

~ For Thy Sweet Love Remembered... ~

by romansilence

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Subtext is maintext here. To be more exact this story takes place in an alternate universe where same sex relationships and marriages are normal; also "Ghost" never happened and Alex' mother didn't die. There's more but that would be telling.

English isn't my first language. So, don't be shy in telling me should I butcher grammar and spelling too much. I'm still learning.

This story is dedicated to Chris who was the second person to find out from where my alias was derived. (And just for those who are curious the dedicated story for the first person is not yet finished.)

The story was first published at the Shatterstorm Advent Calendar 2009 (29th December 2009); so, I probably should also post the "Proud Participant" icon with this story.

Feedback is always welcome under romansilence[at]yahoo.de

Chapter One

Detective Dani Beck strode into the squad room as a woman with a mission.

Two weeks ago her captain had volunteered her to temporarily replace one of the regular detectives of the Manhattan Special Victims Unit who had been recruited by the FBI for an undercover operation. The first couple of days had not been a stellar success, in fact it had been outright horrible.

In retrospect and only to herself Dani admitted that she had acted prematurely concerning the fingerprints and the treatment of their suspect, but it did still not warrant the acerbic comments of her then partner, Detective Odafe Tutuola - and subsequently it seemed that there was nothing she could do right in his eyes. He even had asked for some leave just to get out of what he called 'his babysitter assignment', instead of granting him that, Captain Cragen had assigned her a new partner.

Detective Elliot Stabler was every straight woman's dream: tall, good looking, and at least from her perspective they had hit it right off. They flirted and had even shared a heated kiss.

Then, about a week into her assignment Elliot's regular partner had returned from a week of leave, the night after the kiss. After a quick consultation with the captain it was decided that Dani would continue to partner with Elliot and Olivia would work with Finn.

Dani had been smitten from the first moment she had laid eyes on the brunette, her sexual interest in Elliot all but forgotten. In her eyes Sergeant Olivia Benson was not only beautiful but she seemed to fill every room with her presence the moment she entered. Outwardly aloof and almost cold her whole attitude changed to genuine warmth whenever she had to deal with a victim or a witness; and seeing her working her magic with a frightened child was outright mesmerising.

And so, Dani had made it her mission to get to know the woman better. She had invited her to coffee and lunch, but Olivia had always insisted on paying her half of the tab and despite Dani's best efforts their conversation had never strayed from professional small talk.

Elliot seemed like her best chance to get some first hand information about Olivia, but Dani quickly found out that as open as he was about most things in his private life as tight lipped he was about the private life of his partner. His reluctance, however, made her even more determined to get behind the woman's professional façade.

And now by a stroke of luck she finally knew how to bond with the enigmatic Sergeant.

The day before she had had a chance to see a photo in Olivia's purse. It showed her with a classically beautiful blond woman with captivating blue eyes and a toddler with brown hair and the same deep blue eyes. The face of the woman seemed familiar, somehow, but it took her half of the night before she finally remembered all the pictures and head-lines plastered all over the city about three years ago.

"ADA slain by mob."

"Still no hints on the murder of ADA Cabot."

"Slain ADA leaves mourning mother, wife, and daughter."

Google had helped her to refresh her memory and slowly the outline of the relationship between the daughter of a college professor and the heir to one of New York's leading families and fortunes began to take shape, blue collar and money nobility. For a while the love affair between the first year law student at Columbia university and the then simple beat cop seemed to have been the centre piece of every paper's society section. Their marriage had been in the public spotlight from the moment Alexandra Cabot had proposed to a newly promoted Detective Olivia Benson. The snapshots and official photos Dani found on the net clearly showed the deep love those women shared, and after Alexandra had given birth to their daughter it became even more palatable.

For a moment Dani's eyes had fallen on her wedding photo and she had smiled but not at the love she would always have for her deceased husband but at the fact that now she had something in

common with the elusive Olivia Benson. They both had lost loved ones to senseless violence; they could help each other get over their loss.

Dani had fallen asleep fantasising about kissing Olivia's pain away and exploring the other woman's skin with her lips and tongue.

So, this morning Dani was prepared. On the way to the precinct she had stopped for a coffee latte from Starbucks for Olivia. She had their whole conversation already planned out in her head. Olivia, however, was not at her desk doing paperwork, as she usually was.

About half an hour later she overheard Captain Cragen telling Elliot that Fin and Olivia had been called to a scene at the crack of dawn.

Dani vowed to try again the next day, and gulped down the already half cooled coffee with for her taste had far too much milk in it.

When they finally came in around mid-morning Detective Tutuola went to brief the captain and Olivia headed straight for her desk. As she sat down her professional mask slipped for a moment and the wary expression on Olivia's face went right to Dani's heart, and then the expression of vulnerability was gone.

SVU's assistant district attorney Casey Novak entered the squad room and headed directly to Elliot's desk to ask him a few questions about a DD5 he had filed only the day before. Dani's own paperwork was almost done. So, she decided to grant herself a short break.

Dani went over to the coffee station to brew a fresh pot and keep an eye on Olivia, ready to step in should the mask once again slip. Standing there she realised that her plan could still work; all she needed were a few minutes with Olivia, uninterrupted. Now was as good a time as any, Dani told herself.

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Casey took a few notes and asked her next question, but instead of an answer Elliot said, "Uhuh!"

"What's up, Elliot?" She asked.

"Turn around and look for yourself." Elliot answered.

"Uhuh!" Casey echoed and looked back at the tall Ex-Marine. "Why didn't you warn her?"

"You can't keep a moth from the flame, Case." Elliot said. "I tried, I warned her. I told her to leave Liv alone. Guess what? She didn't listen."

Casey once again turned around and saw Detective Beck leaning against and half sitting on

Olivia's desk, trying to hand the other woman a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

"Big mistake." She commented.

By now both of them had given up the pretence of working and were openly staring at the scene unfolding right in front of them.

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Detective Beck was pacing as much as the confines of Captain Donald Cragen's office allowed. Her emotions vacillated between feeling humiliated and being angry.

The fact that she now was waiting in that office like a naughty school girl waiting for a dressing down from the principal didn't really help improve her mood. Dani took a deep breath and tried to understand when her conversation with Oli... with Sergeant Benson had started to go so terribly wrong; especially since it had begun on such a promising note.

Olivia had thanked her for the coffee and they had chatted for a moment. Dani had slowly brought up the subject of their murdered spouses and how they could help each other cope; especially at this time of the year, when everyone from Adam to Eve was promoting family values. Yes, what she had said, had not sounded as convincing as it had earlier that day in her head, but she still thought that her arguments would have an impact on Olivia; and they had, just not the way she had hoped.

Olivia's eyes had widened and her eyes had quickly turned hard. She had rolled her chair back from the desk and studied Dani as if she just had grown a second head.

Her voice had been cold when she had asked, "And, pray tell, Detective Beck, how do you intent to 'help' me? And what makes you think that after more than three years I would need your help to mourn my wife?"

Dani then had told her that she had felt drawn to Olivia from the very first moment and that their shared experience of losing a loved one to an act of senseless violence put them in the unique position of understanding each other better than anyone else ever could and that they should explore the possibilities.

"Explore the possibilities? Care to elaborate?" Olivia had asked calmly.

Dani had leaned against Olivia's desk and given her her most charming smile. She had answered that they could start with dinner and proposed an Italian place just a couple of blocks from 1, Hogan Place.

Olivia slowly put the mug on the desk, "And how would you like this dinner to end? In my bedroom?"

In retrospect the sarcasm in Olivia's voice had been evident but earlier, out there in the squad room, she had not wanted to hear it. Now, aside from being angry at Olivia and the whole situation Dani was also angry at herself for not backtracking as quickly as possible as long as she had had the chance.

Instead she had caressed the rim of Olivia's coffee mug, seemingly inadvertently, and said, "I wouldn't mind sharing a bed with you and more, Olivia, you're a very beautiful and intriguing woman, but not at the first date. Before we do that I'd like the chance to get to know your daughter."

How stupid had that been? Olivia had slowly stood up, very slowly. Her eyes had gone completely cold and a white line had appeared at the left and right side of her nose. She had stepped into Dani's personal space. Her voice had been calm, controlled but to Dani it had been evident that it took quite an effort.

"Who do you think you are, Detective Beck? Do you really think you have what it takes to take Alexandra Cabot's place in my life? You are not woman enough for that; and even if you were the last human being in the world I wouldn't fall for your charms.

"I thought I had made it abundantly clear during our lunches that I'm not interested in anything but a purely professional relationship, but since you apparently didn't understand I'll tell you in a language you can understand: Fuck off, Detective Beck, stay out of my life! And if you ever again mention my wife or my daughter I will make sure that you end up writing parking tickets for the rest of your career."

Dani had been speechless and when Olivia had already turned away from her she finally had burst out, "And who do you think you are to threaten me like that?"

"Who I am?" Olivia's voice had gotten even colder, "I am Sergeant Olivia Benson-Cabot, wife of Alexandra Cabot, mother of Janet Elizabeth Cabot, and you don't know half of what I'm capable of to protect my family. Oh, and one more thing: get your ass off my desk, now."

Suddenly Captain Cragen had been there and had sent Olivia upstairs to "take a breather" as he had called it, followed by a "Beck, my office, now!"

The last thing she had heard before she had closed the door was that Cragen had asked Elliot if Janet was in town or in the Hamptons.

By now Dani had stopped her pacing and looked out into the squad room. Finn and Elliot were sitting at their desks, apparently focused on their paperwork, as were the other officers of the squad still in the room. Working here at the special victims unit was the challenge she had hoped for when she had finally earned her gold shield, it also would have been a smart career move. Even though she doubted that Olivia would or even could make good on her threat, she feared that her time here was counted, and being thrown out of a unit that consisted of volunteers only was not good for the career.

From that her thoughts turned from angry to morose, and she wasn't even aware that Captain Cragen had entered his office.

"Take a seat, Detective Beck." She slowly obeyed. "For the record, the squad room is no place for romance and trying to hook up with a co-worker is always a bad idea. Don't do it again. Now: off the record. Trying to get closer to Olivia by referring to Alex was the worst thing you could do. However, even if you had been, let's say, less blunt, it would not have done any good. And to be blunt myself, you're not the first person who wanted to get into Olivia's pants those last three years, and I doubt that you will be the last.

"What I'm about to tell you now is not to leave this room, but you're a good cop and I would hate to lose you. When Alex died we all lost part of our family but no one lost as much as Olivia; and if not for their daughter she might no longer be with us. She would have given up. There never will be anyone else but Alexandra Cabot for Olivia. So, just do us all a favour and stay out of Olivia's way for the next couple of days." Cragen said.

"You don't think that she really could do something to get me demoted, Captain?" Dani asked.

"Olivia never uses the connections of the Cabot family except when it comes to protect those she cares for, Detective Beck, Dani, but don't fool yourself into thinking that she wouldn't if she considered you to be a threat, which she doesn't. I got her to calm down and she told me that you had what it takes to become a good SVU detective.

"She does not want you to leave the squad, but if she did it would only cost her a couple of phone calls. She has a superior judge on her speed dial, among others, and I don't even want to think about all the connections her mother-in-law could call upon. The Cabots and their friends were a tight-knit clan before Alex was killed but since then they've grown extremely protective about each other, and Olivia is one of them," Cragen explained.

"With all those connections what she's still doing here?" Dani asked, curiosity taking the better of her.

"I asked her that once and she answered, 'Because that is what I wanted to do. I'm a cop, not a politician.' And believe me she had enough offers, still does," Don answered.

"Olivia was right, you have what it takes to make it in this unit even if you didn't get off on a good start with Fin, but if I had to choose between her and you, you would lose."

"I understand, Captain. You certainly gave me a lot to think about. Is there anything else?"

"Yes, there is. Mrs. Cabot and Olivia's daughter are coming by to take her for lunch. And whenever the girl comes around we make sure that there are no crime scene photos hanging around and that all the file folders are closed. Theoretically Janet knows what her mother is doing but we all feel that she doesn't need any graphical reminders."

"I'll make sure that everything is packed away, Captain. Thank you for the pep talk. Do you think

I should apologise to Olivia now?"

"Give it a day or two, Dani, and never again lean against her desk. That's Alex' prerogative."

"Thank you, Captain."

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Janet had been thrilled to see her friends from the one-six again. It was not often that her mother allowed her to visit the precinct, usually she waited for them just outside of the building. So, whenever she was allowed to enter the squad room it always was a big deal for her, and it allowed her to see her favourite uncles in their workplace.

Janet still had been a bit hyped up that evening and it had taken longer to get her to sleep than usual. Olivia had worked on a couple of files, readied herself for bed, read a couple of pages of a novel. Before she extinguished her bedside light she touched her first and index finger to her lips and then transferred it to the picture frame on her bedside table.

"I love you, Alex."

-X-X-X-

Chapter Two

"I love you, Liv, I always will." The woman turned the bedside light off and snuggled under her light covers to sleep. "And I love you, Janny." Her words were directed towards the ceiling but not less heartfelt.

She closed her eyes and tried to fall asleep, but as usual she didn't succeed, as usual something was off, a scent, the feeling of the sheets against her skin, the smell. And before she had a chance to find out what it was this time her front door chimed.

She climbed out of the bed, put on a robe, and headed towards the front door. There was a man in a dark grey suit standing right in front of the spy hole. He was holding up a badge and an ID. It looked genuine but she needed to make sure.

"Put your badge on the outer left edge of the doormat and take five steps back," she said.

The man did as ordered; the door opened just enough to pull the badge in and a couple of minutes later the woman finally opened the door. She had changed into sweatpants and a hoodie and had checked the badge and the agent's description with her contact at the marshal's office just like she always did - and after more than three years she knew that never meant anything good.

"Come in, Special Agent Parks. To what do I owe the honour of your visit this late at night? And please don't tell me that I'll have to relocate again. I rather like teaching law," the tall blonde said.

"I have good news for a change, Mrs. Cabot," Parks said.

"Say that again, please."

"I have good news."

"No, the other. Say the name again, please."

"Mrs. Cabot, Cesar Velez is dead. He and all of his lieutenants were killed two days ago in Columbia," the agent said.

"Are you sure? He's really dead?" Alex asked.

"I have photos to prove it, Mrs. Cabot, as well as police reports and the reports of the medical examiner. I can assure you, he's dead."

"As dead as I am - or really dead? Show them to me. After all this time I need more than your word, Agent Parks. I'm sure Agent Hammond or my case file told you that much about me."

"It's not a pretty sight, Mrs. Cabot," Parks cautioned.

"Agent Parks, for three years I was the ADA for Manhattan's Special Victims Unit and during that time I have seen pretty much anything human beings do to other human beings, and I've dealt with the survivors of the most heinous crimes. There's not much that can shock me anymore. I need fact and I need to see them with my own eyes."

Agent Parks pulled a thick folder out of the briefcase he had been carrying with him and handed it over. She slowly opened it and with the first picture the professional mask of Assistant District Attorney Alexandra Cabot was back. It didn't even slip when she saw a very familiar face among the dead, and not when she read the M.E.'s report. The only sign of weakness was that when she was through she started again, picture by picture, report by report.

She closed the file and looked at the FBI agent through her wire rimmed glasses, "From the pictures I gather that this was not an official mission."

"I'm afraid that Agent Hammond didn't handle your case by the books."

"What do you mean, 'not by the books'? He's the one who always quoted his sacred regulations to me whenever I wanted something just for me," Alex burst out.

"It's a long story and it started three and a half years ago in New York City. Agent Hammond left

a letter for you. My superiors don't want you to see it, but they also didn't object when I took it with me; and I think you have a right to know," Agent Parks said and handed Alex an envelope.

It contained three sheets of paper. The front and the back were both covered in handwriting. The handwriting was small and neat, not at all like she had suspected Hammond would write. It started with the words, "Dear Alexandra..."

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Olivia entered her home and closed the door behind her. She sank back against the hardwood surface of the door, exhaustion finally getting the better of her, though her mind was still running a mile a minute.

It had been a hell of a week; and thinking back, her anger at Detective Beck's ill-fated attempt at seduction a couple of days ago had been at the harmless end of the spectrum, and it had had a positive outcome. It had brought her an unexpected lunch with her daughter which as usual had done wonders to get her to relax. It had also allowed her to refocus on the case.

Alicia Silver's case was one of those which got under the skin of everyone involved, regardless of how detached they usually were.

A six-year old being raped and beaten by her own father unfortunately was not something new, but the girl being raped with the barrel of a gun because she had begged her father not to play their 'game' for one night was something that could make a person sick to the stomach.

The mother turning a blind eye to what happened in her home was also nothing unusual, as was a neighbour reporting the crime; but the girl begging the detectives to be allowed to apologise to her father because it all had been her fault, a father who had convinced his own child that what happened to her was necessary because she had seduced him, the girl crying in Olivia's arms.

That had been enough to break one's heart.

Alex would have had a field day with the father who despite his defence attorney's warning had made a full confession. She would have eviscerated him in court and would have made sure that he served the full sentence for every single time he had raped his innocent daughter, and that he would serve his sentences consecutively. He would never again breathe unfiltered air.

But Alex was gone, Alex was dead. Alex had died three years, two months and sixteen days ago because she had not been fast enough, because Olivia had failed to protect her.

Alex was dead because she had failed her. It was her fault, and regardless of what Caroline tried to convince her, regardless of what Don said, regardless of what George wanted her to believe, regardless of what Elliot said, she knew better. Olivia knew that ultimately it had been her fault. It was because of her that Janny had lost her Mommy. If she only had been a couple of seconds faster, she could have saved her love; the bullet would never have hit her. She could have saved

her wife, she could have saved Alex's life.

Olivia shook herself out of those musings when her cell phone rang.

The paperwork was done; Harald Silver's arraignment would not be before Monday morning. She really hoped that it wasn't an emergency. She needed the night to unwind before she would join her daughter at the Cabot estate in the Hamptons the next morning. Olivia was surprised to see Abbie Carmichael's number and said as much when she accepted the call.

Abbie seemed to be in rather good spirits, "Hey, Olivia, I heard you have the end of a case to celebrate. I'm in *Esther's* with a couple of friends, care to join us?"

"Who told you about the case, Abs? Isn't that below you as a high and mighty US Attorney?" Olivia asked.

"Serena and Casey are here too, and Casey entertained us with the tale of how you and Elliot skilfully coaxed a confession out of the perp despite his attorney's presence."

A drink among friends sounded good, but Olivia was not in the mood to deal with Serena Southerlyn when she was drunk. Alex' law school friend tended to get rather touchy-feely when she had a drink too many, and she tended to forget that Olivia would only ever see her as a friend, nothing more.

"Another time, Abs. I'm dead tired and I need to get up early for the drive to the Hamptons."

"We haven't seen each other in months, come on, just one drink," Abbie begged.

Olivia smiled, "How about an early breakfast, at Rita's bakery? I'm buying if you flirt with Casey."

"How early is early? And why would you want me to do that? You know I'm not wired your way."

"I know, but Casey has a big crush on Serena, has had for years, and Serena knows that and even shares her feelings, but she also thinks that Casey is a safe bet, so she doesn't do anything about it. Someone as drop-dead gorgeous as you, someone who usually doesn't play for our team might just make her re-evaluate her options. Is six too early?"

"Much too early. We'll have breakfast the next time I'm in town, and I'll think about the rest. Sleep well, Olivia."

While talking Olivia had slipped out of her jacket, put her keys and badge on the small dresser next to the wardrobe and had opened the safe to put her gun in. Securing her weapon this way had become routine ever since they had moved into the brownstone a few months into Alex' pregnancy; they both wanted their child to be safe in her own home. After also putting her shoes away she went to the kitchen and found a rice salad in the fridge with instructions from her

mother-in-law to eat all of it.

That brought the second genuine smile of this day on her face; Caroline just knew her too well. When Alex had still been alive, rice salad had been among their favourite dishes. Olivia had concentrated on the rice and the peppers while Alex had eaten the rest; and ever since...

She grabbed a glass of juice to go with the salad and walked over to the den to watch the news. Had her daughter been home she of course would have eaten at the kitchen table or in the dining room not to give her a bad example, but since no one could call her upon it, she didn't care.

-X-X-X-

Olivia was chewing her fifth fork-full of rice salad when the door chimed. She cursed and walked over to the door. The security monitor showed her a neatly shaved man in his mid-thirties, she presumed, wearing a neutral grey suit and holding a badge and an ID next to his face. Behind him, out of the scope of the porch light was the shadow of another tall figure whose features she was unable to discern. Olivia zoomed in on the badge and saw three letters she could have lived the rest of her life without ever seeing again.

Coming to a quick decision she took her gun out of the safe and opened the door with its barrel pointed towards her late visitor. Before he had a chance to introduce himself she said, "The FBI is not on my list of approved visitors. What do you want?"

"Mrs. Benson-Cabot, my name is Special Agent Charles Parks. I have good news for you."

"That's Sergeant Benson for you. The FBI is not known to be the bearer of good news. Make it quick!" Olivia said sharply, not ready to cut anyone associated with the organisation she held partly responsible for her wife's death even the slightest bit of slack.

"Cesar Velez is dead and his organisation has been destroyed," Agent Parks said with a certain amount of triumph in his voice. Then he saw the sidearm in her hand and added, "Please, put the gun down. I mean you no harm."

Olivia's hand didn't waver, "That's good to know, but there probably is already the next slime bag waiting in the aisles to take over for him. I don't want to sound ungrateful but what about his death is so important that you could not tell me using official channels?"

"The DA's office and the Police Department will be briefed Monday morning, Sergeant Benson. What I have to say is hard to tell standing out here in the open."

"Alright, you may come in, under the condition that you first introduce your colleague to me."

The FBI Agent grinned and stepped aside. The other person slowly began to move and from the first step on Olivia was certain that his colleague was a woman. Before she had reached the level covered by the overhead light on the porch Olivia's gut told her that there was something very

familiar about the way the mysterious woman moved.

She stepped into the cone of light and Olivia looked at long blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes behind black rimmed glasses, and a shy, slightly insecure smile she would have recognised among millions.

"Alex," she whispered.

The weapon fell from her suddenly limp hands and clattered to the floor; luckily the safety had still been on.

"Liv," the apparition said.

Olivia tried to take a step forward but her knees gave way and she sank to the floor, out cold. Alex pushed the agent out of the way and was at her wife's side less than a heartbeat later. She pulled her in her arms and immediately noticed the hard muscles that had not been there the last time they had touched.

Agent Parks used the opportunity to pick Olivia's gun up and close the door behind him. His orders were to provide protection for Alexandra Cabot until the official announcement of Velez' death would take place on Monday; and had his superiors known that the first course of action of his charge after she had read Agent Hammond's letter had been to book two first class seats on the next flight out to New York City and that he had not been able to make her stay put, they would either have his shield or have an apoplexy or possibly both. Alex Cabot, he quickly had learned, was a force of nature when she wanted something. He also had seen no good reason to deny her, and after having been received at gun point by one of New York's Finest he also knew what she had fought all this time not to let go.

He helped Alex to carry Olivia to the couch and was quickly sent to the kitchen to get a glass of water. Alex knew of only two occasions her beloved wife had ever fainted, one had been when she had asked her to marry her and the other when they had learned that the fertilisation and insemination process that taken and Alex was officially pregnant with their daughter.

Alex studied her wife's face. There were more lines around her eyes, some deeper than others, and she somehow had a feeling that just like on her own face not all of those were laugh lines. Her hands, almost of their own accord, retraced the outline of Olivia's torso. She found even more muscles and itched to explore that glorious body unhindered by clothing, inch by inch. She longed to feel the soft skin under her fingertips, longed to drown in those brown orbs, longed to be held by those strong arms.

Parks cleared his throat to tell her that he was back. On his way from the kitchen he had studied the two women, the prone brunette and the blonde obviously entranced by the sight right in front of her. With a pang of regret he had realised that he probably would never find someone who would look at him the way Alex Cabot looked at her wife, and suddenly he had understood what had had Agent Jack Hammond so mesmerised that he had broken every single rule in the book just to be closer to her.

He also had known that now they first and foremost needed to be alone. So, he gave Alex his cell phone number and told her to call him should she need anything. She barely acknowledged his words with a nod and returned to her scrutiny of the other woman's face. He made sure that the door was secure and returned to the car they had rented at the Airport. It still held all the belongings Alex had wanted to bring back from witness protection in its trunk. He would keep an eye on the house from there, and thanked the weather god that it was still rather warm though it already was early December. A sleepless night alone in a car was not something he was looking forward to at the best of times, but a sleepless night alone in a car freezing his ass off would have been outright unbearable.

-X-X-X-

Olivia turned to the side and Alex studied her profile; that's when she saw the juice and the salad on the couch table. She frowned; TV dinners, especially with cold food, certainly were not the way she wanted her daughter to be raised. They had talked about that years earlier during her pregnancy, and they had both agreed. Out of reflex she put the lid back on the plastic container and saw a note taped on top.

"Liv, Janet and I made this especially for you, so don't even think of not eating the rice. We already have the menu for the weekend all planned out to make up for your sporadic eating habits during the week. Try to be on time for the trip to the Christmas tree farm tomorrow."

The note wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be. Alex easily recognised her mother's handwriting and she could almost hear her gently scolding voice. When she first had introduced Olivia to her family, Caroline Cabot had gone through a phase of shock and denial, but sometime during her second year of law school Olivia's persistence had won over her mother; well, that and her impeccable manners and her extensive knowledge of literature and art. Once her elitist mother had been over her prejudice concerning Olivia's blue collar familial background, she had easily accepted her into the Cabot clan. Alex was glad to learn that they had even got closer during her absence, her death.

What worried her was the content of the note, since Olivia as a rule only forgot to eat when she had to deal with a really demanding or gruesome case. She would have to ask her about it later, much later.

There were more important things to do for now, like getting reacquainted with her beloved's body; and she decided to start with Olivia's hands.

Alex studied Liv's hands one by one, starting with her right hand. Her skin still had its usual olive tone and she was wearing the bracelet Olivia had put on her arm the day of Janny's birth. At first she had been a bit surprised, but then she rationalised that the Feds or the hospital where Alex allegedly had died would have given it to Olivia as part of her personal effects. Tears welled up in Alex' eyes and she blinked them away as best as she could. She didn't want to cry, not yet.

She turned the hand around and was immediately fascinated by the network of lines in the palm of Olivia's hand. She gently retraced the main lines and found the palm harder than she remembered. At closer inspection she found that her wife had somehow acquired more calluses, probably from spending more time at the shooting range. To verify her theory she changed hands and pulled the left one over, and when she saw the two wedding bands on Liv's ring finger her query was forgotten and the tears she had been holding back burst free.

Olivia's eyes snapped open at the sound. She raised her head and smiled at the blonde, "Fancy meeting you here, Counsellor."

The simple words and the long missed nickname made Alex cry even more. Olivia sat up and pulled her in her arms, and for the first time in three and a half years her arms closed around something solid and she didn't wake up from another dream filled with futile hope. The body in her arms was solid and real, too real to be a dream, she hoped.

Olivia put enough distance between them to look at Alex' face; with slightly trembling lips she put a chaste kiss on Alex' lips - and still the apparition didn't disappear. Olivia licked at the tears running down Alex' cheeks, she tasted their salt. Only then did she look into Alex' deep blue eyes still framed by the black rimmed glasses.

"You're real, you're not a dream, you're alive!"

"Yes, my love, I'm alive. I was in witness protection. I..."

Alex wanted to say more but Olivia sealed her lips with her own, and this time their kiss didn't stay chaste for long.

"I don't care," Olivia finally said after they had had to break the kiss to breathe. "You're here and I'll never let you go again."

"I'm here to stay, my Liv."

Alex captured Olivia's lips which offered no resistance to her probing tongue while Olivia worked her hands under Alex' sweater, still not completely convinced that all of this was not an elaborate dream.

The tip of Alex' tongue touched the roof of Olivia's mouth, teasingly at first and then retraced its whole length starting from behind and ending up at her front teeth. Only Alex knew that this was a major ticklish spot and that it also drove her crazy with want.

Now, she was sure that it wasn't part of a dream. Olivia burst into tears. Alex pulled her arms around her beloved wife while her own tears kept falling and began to cover Olivia's face with gentle kisses.

Suddenly Olivia needed more contact than just her hands on Alex' back. She needed to feel all of

her. With a burst of energy she tore her hands away from the smoothness of Alex' back and tried to pull the sweater over her head. Alex seemed driven by the same impulse when she began to tuck at Olivia's top. Without breaking eye contact for more than the few seconds it took to get the garments out of the way they came to their feet and got rid of their clothes; all they wanted was to feel each other.

Alex' longer legs gave her a slight advantage but before she knew how Olivia had lifted her off her feet and gently put her back on the couch. She had no chance and no intention to protest because her wife's strong body quickly settled on top of her and covered as much skin as possible. Alex felt her hard nipples poke against Olivia's and she sighed at the long missed feeling. Her hands roamed over Olivia's back and she pulled her closer. She longed to feel Olivia's full weight on top of her, longed for the feeling of security it had always given her from the first time on.

Olivia never stayed long in this position for fear of squishing her but somehow it made the years they had missed melt away and let Alex' need burn hotter.

"I need you, my Liv, go inside. I need you."

Olivia rolled them over and somehow managed not to make them fall off the couch. They kissed for what seemed like an eternity, and yet was not enough to quench their thirst for the other. Their bodies recognised each other, hands roamed over smooth skin. Olivia entered Alex with two fingers and circled her clitoris with her thumb. Alex smelled Olivia's arousal and entered her with three fingers. She fluttered them in an erratic rhythm that was rewarded by a deep guttural groan. Alex answered with a languid moan when Olivia began to pump her fingers in and out of Alex' centre.

Their eyes were locked onto each other. They didn't even blink, as if they still didn't believe that what they were doing was real. After what seemed like only seconds both were at the edge of an orgasm, and when their inner muscles clenched at the same time, it was as if they never had been apart and the tears still running down their faces made everything appear a bit surreal.

To Olivia, however, the wetness on Alex' slightly bronzed cheeks and the tears she still felt falling from her own eyes were the ultimate proof that this was not part of her fantasies. It was real and glorious and incredible. It was improbable but real.

Alex was back, Alex was alive, Alex was alive, Alex came home.

Alex began to withdraw her fingers. "No, don't. Leave them. I need to feel you inside of me."

Alex smiled at the familiar request; there had been many a night they had fallen asleep that way, firmly anchored in the other's centre. It always conveyed a sense of connection nothing else could ever give them. Alex retraced Olivia's jaw line with the fingertips of her free hand. She drank in the look of wonder on her face and soon was lost in those deep brown eyes.

"I love you, my Liv, my life."

The expression in Olivia's eyes was all the answer Alex needed. They kissed again, deeply and passionately. With a sudden burst of possessiveness Olivia rolled on her back and simultaneously pulled Alex right on top of her, completely forgetting that though the couch was deeper than the average, there was not that much space left. They landed with a thud and a groan on the hardwood floor; and both burst out laughing. Their hands had slipped out of their comfortable resting places and Olivia used the opportunity to close both arms around Alex and to hold her firmly in place on top of her when she tried to get up.

"I love you, Alexandra Cabot, more than life itself," Olivia said softly.

"And I love you, my Liv, but let's take this to the bedroom. I must be squishing you, and there's so much I have to relearn about you."

"Yes, there's much to rediscover, my love," Olivia answered but refused to let go of Alex.

She bent her head and began to kiss the scars marring the smooth skin of Alex' shoulder. She alternated between tiny kisses and gentle licks. One of her hands softly stroked the back of the shoulder and quickly found the rough patch where the assassin's bullet had ripped through Alex' flesh.

Olivia's touch was not only tender it bordered on reverent. Alex trembled under the caress and new tears spilled forth. The old wound still hurt from time to time, and in her eyes it was the constant reminder of everything she had lost.

"It's ugly," she whispered.

"No, Lexi, it's not ugly. It's beautiful. It's proof that you survived. It's proof that this is not a dream. It's proof that..."

"It was so hard to live without you. I knew you were dead but my heart never believed that. I knew I would drown if I started to believe that. Janny was the only reason I didn't give up. And it must have been so much worse for you, all alone."

"I knew that you and Janny and my mother were all safe; that made it bearable. I promise I'll tell you all about witness protection, but not now. Now I need to feel, not to talk," Alex answered.

Olivia gave Alex' shoulder another kiss. They somehow managed to stand up without letting go of each other and walked upstairs to their bedroom, leaving their crumbled clothes on the floor.

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Chapter Three

Olivia's phone rang a couple of hours later. She was not on call that night, but only the captain

would call her in the middle of the night, and only in case of an extreme emergency. Alex and she had made love for hours. They had showered together and had only minutes ago crawled under the covers, determined to get at least some rest. They both were too keyed up about being back together for sleep to be even a remote possibility, and they knew it, but just lying in each other's arms was more than anyone of them had dreamed possible less than forty-eight hours earlier.

She looked at the digital clock on her nightstand, 0332, it said. The caller-id identified the number as belonging to their elderly neighbour Mrs. Wolfstein. She reluctantly accepted the call and put it on the speaker to let Alex hear it too.

"Mrs. Wolfstein, what can I do for you?"

"I'm dreadfully sorry for disturbing you at this late hour, dear, but you said to call anytime should something strange be going on. Well, when I woke up a little while ago I saw this man sitting in a car right across from your house. He's looking at your door and the windows. I know it might just be one of your fellow policemen on a protective detail, but I wasn't sure and I didn't want to take any chances with the safety of the little angel. After last year, I..."

"I understand. Thank you for calling, Mrs. Wolfstein. Janny is with her grandmother in the Hamptons. I'll join them tomorrow morning. I have a pretty good idea who is out there. There's no need to worry, but I'll go and make sure and let you know."

"I'll stay right here at the phone, ready to call for help, should there be any problems, dear."

"Thank you, Mrs. Wolfstein. I'm sure that this can be cleared up quickly, and you can go back to your bed."

Olivia put the phone down and left the comfort of Alex' arms and the bed. She quickly slipped into some jeans and a sweater, put a pair of sneakers on and sighed. She should have known that the FBI agent wouldn't consider his job done by just dropping his charge off. He would not let her too far out of his sight. Alex had also climbed out of bed and was standing in all her naked glory in their bedroom, looking a bit lost.

"I have nothing to wear. My suitcases are still in the trunk of the rental," she finally said.

"You don't need clothes, my love. Go back to bed. I'll just let your agent bunk down in the guest room. I'll be back in a few minutes," when Olivia saw the determination in Alex' eyes she added, "but if you really want to get up, your clothes are still in the closet. Some of them might be a bit old fashioned by now, but it's all still there."

"You kept my clothes?" Alex asked incredulously.

To Alex Olivia's smile looked a bit pained, especially since she didn't give any other answer than a shrug of her shoulders. So, she stepped into Olivia's personal space and embraced her.

"I'm sorry, Liv, I never wanted to cause you pain."

"It wasn't your fault, baby; you only did your job. If there's someone to blame it's Velez and Hammond, that pigheaded bastard," Olivia burst out.

"They are both dead; they won't hurt either of us ever again. It's over. I love you," Alex said and closed her arms tighter around her wife.

Olivia allowed herself a moment's indulgence and let herself be held, "I love you, my Lexi. Giving your clothes away would have made your death more real, and that just hurt too much."

Alex kissed Olivia. Now was not the time to talk. Their feelings were just too raw, "Go and bring Agent Parks in. I'll make us some coffee."

It had been easy to convince Special Agent Parks to follow her inside, but much harder to get him to use the guest room. He had insisted that in order to keep Alex safe he would have to keep an eye on her until the official announcement would be made on Monday.

After about ten minutes of bickering back and forth Alex said, "The guest room is on the second floor, the first door to your right. It has an adjoining bathroom. You can go there or stay here, either way we'll meet you tomorrow morning. Olivia and I are driving up to the Hamptons to meet with our daughter and mother."

Alex didn't give him the chance to say anything in return. She grabbed Olivia's hand and pulled her back upstairs to the bedroom. Olivia made a short phone call to give Mrs. Wolfstein the all-clear and then they quickly peeled themselves out of their clothes and slid back under the covers. After hours of love making the feeling of skin on skin no longer elicited a burning need in either one of them; it was superseded by an almost overwhelming feeling of togetherness, for want of a better word, a feeling of home and security and safety and eternity, a feeling both of them for different reasons had not expected to ever experience again.

"Tell me about Janny, Liv," Alex demanded.

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"I'm afraid, Liv. She won't recognise me. I'll be a stranger to her." Alex said when they had to stop at a street light at 6h30 the next morning, barely fifteen minutes into their two hours drive to the Hamptons. They would have started out even earlier but it had been hard work to convince Agent Parks that Alex would be perfectly safe in the company of one of New York's Finest and on a well protected estate far out of town and that instead of being her shadow he should enjoy a weekend off in New York.

Olivia squeezed her thigh as the light turned green and pulled over just a couple hundred of feet later.

"We speak about you, my Lexi. She includes you in her prayers. Janny might need a bit of time to get used to have you back, but she's a bright girl. She will understand."

"You know her so much better than I do," Alex answered dejectedly.

"You will get to know each other again, Lexi; and she will love the real you, not the image in her head. She loves you. Trust me."

"I'll always trust you, my Liv. I'm just... It has been so long. And I don't know what to say to my mother. For three years I dreamed about that but now that it's real I can't believe it's real. ... Oh, damn, I'm a lawyer, I should be more eloquent."

Olivia kissed Alex, cutting off the expression of her self-recriminations and insecurities; and once again the kiss quickly turned passionate. Alex responded to the demands of Olivia's tongue, and suddenly the fears about her daughter receded and her wife once again was at the forefront of her mind.

Their car was parked a bit hazardously at the side of the road. Neither Alex nor Olivia saw the other cars carefully avoiding to collide with their vehicle; and they also didn't see the patrol car pulling up behind them. One of the officers got out and tapped at the driver's side window with his flash light.

Olivia acted on instinct. She drew her weapon and pointed it at the young officer. As soon as she saw the uniform she let it drop in her lap and raised both of her hands. She also turned to the side to block Alex from his range and view.

"NYPD Sergeant Benson," she said in an effort to allow him to read her lips.

By then the rookie also had his weapon out and pointed it at her window. It was trembling and there was fear in his eyes. He already had his finger on the trigger, and Olivia started to think that pulling over at this time of the day had not been one of her better ideas, especially on a Saturday. Suddenly the young officer was pulled away and a firm voice that easily penetrated the isolation of the car windows ordered her to open the door with her left hand and step outside.

Olivia complied. The speed of her movements indicated that she was not hesitating in obeying the order, but also wanted to diffuse any tension coming from her acting too fast. She obediently turned around when ordered and cursed her luck that for once she had put her shield in her left back pocket instead of clipping it to her belt.

The rookie moved to secure her gun, but while picking it up from the floor he didn't pay attention to Alex, as she noted peripherally. Olivia hypothesised that she had looked frightened and thus had not qualified as a threat in his eyes; a presumption which had killed more than one of New York's Finest. His superior silenced him with a look while he cursorily patted her down. He quickly tapped the back-up weapon she had tapped at her left ankle and when he came back up their eyes met for a split second.

So, he knew, and probably wanted to teach his younger colleague a lesson. Olivia decided to play along but she wished that she would have had the chance to warn Alex, but there had not been enough time; it would have given the game away.

The older officer first took half a step back and then slammed her into the side of the car, hard enough to possibly leave some slight bruises. It also allowed her to simulate a rebound more forceful than it usually would have been. The older Officer, a sergeant from his shoulder patches, played along and allowed himself to be pushed backwards. Olivia used her freedom of movement to kick the rookie square in the stomach. Unprepared for the sudden attack he stumbled back and landed on his behind, and his older colleague found himself with her back-up weapon at his temple.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Sergeant Benson," he said and grinned. "I hope you have a permit for your second weapon."

"What are you taking me for, one of our perps? Of course I do. You know what you're doing; so, your rookie, how long has he been with you? If I had been a real perp he would have been killed a couple of minutes ago. He didn't even try to step out of the reach of my bullet."

"My own training's officer always told me that there are rookies who need more monitoring than others. Half of them need it because they will never learn and won't get past the probation period, and the other half of them need it because they have all the instincts but are too confident in their abilities. He still has a chance to belong to the second category," the uniformed man answered.

"May I have my weapon back?" Olivia asked.

At a nod of his superior the rookie handed it over, and Olivia put it back in its holster. The young man's facial expression still spoke of bewilderment and a great deal of insecurity.

She patted him on the shoulder while she handed her back-up weapon to Alex, "Next time you'll do better, Junior."

Alex and Olivia drove away and the rookie followed them with his eyes, still not completely sure about what had just happened. Not until his training's officer ordered him to get his ass in gear and resume their patrol.

About two minutes into their drive the rookie asked, "What the hell just happened there?"

The older man smiled and answered, "You just got your ass handed to you and should spare a few 'Hail Mary's to the fact that this time you were not facing a criminal but a NYPD Detective. If not for your uniform she would have shot you right through the shoulder, just beyond the point protected by a vest before you would even have had the chance to draw your own weapon, window or no window."

"You're exaggerating, right?" The rookie asked.

"No, I'm not, but with a bit of research you'll be able to judge for yourself. For now it'll be enough to say that we had the same training's officer. Smyth also told me that there was another category of future officers: the ones born to it, those who have it in their blood. Sergeant Olivia Benson is one of them. And tomorrow we'll meet two hours before the start of our shift to go through what happened just now."

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"What the hell just happened? I simply could have clobbered him over the head and he would have been out. He didn't even consider seeing me as a threat," Alex fumed.

"He's a rookie, Lexi; he will learn," Olivia answered calmly.

"He should have learned at the Academy."

"Theory and practice are very different, baby-girl. And yes, he could have endangered his own life and the life of his training's officer, but no one is born a cop. You have to learn how to do it, and only time will tell if he'll be among the forty to sixty percent passing the probation period," Olivia explained calmly.

"He had his finger on his trigger, Liv. He could have killed you. He could have taken you from my life just as surely as if that hitman's bullet would not have pierced my shoulder but your heart."

This time Olivia used the exit to a gas station to get them out of traffic. She cut the engine and turned towards Alex. She could read fear and worry bordering on panic on Alex' face.

Alex' hands were folded in her lap, outwardly relaxed and calm, but Olivia knew better. She grabbed the hands and turned herself around until her back was uncomfortably pressed against the lower part of her steering wheel. Never losing eye contact with her wife Olivia pulled them up to her lips and kissed the clenched knuckles.

The fear didn't subside, so, she said, "He had his finger on the trigger, but the safety was still on, Lexi. I promise, we never were in any danger. It was my fault, baby girl, I should not have pulled aside in a no-parking zone. Just being near you again was just too much for me. I should have paid better attention, but that seems to be the pattern in my life."

"Please, Livia, don't do this to yourself. Don't blame yourself. You saved my life; you have nothing to be sorry for. It's not your fault!" Alex answered pleadingly.

"How can it not be my fault, Lexi? If I only had been a bit faster the assassin's bullet would have missed you," Olivia said.

Alex looked at the pain-filled eyes of her wife.

The first time they had met, when she had clerked for Judge Harriman just before College, Olivia's eyes had looked almost like that. No, not really. Then to everyone else Olivia's eyes had shown anger and guilt and ambition. Alex had seen all of that in the eyes of the young beat cop sent to Judge Harriman's office to retrieve a search warrant; but she also had seen more...

Now was not the time to reminiscence Alex reminded herself. She had hoped for a better occasion to tell her beloved about her time in witness protection, and she had wanted to choose her own time to do so, but Olivia's well being was more important than her fears.

"You saved my life that day, Liv, do you know that?" Alex asked.

"I got you killed, you mean," Olivia answered, her voice devoid of any emotion.

"No, my Liv, you saved my life."

"I got you killed. I wasn't fast enough to keep you from being hit." To Olivia her words sounded like something she had said countless times and no one had ever believed her. *They just didn't know.*

"How could you, my love, you're only human. You did what you could, and without you keeping pressure on the wound the FBI might just have been right. I would have died. As it was I was in a coma for about three weeks. Without your help, without you staunching the bleeding, I would have died even before the EMTs took over. You gave me a chance, but according to my medical file it was touch and go for more than just a few days. Officially I had already been buried before the doctors gave the go ahead to move me. I woke up in a hospital bed in an unfamiliar room that clearly did not look like any hospital I'd ever come across. All I wanted was to go home but they didn't let me; they even addressed me with I name I had never heard before. I fought them and they strapped me down and sedated me until I was deemed strong enough to travel.

"That was when Agent Hammond came and told me that officially I was dead. He even showed me photos of my funeral. I saw the pain in your eyes; I saw how lost you looked, and I badgered Hammond to tell you that I was still alive, that I was safe in witness protection. About a year and three identities later he told me that you had moved on and found another lover. He told me that it was time for me to start over as well. If it had been up to him he would have erased Alex Cabot from my memories, but regardless of who I officially was supposed to be every night I told you and Janny that I loved you. I couldn't let go of Alex Cabot, I never would have, and I knew that he was lying about you having found someone else. I could see it in your eyes."

Alex refused to look at her wife. She hated to drag up all that pain, but Olivia had a right to know.

"Every time I saw you in one of the New York papers to which I had subscribed online without his knowledge I knew that you were still mourning me. I began to feel selfish. I was dead; there was no need for you to hold on to a ghost, but regardless of what Hammond told me, I knew better, and it helped to keep at least a part of Alex Cabot alive while I was transferred from one identity to another, from one job to another, from one part of the country to another. Your eyes

are so expressive. They always told me everything I needed to know about you, even through the distortion of grainy newspaper photographs.

"I saw that you suffered and all I wanted was to give you back that spark that always had driven you beyond the scope of a student or a cadet or a beat cop or a detective. I even saw a picture about your promotion to Sergeant. To everyone else you might have looked as if you were at the top of your game, but I knew better. I saw the pain in your eyes, and all I wanted to do was to come back home, consequences be damned - but then I thought about Janny and my mother and the guys and the rest of my family. You all would have been a target if I had just returned out of nowhere. I couldn't risk that."

Alex' voice had been barely above a whisper and Olivia sensed a lot of pain in it, but there was one thing she had to know, "If possible, would you have taken us with you, Janny and me?"

"Three years ago I would have said yes. I never wanted to live without either of you, but now seven identities later I'm no longer sure. I know you would not have complained, but I couldn't do that to my child. Janny needed the stability you gave her. But there wasn't a day that I didn't think about both of you. On the other hand, I might not have been moved that often had you been by my side.

"Hammond left me a letter where he admitted that he had arranged most of my moves to break me, to get me to confide in him and fall in love with him. He knew that with you at my side that never would have happened. He tried his best to destroy my hopes of ever leaving witness protection. He tried to convince me that there was nothing to come back to, that Janny now was calling someone else Mommy."

Tears were running down Alex' face and Olivia pulled her in her arms, "Hush, my love. It's over now. You have won. You're back, Lexi, and I love you and Janny loves you; your Mom loves you, the guys at the one-six love you even though they think that you're dead. You're back; that's all that counts for me. I love you and I will never let you go. You even might become tired of my continued presence."

"Never, my Liv. I survived three years without you, but now it's time to regain my life. You are my life," Alex said. "You and Janny were the last thought I had every night and the first every morning. You were my light in the window. You were what made me go on. And now I just have to turn my head to see you and reach out my hand to touch you. No, my love, I'll never become tired of you."

Alex was still crying and Olivia felt completely helpless. She finally voiced her frustration, "I wish I could make Hammond pay for what he did to you."

"He already paid the ultimate price, Liv. He paid with his life. The raid of Velez' headquarters was not an official FBI mission, not an extradition effort gone wrong as the official announcement on Monday will say. Hammond acted on his own, he and a couple of former agents unhappy with FBI and DEA politics. They didn't go to Columbia to bring Velez here and have him face trial. They went there to kill him. He is the reason that I'm back."

Olivia kissed her wife. She knew Alex couldn't help but feel responsible for the deaths of Agent Hammond and his former colleagues, and even for the deaths of Velez and his fellow drug lords. "Don't blame yourself, Lexi. You did nothing wrong. It was their decision to go there, please my love. It isn't your fault, my love. Don't second guess your being back."

A smile crept on Alex' tear stained face and she playfully kissed the tip of Olivia's nose, "Only when you stop blaming yourself for my presumed death and accept that your actions saved my life."

"I spent three years and a two and half months blaming myself, Alex, that's a hard habit to break, but having you back will help. I promise I'll try. Blaming myself for your death was one of the ways I found not to let go of you," Olivia answered softly.

Alex knew that she was possibly the only person in the world to whom Olivia would admit such insecurities and weaknesses, and it was one of the many reasons she loved her. They kissed, tenderly, slowly, savouring the moment and once again completely oblivious to their surroundings.

When they had to stop to breathe there was a knock at the passenger side window. Alex rolled down the slightly fogged over window and looked into the pimpled face of a teenager.

"Can I help you?" She asked.

He studied both women for a moment and said, "You're way too old to make out in a car, ladies, but still I wanted to tell you that there's a make-out point about five miles south of here. You'd have a great view over the ocean, not that there would be much to see with all the heat you're creating in the car."

Before Alex had a chance to give that young pup an eloquent piece of her mind about being too old for a make-out session Olivia had pulled out her gold shield and asked, "Young man, are you by any chance trying to embarrass an officer of the law? If I think about it your words could even be seen as an insult, and that is a punishable offence."

His eyes widened, he stammered something about being sorry and sprinted back to his friends standing at the gas station. Alex pushed the button to close the window. She looked at Olivia and they both burst out laughing, a reaction far out of proportion for the occasion. Being back together had put them both on a roller coaster of raw emotions they both had held back for far too long.

Alex was the first to regain control, "I love you, Sergeant Olivia Benson."

"I love you, Counsellor. How about we act on our highly advanced age and go find our daughter?"

"You mean we should act like responsible adults? Where would be the fun in that?" Alex

answered playfully, "But you are right, we have two perfect Christmas trees to find."

"Two?"

"Two, one for the Hamptons and one for the Brownstone. I have a lot of celebrating to make up for." Alex said.

Olivia squeezed her knee, "Two it is. Janny will be thrilled. We only had a few middle sized twigs in New York while you were gone. If it had not been for Janny, I wouldn't have celebrated at all. Christmas shopping without you was pure torture."

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Chapter Four

They made good time and arrived at the Cabot Estate at half past eight. Olivia opened the front door with her key, carried their shared bag inside and set it down to the left of the door.

"Come, Alex, your mother is probably in the kitchen eating breakfast with Mary. Do you want to surprise them or should I go in first and explain everything?"

Alex blanched and suddenly turned back to the door, "I can't do this, Liv. I'm not ready. I don't know what to say. For the last year I time and again told my students to never go into court or a meeting with a client unprepared, and I'm as unprepared as humanly possible. I can't do this."

Olivia reached her before she was back at the door and pulled her in her arms. Because of the almost two inches Alex had on her wife it was impossible for her to hide her head against Olivia's chest but as it were she gave a very good impression of doing just that. Olivia just held her; one hand caressing her neck, the other drawing tiny circles at the small of Alex' back.

"I'm afraid, Liv."

"I know, baby girl, but everything will be fine. Your mother will not want to let you out of her arms and Mary will cook up a storm with all your favourites. We all love you, Lexi. I know you are strong, you can do it. Your mother is not Judge Petrovsky; she won't hold you in contempt."

Olivia's attempt at levity brought the ghost of a smile on Alex' face. She closed her eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, then she straightened her shoulders and said, "Let's go face the music, my Liv, but to reduce the shock value it might be better if you prepare them first."

"I'm afraid that it is quite too late for that, Alexandra," Caroline Cabot said with her cultivated Bostonian accent.

Alex and Olivia both whirled around and looked at the two older women standing side by side at the entrance to the kitchen as if it were they who had just seen a ghost.

"Mother," Alex whispered and Olivia had to push her forward to greet her mother properly. She took a tentative step forward and said, "I missed you, Mama."

As soon as Alex used the old childhood name for her mother, Caroline's paralysis was broken and she hurried in her daughter's arms. Caroline was more than half a head shorter than Alex; she had no problem to snuggle against her chest. She breathed in the familiar scent of lemongrass and vanilla that somehow only harmonised on Alex' skin, and she knew that this was not a dream.

"You're alive. The FBI lied to us."

"I was in the witness protection program, Mama."

Olivia caught Alex' eyes and answered with a short nod, "Let's give them some time alone, Mary." She tried to lead the older woman back to the kitchen, but Mary was rooted to the spot.

"Please tell me that this is not a dream, Miss Olivia. Miss Alexandra is really alive? She's back to stay?" Mary asked without her eyes ever leaving Alex' tall form.

"You're not dreaming, Mary, Alex didn't die. The FBI sent her to witness protection without giving her a choice, but now, she's back home."

"She's really back?" Mary whispered.

Alex turned a bit to the side and stretched one of her arms towards Mary, "I'm real, Mary, and I'm back for good. Let me hug you."

Mary didn't need another invitation. As a young woman she had come with Caroline Cabot from Boston. She had known Alex all her life; Alex was like a daughter to her. She had been her confidante and ally whenever the headstrong child had run into trouble, either at school or with her parents.

All three of them were crying by now, and Olivia looked on. She felt a bit helpless from her position at the kitchen door. She wanted nothing more than to take all of them in her arms and make the last three years go away.

"Liv!" Alex smiled through her tears and though it was a bit awkward Olivia managed to touch all three of them.

Had someone told her that one day she would be in a group hug with Caroline Cabot when Alex had first brought her to the Hampton Estate more than ten years ago she would have told them that they're completely out of their mind. She didn't exactly get a warm welcome then, but time changed that once the matriarch of the Cabot clan had resigned herself to the fact that her only daughter had chosen her love interest far outside of her social circles.

It felt good, but there still was something missing. Olivia needed to see her daughter in Alex' arms, and she knew that Alex also needed that. It was as if a tiny part of her could not believe that she was in an elaborate dream until she had seen the two most important persons in her life together, preferably in her own embrace.

The emotional overload was hard to take for all of them. Mary was the first to recover. She extricated herself from the group embrace. "Go and see the little one. She should still be in the stables. I'll prepare a proper breakfast in the meantime."

"We already had coffee, Mary. We'll be alright." Olivia said.

"I know you, Miss Olivia; you probably didn't have more than coffee. You need some real food between your teeth. Except for spending time with Janny you probably did nothing but go to work and work out in that gym of yours and forgot to eat ever since you were last here two weeks ago."

Alex snickered at that. It was like being in a time loop. Mary had always complained about Olivia or her not eating enough, but for once it was not her at the receiving end of one of Mary's admonishments.

Mary turned her pale green eyes towards the tall blonde and added, "Don't you start with me, young lady. I have eyes, and they tell me that whatever you did out there, a regular diet was not among your priorities. You need feeding at least as much as your wife does."

A bright smile broadened Alex' face, "Gods, I missed you, Mary."

"Go, go, I have things to do." She made shoeing gestures and two of the other three women took it as an order.

Only Caroline Cabot remained, "I'll help you, Mary."

They all knew that Mary needed no help in her kitchen, but they also recognised that Alex and Olivia needed that time alone with their daughter.

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Olivia could feel Alex' tension rising with every step towards the barn and the stable. So, she tried to get her to relax, even if it was at her own expense, "One thing is for sure, Lexi, Mom and Mary took your return better than I did. They didn't faint."

Alex didn't react to Olivia's attempt at levity but to the lingering, unsuccessfully hidden desperation in her voice. Intellectually she knew that there would be many more occasions when Olivia needed reassurance and that it was only a question of time when she once again would be in need of her wife's strong shoulder. Actually, Olivia's seemingly innocent remark had effectively pulled her out of a growing bout of insecurity. So, Alex stopped practically in mid-

stride and pulled them to a stop.

She took Olivia's face in both of her hands, "Mama and Mary are family, but you are my heart, Liv, and you always will be. I love them, but even before I was forced to go into hiding you held my heart. Hammond wanted to make me believe that you had found someone else, that you had moved on. After the third relocation I was ready to believe him, until he told me that you supposedly had hooked up with Elliot. That's when I stopped trusting him and began to search the internet for information about you."

"Elliot? We would kill each other after five minutes. Don't get me wrong, he's a great guy. He's my best friend, apart from you; but he's not my type and he never will be. He and Kathy might have problems at the moment, but even if there was no chance for them to ever reconcile, I would be the last person he would turn to for that kind of comfort," Olivia said defensively.

"I know, my Liv, Elliot is more of a big brother than anything else, and the feeling is mutual. That's not why I told you about Hammond's delusional idea. What I really wanted to say was that even in my darkest hours as a so-called protected witness I always knew that just as much as you are my heart, just as much as I belong to you, you belong to me and I own your heart.

"Hammond wanted me to believe that you had moved on even though you supposedly knew that I was still alive. I knew better. I knew you would wait for me 'til eternity and beyond if you had been told that I was alive; and I feared that you wouldn't go on if you thought that I was dead. I didn't want you to spend the rest of your life alone, and I didn't want you to spend your life without me. That's what hurt the most.

"For someone who earned her life with talking and manipulating words I'm expressing myself very badly. Bottom line is, had our roles be reversed I would have fainted too. Mother and Mary are family, Liv, but you are my heart and my soul."

"For eternity and beyond," Olivia answered and kissed Alex, deeply and passionately.

They were both flushed when they had to come up for air, and this time it was Alex who tried to ease the mood; the twinkle in her eyes was unmistakeable.

"If it makes you feel better, my tough Detective, sorry Sergeant - and how Don got you to take the exam is a story you'll have to tell some time soon - if it makes you feel better: it takes a lot to get you to faint like a proper Southern lady."

Olivia smiled at that; Alex had always known how to make her smile. "And as far as I remember ever single time had had to do with you, my love. It seems as if you are my kryptonite and my ambrosia all in one. But I'm not complaining, baby girl, since the first time was when you asked me you marry you."

"And the second when I told you that we soon would have a daughter," Alex added with a growing smile.

"And the third time you returned to me when I thought you lost and dead for the rest of my life. And speaking of our daughter, are you ready to meet her?!"

"Not a day has gone by that I did not dream of this moment, but ready...? No, I don't think that I'm ready. I'll probably never be. So, let's do it."

Alex strode confidently towards the open doors of the stable. From where Olivia stood she looked just like she had three years ago when she had been about to enter the courtroom, and Olivia couldn't help but think that her Alex, the gentle lover, the dedicated mother, the kick-ass ADA really was back, really back.

Only five of the eight stalls were currently occupied. Two of the horses neighed softly as Alex passed them as if they recognised the scent of their old mistress. Alex' attention, however, was focused on the slender figure of a young girl about five yards away who was brushing a grey pony. The pony topped her by about a hand at his shoulder. He had gentle brown eyes, and had Alex paid attention she would have seen that he came from very good stock, not that Caroline Cabot would ever buy anything but the very best for her granddaughter.

The tall blonde's eyes were riveted on the girl and her easy, practised movements. She drank in the sight like a starving man would the sight of food.

Alex started to tremble and immediately felt Olivia's comforting arm around her waist, "I'm here, baby girl."

"She's beautiful, Liv. So grown up," Alex whispered.

"She's a little hellion, just like her mommy was at her age," Olivia answered.

"You must be talking about yourself, Sergeant Benson," Alex replied to the familiar banter. "I'll have you know that I was the perfect angel, always."

"According to Mary and Mom there sure were horns poking out from under your halo," Olivia replied.

The girl must have heard the voices and turned around. Big blue eyes looked at the women standing close to the entrance.

"Moma?" She asked.

Alex took a tentative step forward, but her legs suddenly refused to carry her weight any longer. She sank to her knees.

"Janny, sweetheart!" Alex said softly.

Blue eyes widened and Janet looked questioningly at her other mother. Olivia nodded and the girl ran into Alex' arms.

"Mommy! I knew you wouldn't stay in that box, but Grandma didn't believe me. I'm so glad that you're back, Mommy."

Alex looked with wonder at the dark-haired girl in her arms. In her eyes Janet had always been perfect, but in the last years she had developed into an even more perfect mix of both of her parents.

"Don't cry, Mommy. You're back and Moma and I won't ever let you go. Moma cried for you at night. Please, don't leave us again."

Alex cried even harder at that. Janet's words had been a balm and an accusation. She buried her head into the girl's hair, "No, sweetheart, I will not leave you. You and your Moma and I, we'll stay together forever and always."

Olivia had lowered herself on her left knee and put a hand on both of their backs, "Janny, sweetie, Mommy didn't want to leave us. She had to. There was a bad man who wanted to hurt her. So, she had to hide, but now the bad man is gone, and he will never again hurt her or anybody else."

"Like the bad man who wanted to hurt me last year?" Janet asked.

Olivia flinched almost imperceptively. She had hoped to get the chance to tell Alex in her own time, "Yes, sweetie, just like him, but the bad man who wanted to hurt your Mommy had a lot of friends. That's why she had to hide; but he and his friends are all gone now, and they never will be back," Olivia said.

"Promise?" Janet asked.

"Yes, sweetie, I promise."

"Good. Come, Mommy, I'll introduce you to Comet and the others. Comet is mine. Grandma gave him to me for my birthday. I wanted to take him home with me but Moma convinced me that he's happier here. I only see him on the weekends and during school holidays, but I know he loves me," Janet said while she pulled Alex towards the pony.

Alex wiped her tears away and smiled at the girl's enthusiasm. Internally she was still stunned at the ease with which her daughter had accepted her unexpected return. It was almost too good to be true.

They spent the following hour talking about the horses; well, mostly Alex listened to Janet talking about them. Janet knew everything about their favourite treats, their reaction to different kinds of weather, how they responded to a saddle, everything. Even when Janet had still been a baby and had been fussing with teething, a slow ride had always calmed her down. She seemed to have sucked in her birth mother's love for horses with her milk.

It didn't take Alex long to connect with the animals. Except for Comet there was a golden coloured mare relatively new to the stable, but Alex remembered the other horses. There was old Rusty who had found a retirement home at the Cabot estate; and Big Martha, a gentle thorough breed, who had been operational in curing Olivia from her fear of horses.

The one in the stall closest to the door was a black stallion, eighteen hands high. His name was Black Devil, and he had a temper to match. He raised his head and looked into Alex' eyes. For a moment she forgot about Janet and Olivia. Devil had been her father's horse and it had taken her weeks to get him to trust her after his death. From then on he had been hers; he had allowed others to groom him, even to saddle him, but had refused to accept any rider but her, until three years ago. Alex took a step forward and though the stall door was still closed he showed a lot of hostility.

"No, Mommy, only Moma can ride him. He throws everyone else, even jockeys," Janet said.

Alex' eyes were glued onto the horse, "It'll be alright, sweetheart. Devil and I are old friends."

"Go and put Comet back in his stall, Janny. Breakfast should be ready any minute. Mommy and I will be fine."

Something in the tone of her Moma's voice reassured Janet and she obeyed. She had her back turned when Olivia undid the hatch to Devil's stall. She also missed Olivia telling Alex to stay back for a moment. When she turned back she saw the familiar sight of Olivia, her Moma, caressing Devil's muzzle and rubbing her head against the side of his neck. As usual she murmured something unintelligible.

After a couple of minutes Olivia stepped back and made way for Alex. The woman and the horse once again seemed to stare at each other. It might put too much humanity in an animal's reaction but they both seemed nervous. Alex took a step forward and Devil half a step back. Alex took another step forward and Devil hit the ground with his left front hoof twice. The next step brought Alex well into reach of his front hooves should he decide to attack. He didn't. Alex stretched out her hand, palm up. She allowed him to sniff and lick it.

Black Devil neighed and his front hoof once again hit the ground repeatedly. Alex took another very small step forward. Devil slowly lowered his head until his ear was only a quarter inch from Alex' palm. She scratched behind his ear, and he pressed against her hand. He recognised her.

"I missed you, Dev," Alex said.

The pressure against her hand increased. Alex raised her free hand and scratched his other ear rhythmically. Her forehead met his.

Olivia had observed the scene, anxiously at first, but now she knew that everything would be alright. It had taken her months to get Black Devil to trust her and allow her on his back, not only because on the way she had had a lot of her own fears to conquer. On the one hand it was frustrating to see that what had taken her months of effort took only a few minutes for Alex. On

the other hand she was glad that the fierce animal responded that favourably to his true mistress.

A few moments later Alex moved to the side and Devil raised his head once again. He found Olivia's dark eyes. She was the one to whom he had related after Alex' supposed death, and it seems that he was not about to give up on that connection. He neighed; Olivia stepped closer and Devil pushed his nose in her hand.

"Yes, my boy, she's back. She came back for us, and later that day we will go on a ride together, and you will know that it's real. And we all will be there to watch."

Olivia turned her head and looked at her wife. Alex was smiling, one of those radiant, breathtaking smiles she had longed for all this time, one of those smiles she never offered to anyone but very close friends and family.

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They walked back to the house hand in hand with Janet in the middle. Breakfast was ready and held all of Alex' favourites, French toast and pancakes and homemade jam and that special Jamaican blend the blonde had so sorely missed. Janet was chattering happily away and told Alex about the day before at school and what kind of Christmas tree they would go buy later, just as if her birthmother had only been gone for a day or two and not for more than three years. It gave all of the adults a sense of normalcy and they probably would have spent the whole morning at the breakfast table had Janet not insisted that they had to go soon to find their perfect tree.

Upstairs in their bedroom while changing into warmer clothes Alex said, "Tell me about last year."

Olivia had expected the question ever since Mrs. Wolfstein had mentioned it the night before. What could have happened to Janet had the kidnapping lasted longer still gave her nightmares. So, she was rather reluctant to talk about it, but she also knew that her wife would not take a simple 'I'll tell you later' as an answer.

"Last year, on October, the 16th, a man named Henry Miller broke into the brownstone, sedated Janny with a tranquiliser dart and kidnapped her. Mrs. Wolfstein saw someone she didn't know carry a canvas sack to a white van and memorised the licence plate. She always says that she can't command her body to grow any younger but she can keep her mind from getting old. Anyway, when I came home from grocery shopping and couldn't find Janny I started by asking the neighbours if they had seen her and Mrs. Wolfstein told me about the van. I called the precinct and half an hour later there was a bullet out for the van. Three hours later a cruiser found it, empty and parked in front of an abandoned warehouse in Harlem. Fin and I broke all traffic laws to get there as fast as we could. We entered the warehouse through a delivery entrance in the back. Janny had been bound to a chair and Miller was brandishing an Army knife in front of her. He rambled about cops being too stupid to catch him and that she would make a good addition to his collection. I couldn't stand it any longer and rushed him from behind. Miller is in

jail now and Abby made sure that he never will get out."

"Abby? Abby Carmichael? But she's an US Attorney now; what does she have to do with a kidnapping in New York City?" Alex asked.

"Miller worked as a trucker all over the country. For years he abducted, tortured and killed the children of police officers who had recently been in the press for getting a commendation or a promotion or having solved a difficult case. During the trial he said that he did it to make them pay for not having accepted his application to the police academy in Seattle. Without Mrs. Wolfstein's...." Olivia fell silent.

"Without Mrs. Wolfstein you might not have found our baby in time," Alex whispered. "How does she cope? Did she have nightmares?"

"I let her sleep with me the first couple of nights and we saw Elizabeth Olivet for a few months, but Janny is fine now. He had her for about four hours and she was unconscious for most of the time. I think I needed Elizabeth's help just as much as Janet did. I blamed myself for what happened. I was convinced that had I not left her alone he would not have succeeded. I even thought about quitting the force."

Olivia was sitting on the bed and stared at the floor. She hated being reminded of that day and its aftermath. Alex knelt in front of her and took both of Olivia's hands in her hers.

"Look at me, Livvy. Miller didn't succeed. You stopped him in time. I know you must have been frantic with worry and I'm very proud of you."

"Proud?"

"Yes, my love, proud. You did everything you could to protect our daughter and you did it all by the book," Alex said.

"Not really. I should not have been in that warehouse. I was too close to the case but I also could not stay away. Elliot wanted me to wait at the one-six, but Fin knew that I had to be there. Janny was physically unharmed but had he injured her in any way, nothing would have saved him. I would have killed him on the spot."

"But you didn't, Liv, that's what counts. You're a mother and a cop, neither of them would have killed him. You might have beaten the living daylight out of him, but you would not have killed him."

Alex kissed Olivia's hands and then stretched and kissed her full on the lips, "I love you, Sergeant Olivia Benson-Cabot. And just so you know I would have helped you bury that guy. He wanted to hurt our girl."

Olivia's eyes widened in surprise at the vehemence of Alex' last statement but since she shared her feelings she did the next best thing to telling her; she gave her a passionate kiss, a toe curling,

breathhtaking kiss that was only broken when they heard their daughter's voice coming from the open door.

"They're not ready, yet, Grandma. They're sucking face; that's gross," Janet shouted.

"Language, young lady." The admonishment came directly from behind the girl, "And there's no need to shout in this house; that's why we have the intercom."

"I'm sorry, Grandma. But we really have to hurry or else the best trees will be gone when we come in too late," Janet said.

"We're ready, sweetheart," Alex said. "And we'll find the two best Christmas trees there are, promise."

"Two trees?" Caroline asked.

"We'll also need one in the city." Alex didn't add that she had spent the last three Holidays alone, too depressed to even put up the slightest seasons' decoration. Rationally she knew that she couldn't turn back the clock and that she was liable to go a bit overboard in compensation, but that was a risk she would gladly take.

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Chapter Five

Mary had had hot chocolate waiting when they had returned with the larger of the two trees they had purchased strapped to the top of the car. The second tree would be delivered to the brownstone on Tuesday. Alex and Janet had spent some time planning on how they wanted to decorate it. Olivia had sat next to them in front of the fireplace and listened, her eyes following Alex' slightest movement. She also had always been keeping some kind of physical contact with Alex, unconsciously afraid the other woman would disappear again. During the night that fear had translated itself to Olivia wrapping herself around Alex' taller body like an octopus.

They had returned to Manhattan late Sunday night. Janet had to go to school the next day and Alex didn't want to leave it to the official channels to let her and Olivia's friends from the one-six know that she was still alive. Special Agent Parks had left a note that due to the high profile of the case and the rather unusual circumstances of Velez' death the official announcement to the police commissioner and the district attorney would be made by the director of the FBI himself. He had an appointment with both men at two o'clock Monday afternoon. The plan was to first drive Janny to school and then enter the precinct together.

If there was one thing one could count on in New York, however, it was that things rarely went as planned, especially not for the detectives of the Special Victims Unit; and this time was no exception. Though not officially on call Olivia was called to a crime scene at a quarter to six; and she never before had been that reluctant to go into work.

There was more than just one victim. The first responding unit had found two bodies and a severely traumatised girl of about ten years about an hour earlier. The girl had been the main reason why Olivia had been called in. Dani Beck had tried to approach the child but she only had shrunk further into herself and started to scream whenever anyone tried to touch her.

"I'm glad you're here, Liv," Elliot said. "We have the rest of the crime scene covered but there's a little girl on the second floor who might have seen everything. She doesn't respond to any of us. Sorry to cut your weekend short."

Olivia just nodded and shrugged off her leather coat. Elliot caught it in his outstretched hand and grabbed the service weapon she'd handed him with the other. If she had paid attention she would have seen Dani Beck's eyes darkening in anger.

The front door had barely closed behind her when the SWAT team arrived and turned the whole scene into pandemonium though there was nothing for them to do. Luckily Cragen and Casey Novak were not too far behind and managed to keep them at bay.

Less than twenty minutes later Elliot was the first to leave the major bedroom, closely followed by Olivia with a young girl cradled in her arms. It came as no surprise to anyone ever having experienced Olivia Benson in the middle of a difficult case that she refused to give the girl up to the paramedics and insisted on riding with her to the hospital to be checked out.

For once they'd been in luck and the grandmother of their surviving victim was living close by, in the next borough to be exact. She was brought to the hospital by a police cruiser about an hour later, and little Anna who until then had refused to give up her hold on Olivia went willingly into the arms of her grandma. Anna seemed to love the older woman and that took a large weight off Olivia. When she had been about to leave an aunt and two cousins arrived, and Anna responded to them like to long lost friends. That further served to ease her mind.

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Olivia returned to the precinct and sat down to write up her report and deal with older paperwork. A couple of hours later Elliot put a steaming mug of freshly brewed coffee on her desk. He was about to turn around and leave her to her paperwork when he registered that there was only one ring on her left hand instead of the two wedding bands she usually wore. He checked out her other hand and found the bracelet also missing. Elliot debated with himself if he should call her on it. It could be the first sign that his partner and best friend was finally ready to move on, and he didn't want her to feel self-conscious about it.

So, Elliot held his tongue. Fin had no such reservations when he came from interviewing a witness in a rape-homicide, "Hey girlfriend, what's with the missing jewellery?"

Olivia looked down at her left hand and smiled, "Oh, that, gave it back to its rightful owner."

"You did what?" Elliot asked from his desk and hurried over.

"I gave it back, Elliot, what's not to understand?"

"But you can't. The ring and the bracelet are worth thousands of dollars; you can't just put them on Alex' grave or something asinine like that. That's insane, Liv. Don't get me wrong; I think it's great that you've given up these constant reminders of your loss. It's an important step."

Had Elliot's attention not been entirely focused on Olivia he would have seen the slack-jawed expression on Fin's face as he looked towards the entrance to the squad room. Olivia also saw what had him so surprised and a bright smile the likes of which Elliot had not seen in years lit up her face.

"What makes you think that I would do something that stupid. I told you, I gave them back. Turn around, Elliot."

"Hello Elliot, long time no see."

Elliot whirled around and stared open-mouthed at the apparition right in front of him. Light grey power suit, a purple blouse, high heels, deep blue eyes behind black-rimmed glasses; her hair was longer, but the knowing smirk and the slightly raised eyebrow; that was Alexandra Cabot as they all had known her.

Before he could react Fin rushed past him and pulled Alex in a bear hug, "Damn, Cabot, you're a sight for sore eyes, and just as beautiful as ever."

When he let her down she squeezed his upper arms, "Charmer. It's good to see you too, Fin. I missed you all." Alex stepped aside and gave Elliot one of her patent bemused smirks, "Cat got your tongue, Detective Stabler?"

"Alex... I... How...?" He stammered.

"Hammond stashed her away in the witness protection program, El," Olivia explained.

Elliot turned towards his partner, accusation vivid in his eyes, "You knew! You knew the whole time and never said anything. That's why you never even tried to find someone else."

In the blink of an eye Alex had stepped into Elliot's personal space and between them, "You are out of line, Detective Stabler. Olivia knew since Friday night, that's when I came back home. Who do you think you are to presume to judge my wife?"

Alex' blue eyes were blazing icy fire and Elliot instinctively stepped back. Fin's delighted chuckle and Olivia's calming hand on her back almost completely snuffed out her anger at Elliot's presumptions.

"That's the Alex Cabot we all love and missed; kick-ass to the core," Fin said with a shit-eating

grin.

A sheepish grin appeared on Elliot's face, "I forgot how fiercely protective the two of you are of each other. I'm glad that you're back, Alex. Sorry for what I insinuated. It was just a shock. May I give you a welcome home hug? Pretty please."

Immediately mollified by his unexpected antics Alex opened his arms to him and smiled. That Olivia had told her over the weekend how much of a rock he had been for her after Alex' faked death also contributed to calm her down.

He closed his arms around her and she whispered, "Thank you for taking care of her while I was gone."

"That's what friends and partners are for, Alex," he whispered back. Out loud he added, "I should have known that something momentous has happened when Liv arrived at the scene this morning. It was the first time in far too long that she seemed at peace with herself. Damn, I'm glad that you're back to keep her in line. She was such an insufferable bear at times."

For a second Alex' eyes darkened but his wide grin told her that he wasn't serious. He saw it and his grin widened. He once again took her in his arms, whirled her around and sing-songed, "I'm sooo glaaad that you're back, Alexandra."

At that moment Dani Beck entered the squad room and Captain Cragen left his office to find out what all the ruckus was about. He froze in mid-step when he recognised the woman in Elliot's arms.

"Alexandra."

Elliot immediately put her down and she walked towards the older man. They hugged; then Cragen pushed her away and studied her from head to toe. He said, "The next time I'll see him, I'm going to kill Agent Hammond. When they refused to let our M.E. have a look at your body I became suspicious and asked him and he swore that you really were dead and not, as I had hoped, in the WP program. That bastard."

"Agent Hammond is dead, Don. It's a long story but I can give you all the cliff notes version."

Since Alex didn't know that Detective Beck was now using Olivia's desk, she took her familiar position of leaning against it and told them about waking up after three weeks in a coma and learning that for everyone she loved she was dead. She told them about being relocated almost too many times to count and about Agent Parks appearing on her doorstep and telling her that it was over.

Elliot, Fin and Don also heard what she was not telling. They saw the loneliness and heartbreak she had suffered lingering in her eyes, but they also knew that there was only one person to whom she would talk about those feeling and that person was right at her side with one hand at the small of her back and the other gently stroking the back of her left hand.

Fin tried to lighten the mood by asking, "So, what's with the power suit? Did you miss them so much in bumpkin backwater or wherever else they dropped you off? I mean, Alex, you're back in town for less than three days and already had the time to hit Park Avenue for a shopping trip. So, the rumour about Cabot women and the shopping gene is true; though I thought that you'd have better things to do."

"Oh, I did, Fin, much better things, and no, you won't get any details. I have you know that the Cabot fashion gene would find great clothing or a gifted seamstress in the farthest corner of bumpkin backwater, but in this case it was much easier. I spent the last year in Los Angeles, teaching law at the UCLA."

"Los Angeles, must be a great place to live." Dani was getting fed up with being ignored by the rest of the squad and had decided to make herself known. "Besides, my name is Detective Dani Beck, and this is my desk you're all clustered around."

Alex turned her attention from the other detectives to the source of the intruding voice. It wasn't obvious but she checked the other woman out in less time than it would take most people to tell another person's eye colour. And she obviously found her lacking. Alex gave up her relaxed position against the desk and stood up to her full, high heel enhanced height.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Detective Dani Beck. I'm Alexandra Cabot-Benson. I didn't know that my wife had changed desks since I was here last. We won't keep you from your work much longer, Detective, and you can be assured that it will not happen again."

Alex' bearings were the pinnacle of good manners, but she also projected an air of well-bred superiority; an attitude the members of the Special Victims Unit had only ever seen directed towards the most annoying defence attorneys.

"I'm sorry, Alex. I forgot to tell you that Munch is on loan with the FBI and has a temporary replacement. For the time being Fin is my partner."

Olivia shifted her position until she was facing Alex which effectively blocked Dani's line of sight. She focused her attention on her wife and the rest of the squad room no longer existed for both of them.

"Not that you don't look hot, my love, but didn't you tell me you wanted to take it easy at first."

"And so I did, my Liv," Alex answered and all around them shrank away from their conscious minds. "However, it seems that my mother had an early tee-off time with Arthur's wife. He called me about an hour ago with an invitation to lunch, and he didn't sound even slightly surprised that I'm not dead."

"Lunch? Where?" Olivia asked.

"Da Gianni's," Alex answered. "And have you ever seen me turn down a meal at my favourite

Italian restaurant, especially after three years of practically starving."

"Do you want me to go with you, love?" Olivia asked.

"Yes, I do, but if I want to have my old life back I'll have to stand up for myself. Arthur is a friend, Liv, I'll be alright. And besides, you're only a phone call away and that's more than I had for the last three years."

Oblivious to the presence of the others Olivia kissed her wife, a deep, passionate, breathtaking kiss. During their exchange the other detectives had found some paperwork to do and Captain Cragen had dragged Beck to his office.

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Caroline smiled at the people in her dining room, her friends and her family, all of her family. She couldn't remember ever having smiled as much as since Alexandra's return from the dead, or rather the witness protection program. She was sitting at the head of the table and Alex was a few seats over to her right. She was animatedly talking to Bill Harriman, now and then making a point with a graceful gesture of her left hand while her right was resting on Olivia's left hand. Not a moment went by that either Olivia or Alex sought physical contact with the other. Touching each other seemed to assuage an unconscious need in both of them.

It was almost time to adjourn to the living room where heaps of presents were waiting under the tree. Most of them were for Janet and the girl was already squirming in her seat in anticipation but there were also lots of others. Alex had taken full advantage of the fact that she was back at her old hunting grounds and might have gone a bit overboard with her shopping sprees; not that it had not been fun to see Alex reconquer Park Avenue...

For a moment Caroline's eyes fell on Mary who was sitting at the other end of the table. She had outdone herself with this year's Christmas dinner with adding a few of Alex' favourites; and though she had done most of the cooking, they had hired a catering service to serve dinner and deal with the clean-up later as they did every year to allow the other woman to savour the fruits of her labour.

At the nod of one of the servers Caroline rose from her seat and tapped her wine glass with the silver spoon from dessert. "Coffee and other drinks are waiting in the living room, if you would all follow me."

Unsurprisingly Janet was the first to claim her seat close to the Christmas tree; Alex and Olivia followed suite and five minutes later everyone had found a seat. As by tradition Caroline would start handing out her gifts, but her granddaughter stopped her when she had the first present already in hand.

"Wait, Grandma, there's something missing. Last week Mary and I were watching old videotapes. In the farthest corner of the drawer I found a tape of my very first Christmas.

Mommy was playing piano and Moma was standing next to her singing. I asked Mary about it and she told me that it had been a tradition for them to sing a few Christmas carols before it was time to open the presents. Could you do that again, please? It sounded so good and I can't remember Moma singing, only humming. Please."

Olivia and Alex looked at each other, but both seemed reluctant.

"I missed your voice, my Liv," Alex finally said.

"It hurt too much to sing without you," Olivia answered and kissed the back of Alex' hands. "Please, play for me."

Alex smiled with just a hint of sadness in her eyes. Olivia had the soulful voice of a blues singer. When they had gotten together she even had performed at a jazz club twice a month and when Alex was pregnant Olivia had sung for the baby. Singing had been her preferred way to express herself, and it hurt to learn that she had given up something that important to her.

"No longer, my love. I don't know how good I'll be after almost three years of not touching a keyboard, but I'm willing to try if you are."

Olivia rose and pulled her up, too. Together, their fingers entwined, they walked to the grand piano at the other side of the spacious living room. Alex' hands were shaking when she opened the cover of the keyboard but the moment her fingers touched the ivory keys they steadied and the first chords of 'Hark! The herald angel sings' filled the room. At first her eyes were focused on the black and white keys, but then she looked up and allowed herself to be captured by Olivia's deep brown orbs which were looking at her with love and adoration.

She changed the melody and improvised a medley. When she felt ready Alex nodded towards Olivia who took a step closer to the shining black lacquer of the piano's body. The first notes of 'Joy to the world' were coaxed from the instrument and Olivia complemented it with her rich alto voice. A few other season favourites followed and as they had done in the past they ended with 'Silent Night'. Unbeknownst to them one of Alex' cousins recorded their impromptu concert with his digital camera.

Janet jumped from her grandmother's lap, ran over and hugged first Olivia and then Alex. "Thank you; that was the best present ever!"

"You're welcome, sweetheart," Alex answered, "but I'm sure that you'll find one or two things under the tree that are even better."

Janet emphatically shook her head and said, "I have you and Moma and Grandma and Mary; that's all I'll ever want for Christmas."

"Me too, Janny baby, me too." Alex had tears in her eyes as she hugged her daughter and was grateful when Caroline announced that it was high time to start opening the presents.

-X-X-X-

Hours later Alex and Olivia lay in their bed, snuggled in each other's arms and all but disappearing under the heavy down comforter. The freshly fallen snow outside reflected the light of the almost full moon and bathed the room in silver. Alex' skin seemed almost translucent and her eyes had taken on an eerie hue that made them appear even darker than the usual brilliant blue.

She was so beautiful, Olivia couldn't help but sigh as she pulled her even closer.

"What's wrong, my Liv?" Alex asked already half on her way to fall asleep.

Olivia smiled, "Nothing, baby girl, nothing is wrong. The opposite is true, everything is alright. I'm the luckiest woman in the whole world. I have a brilliant and beautiful wife who, wonder of wonders, loves me as much as I love her. A healthy and smart daughter, a family and friends and a job I love. Yes, I'm the luckiest woman in the world."

"So, it was a good sigh, not a bad sigh," Alex said, now no longer sleepy. "You know, you are wrong. You can only be the second luckiest woman in the world because I am the luckiest. I finally have my life and my family and my love back, and next month I'll start in a job that puts me two steps closer to one day become DA myself. It can't possibly get any...."

Olivia hastily put her finger on Alex' lips, "Don't, please, don't say it. You'll jinx it. The last time we thought that everything was perfect and couldn't get any better you died."

Alex reacted to the raw pain in Olivia's voice, "No one will ever take me away from you, my Liv, my life. I won't let them, never again!"

They kissed and Alex' hand crept under Olivia's pyjama top and cupped her right breast. She didn't have to do more than let the pad of her thumb slide over the nipple to make it stand at attention. Olivia mimicked her actions and for the next few hours their jobs and their family was forgotten. Even after more than two weeks of being back together their bodies responded to each other with an almost insatiable hunger.

Olivia used her other hand to unbutton Alex' silk top, and before Alex got a chance to do the same she bent down and took the other nipple in her mouth. Alex' back arched into the touch; her leg draped itself over Olivia's thighs and pulled her closer. Suddenly the thin pyjama trousers were too much of a barrier between them and Alex tugged them down. She sighed in relief when Olivia's skin touched hers and rolled around until Olivia came to lie right on top of her.

"I need to feel you, my life," she said when Olivia tried to take at least a part of her weight on her arms.

"I love you, Lexi."

Olivia kissed Alex gently. They both needed reassurance as much as they needed the passion between them. Her lips followed Alex' jaw line to her ear. She whispered how much she loved her and needed her. She told her softly that now she was whole again. Tears were spilling out of Alex' eyes and Olivia softly kissed them away, murmuring endearments between kisses. Sometimes their love-making felt like they were on a never ending roller coaster, their emotions oscillating between playful one moment and tearful the next.

Instead of worrying about it or trying to cover up the bandwidth and depth of their feelings they let them run their course in all their overwhelming dichotomy. It didn't matter if they were joking and a heartbeat later they both were crying. It didn't matter because they finally were back together, and together everything was possible.

Alex' tears stopped and Olivia smiled at her, "I love you, baby girl, so much."

"I love you more, my Liv."

"Impossible. I love you more."

"Do not. I do."

"Do too."

"Do not."

And they started to giggle like school girls. Olivia let herself glide to the side and started to tickle her wife. She knew all the spots and as soon as she had Alex laughing helplessly she changed paces and started to put butterfly kisses on the scarred shoulder. Alex still felt self-conscious about the scars and Olivia's ministrations were a balm to her insecurities.

"You're so beautiful," Olivia breathed against the scar tissue. "So beautiful, and mine."

"Yours alone, my life. And you are mine."

The possessiveness in Alex' voice in turn was a soothing ointment on Olivia's fears. Alex validated her words with actions and entered Olivia's drenched centre with two fingers. Olivia hissed and pressed into the touch but continued her ministrations to Alex' shoulder, gentle kisses and short licks, on the threshold between playful and sensuous. When she locked up she saw the raw need in Alex' eyes. So, her head dipped and her lips once again found Alex' rock hard nipple. She nipped at it with her front teeth and was rewarded by a shiver running through her beloved's body.

Holding herself up on one elbow Olivia cupped the other breast with her free hand. It immediately puckered up in response to Olivia's gentle kneading. Alex mirrored her rhythm with her still embedded fingers. They both moaned.

"Go inside, my Liv. I need to feel you. I need you."

Olivia took a few more moments to flick Alex' nipple before she let her hand slither down the firm body and smooth skin. She quickly thrust two fingers into Alex' folds and just as quickly withdrew. Her fingertips caressed the outer labia and she revelled in the feeling of the neatly trimmed blonde curls.

Alex let her finger flutter inside of Olivia, teasing her in answer to her own teasing. Olivia smiled around the nipple in her mouth and gently bit down. Immediately Alex' inner muscles clenched, her back arched from the mattress. Her blue eyes had darkened to almost black. Olivia managed to make eye contact, her own eyes burning with desire.

Without letting go of the hard nub between her teeth she whispered, "I love you, Alexandra Cabot-Benson."

Alex had either heard the words or guessed on their content because she answered, "I love you, Olivia Benson-Cabot."

Olivia's mouth now was not only enclosing the nipple but the whole aureole. Alex added a third finger and Olivia's inner walls greeted them all. She was burning inside, burning with desire and the bone deep need she felt for her beloved. It filled her core and her heart, and Alex' eyes told her that Alex felt the same. In the end it was that knowledge that pushed both of them over the edge.

Alex pulled Olivia closer until her head rested on her scarred shoulder. She cherished the familiar weight. Olivia started to remove her fingers from Alex' sex.

"No, don't. Leave them where they are. I need to feel you inside of me."

Olivia sighed contentedly. She kissed the side of Alex' breast and said, "Merry Christmas, my love."

Minutes later they both were asleep and were only woken by their daughter knocking on the door and telling them that breakfast would soon be ready.

-X-X-X-

Epilogue

The New Year's Eve party in the Cabot-Benson brownstone in Manhattan's Upper East Side had been a big success, bigger than the hostesses had hoped for when Alex had brought up the idea shortly before Christmas. It was a testament to the Cabot name and generations of experience in organising social gatherings soaked up with the mother's milk that everything had not only been ready but perfect when the first guests had arrived. Due to the time restraints written invitations had only gone out to a few people who usually spent that evening upstate and to those neither Olivia nor Alex had really expected to show up, citing previously made arrangements.

In the end the turn-out had been spectacular. If terrorists had wanted to deal a real blow on law enforcement agencies in New York City all they had had to do would have been to attack the brownstone at any given time that evening. From the District Attorney to the Police Commissioner, everyone had stopped by at one point or the other. Judges, ADAs, Detectives, TARU, the crime lab and M.E., children's services; all had come, not to speak of the throngs of socialites passing through, either out of a genuine wish to welcome Alex back or out of simple curiosity.

All in all it had been an evening guaranteed to become a centrepiece of every major local newspaper; and if the press had known what they just were missing they would have had a collective conniption.

At 2h30 in the morning only close friends and family were left. Some of them would stay the night, like Elliot and Kathy, Caroline Cabot and Mary who had had a close eye on the caterers all evening despite Alex' and Olivia's efforts to get her to relax. Mary, however, had admonished them that she would not have her reputation ruined by sloppy service. She then had shooed them away to mingle with the guests.

Now, Olivia had convinced the others to take a last hot nightcap on the rarely used but well maintained roof garden. It always had been Alex' favourite part of the house. She had spent hours on end there, working, relaxing, nursing their daughter, making love to Olivia on hot summer nights or simply lying in each other's arms and savouring the lights and sounds of their city. It had been Alex' sanctuary, and as such it had been too painful for Olivia to spend any length of time there without her beloved wife. Now, however, things had changed.

Everyone had bundled up warmly, two with a knowing smile and the rest under token protests. Three brass braziers had been arranged in a triangle, their fire the only illumination. Olivia pulled Alex in the centre of the triangle while Caroline and Mary directed the others to form a circle around them. Olivia took Alex by both hands, warming the tall blonde's already slightly cold digits. Brown eyes held deep blue orbs and though the others didn't have any idea of what was about to happen, they quickly fell silent when Olivia began to speak.

"Alexandra," she said in that sensual tone she only ever used in the privacy of their bedroom, "my wife, my heart. When they told me that you had died, when it began to sink in that I never again would be able to hold you in my arms, I didn't know how to go on. I thought that a part of me, the better part of me had died."

Alex' eyes widened. She never would have thought that Olivia would be this open about her pain and fears in public.

"I would have given up, if not for our beautiful girl."

Olivia cast a short glance at Janet who was standing right in front of her grandmother.

"Janet kept my heart beating. She gave me the strength to go on. Without her I would have given

into my despair. I would have given up or I would have taken too many risk, not caring if I survived them or not."

Olivia cast another glance towards her daughter, but instead of the shock she had expected, all she found was a gentle smile and an understanding far beyond her age.

"I survived with only half of my heart and my soul, but now that you are back, my Lexi, I'm whole again. My heart and soul are complete." Olivia went down on her right knee and pulled something out of her pocket. "Alexandra Cabot, would you do me the honour to marry me for the second time?"

Alex pulled her up and gave her a passionate kiss, "Yes, my Liv, a thousand times 'yes'. I love you, Olivia Benson. Without you I existed from day to day, but now that you are back in my life I can finally live again. Yes, I'll marry you again; tonight, if Uncle Bill would be so kind."

"Then would you please accept this as a sign of my devotion and our bond?" Olivia held up a ring that matched Alex' wedding band, except for the symbol for eternity inlaid with tiny diamonds.

Supreme Judge Bill Harriman stepped forward and said in his distinguished bass, "Then lets do this right. We'll need a best man and a maid of honour."

-X-X-X-

Fifteen months later Bureau Chief Alexandra Cabot returned home after a long day at court and the office. She was in time to snuck behind Olivia who was just about to breastfeed their youngest daughter. She loved holding them when Olivia nursed their child and was already dreading the day when they would start to wean Catherine off to allow her beloved wife to return to work.

T H E o E N D