

## ***PLAN C***

How do women do this? Alicia sat waiting in the cold room, wrapped in a disposable, blue blanket and tried to block it out. Think of something else. Anything. Focus. She closed her eyes and conjured images of memories tucked away in her mind. Her bedroom at sixteen. No. Her first kiss at the Spring Cotillion. Farther back. Her first bicycle. The glint of pink glitter in the midday sun. She ran to it, reveled in the sparkle of streamers blowing in the breeze. She jumped on it without fear, leaned the bike heavy to the left, unencumbered by the scrape of training wheels as she rode down the driveway. And then her mother, standing by the car door, telling her to get in. Alicia in the back seat, her father standing on the driveway holding the bike, both of them fading away, along with her childhood innocence. It was no use. Her old memories had no place here. The cold chill of the sexual assault treatment center. The interviews by detectives. Walking through the crime scene. Pointing out where he dragged her and where she later found her keys. How the police dog and his partner made a beeline for the woods, tracking the scent of the Mexican. The stale waft of his beer probably hanging on the breeze. Then the moment she turned into the gas station, even though the lights were out and it was obviously closed. The three dollars she had for gas. And how if she rode a bike, she wouldn't need gas. Her first bike; pink metallic flake with a banana seat for extra riders. The memory of her mother's face when she rolled it out at the birthday party in front of all her friends, knowing she'd read her daughter's mind. Just like she thought she'd done this

morning, when she picked up the phone to call 911 and cry to the dispatcher about how her daughter had just been raped.

Alicia sat on her bed drying her hair. She gripped the towel tight, pulling the water out so that her thick, brown hair didn't feel like a climbing rope just after a hard rain. Her mind reeled. She didn't know what she was going to do. And as she pulled the towel away, her mother stood in the doorway, and asked if everything was okay. All it took was the red puff of Alicia's eyes and her mother was immediately beside her in full mother-hen mode.

"What is it, baby?" she asked as she wrapped her arms around Alicia and pulled her head in against her breasts. Alicia couldn't speak. She didn't know how to start. What to say?

And her mother just took over. "You know, sweetheart, it's okay. Every couple fights in the beginning."

"No," Alicia said, thinking immediately of Daniel. He loved her. This wasn't his fault. She shook her head for emphasis, and then she started crying.

When Alicia first met Daniel, he was sitting alone, eating at the crowded Subway in the student union. There was an empty seat at his table and she asked to sit down. It wasn't a movie style introduction. There was no witty banter.

"Is this seat taken?" she asked, somewhat hesitant, juggling her books and a six inch turkey on white.

Daniel simply waved his hand at the seat, and with a mouth full of roast beef, answered "Hlp yrslf."

After they ate, they moved to the wooded pavilion behind the student union. A canopy of cypress trees shaded them throughout the afternoon and into early evening. Daniel studied business and planned to backpack Europe after graduation. Alicia recounted her senior trip to

England and her love of language and all things Shakespearean. To this, Daniel recited a line of poetry; something to do with a young girl on the verge and a lotus blossom. He stumbled over the words, and Alicia fell in love as the wind rustled the leaves and branches overhead. So, no. This wasn't Daniel's fault. She could never blame him.

When the detective stepped into the room, he carried a notebook and a digital recorder. He wasn't a mean looking man, like the one in uniform who initially came to the house. The uniform spoke to her like a child who'd done something wrong. He asked questions that pointed fingers at her and tried to poke holes in her story. And when he laughed at her incredulity, her mother demanded to speak to his supervisor.

By the time the detective was called to respond, Alicia was already tired of telling her story. But the detective was different. He apologized for the man in uniform, dismissed him like a chef would a waiter. He walked her through the crime scene. He was patient with her when she cried, and he took notes on what she said.

So, by the time she was sitting in the rape center, her story was easier to tell.

"I left my boyfriend's, he lives in the apartments over by the golf course, and I noticed that I was almost out of gas. So, I figured I should get some because I have a Lit midterm this morning." She looked at her watch and shook her head. "Which, I guess, I'm going to miss now," she said and a frog jumped down her throat. "I don't know what--"

"Don't worry, Alicia," the detective said. "You'll get a chance to make it up." He tapped the gold badge on his chest and smiled. "We have a way of working with professors."

Alicia wanted to smile at his offer to help, but she didn't want to take this to school. She wanted to bury it six feet in the ground and leave no marker. Instead, she took a deep breath and continued her story.

“So, I noticed that my fuel light was on. To be honest, it had been on since earlier but I was already running late when I went over there and just figured I'd get it later.”

“I'm sorry Alicia. I don't mean to interrupt,” the detective said, “but what is your boyfriend's name again?”

“Oh, he doesn't know anything about this.”

“No, of course not. I mean, I wouldn't think that he did. It's just that we need to talk to him, you know, in case he saw anyone hanging out around his place when you left. In case you were followed. You understand?”

Alicia lowered her head and thought about Daniel opening the door to the police. What would he think? What would he say to them? Or worse. What would *they* say to *him*? “I guess I understand,” she said, and she gave him Daniel's name and apartment number.

The detective wrote it all down and excused himself to answer his phone. He stepped out of the room saying, “No...not yet...the nurse isn't here yet...I'm still talking to the victim.”

Alicia didn't like the way the word sounded. She didn't like being labeled. And certainly, she did not see herself as a victim in anything. And now her thoughts were back to her mother, and all the drama she knew was coming. Her mother would want her to leave school. *Don't you think that's best?* she would say. And then she would insinuate herself into every last aspect of Alicia's life. She loved her mother, but Alicia hated being treated like a child. Sure, she still lived at home, but that was just to save money. Her first choice was upstate, but again, her mom balked that her child support and alimony wouldn't be enough to cover the expense. The detective stuck his head in the room and pointed at the phone. He gave Alicia an exasperated look, held a finger up in the air, and smiled. Sitting in the lobby, her mother complained to the victim advocate about counseling.

“We don't have to pay for that, right?” her mother said. “I barely get *any* help from her father, and besides, shouldn't it be free for victims? My daughter didn't ask to be raped, now

did she?" And then the detective was back in the room, shutting the door before the victim advocate could answer.

"I'm sorry about that, Alicia," the detective said as he sat down in the slick vinyl seat across from her. Beads of sweat collected on his upper lip. It reminded Alicia of boys she knew in high school. The heavy ones who brought notes from their doctors and studied in the bleachers during gym class. The same boys who mopped sweat from their brows while they ate alone in the corner of the lunchroom. She was surprised that the police didn't make him work out more. Maybe it wasn't his fault, though. Maybe he just sat behind a desk most days. She shook her head at this thought. What was wrong with her? Why was she suddenly so negative? Maybe Daniel was right when he said she sounded like her mother. She was already so stressed out at the time and he had to go and say something like that. She never would have left so fast if he hadn't freaked out so much. Maybe he did have some blame in this after all. No. No. That was her mother talking again. Daniel loved her. He just acted like any college boy would. If she was honest, she was just as freaked out as he was? Maybe more.

"So, that was my boss on the phone. He's sending over a line-up for you to look at. Are you okay with that?"

"What's a line up?" she asked, but she knew. She'd watched television. They'd found someone. Already. Everything was moving so fast. She couldn't hear the detective anymore. She felt like she was trapped under water, caught in an undertow, and unable to hear the sound of the lifeguard's whistle. Too far gone to grab any life preserver he might throw. She didn't want to look at a line-up. She didn't want to see those men's faces. She definitely couldn't pick one out.

And what about Daniel? Were there detectives knocking on his apartment door? Or had they sent another uniform to ask questions that were none of his business and then deride him for his answers? *What time did you say she left? Did you two have a fight? Well, then why would she*

*have to leave? Are you two sexually active?* As if having consensual sex with your boyfriend is a crime. And so what if they argued? People aren't allowed to have a difference of opinion? And what could that possibly have to do with Alicia getting raped?

"A line-up is a group of photos," the detective said, but then changed tack. "You know what? I'll show you when my partner gets here. It'll be easier to explain once you see it. But don't worry, it's just like television," he said. He smiled a little bit at this. He was trying to be nice. "Anyway, let's get back to your statement. You said you were leaving your boyfriend's house, right?"

"Apartment," she corrected.

"Right. Apartment. Please continue." The detective sat back in his chair as if they were old friends, just visiting after years of separation. *It's so good to see you. I was just thinking the other day, what ever happened to so and so?*

"Well, like I was saying, I saw my gas tank was empty, and then I saw the gas station, so I pulled in."

"Was it open?"

"No, but I thought it might be automated or something," Alicia said. He was starting to sound like the one in uniform now.

"Sure," he said, and scribbled in his notebook. "Okay. Then what happened?"

"Well, I got out of my car and then I saw that it was closed, and then from out of nowhere, some guy was dragging me from my car." Her heart beat heavy in her chest. She felt the tug of hair as he pulled her to the ground and tasted minerals in the dirt as she screamed and kicked against him in a struggle to get free.

"Did you get a good look at him?"

An image of Daniel's face blinked into her mind. His soft, brown eyes. So full of love. "No," she said. "I couldn't. I was kicking at him, but he was pulling me by my hair, over to some bushes or something."

"Were you on your back, your stomach, or something else?"

"My back. He was dragging me and I was kicking."

"Did you see his face, his hair, or something?"

"It was dark and he was pulling me."

"Okay," the detective leaned towards Alicia and lightly touched her knee. "Maybe you can remember something else. Like something he said, maybe, or how he smelled."

"He smelled dirty, like old beer."

"Okay. See, that's good," he said, as he wrote it down. "What else?"

"And he was wearing this sweater. A blue one with a white stripe." Alicia could see it in her head. "It was like one of those Polo sweaters, you know, the ones with the horizontal stripe and the horse on it?"

"Uh huh," he nodded and scribbled some more.

"But it was older. Like not this season. Like, maybe he got it second hand or at a shelter or something." Tears slid down her face and Alicia used the blanket to wipe them.

"Okay. You're doing great, Alicia." The detective stood up and opened the door. "Can you get me some tissue, please?" he said to the advocate. The detective disappeared and Alicia was acutely aware of her mother perched close by in the waiting room. Her mother hugged herself and stared at Alicia with a look of sympathy on her face. And then an old woman wearing a lab coat came in the front door with a man in a shirt and tie following close behind her.

The detective stepped back into the room and handed her a wad of paper towel. "Here you go," he said. "Looks like my partner just got here. Let me talk to him real quick and we'll get

you in to see the nurse. She just got here, too.” He smiled as he walked towards the door. “We’re going to get you out of here as soon as we can,” he said, and he closed the door behind him.

Not soon enough, she thought. This was the worst day of her life. How long would she have to stay here? Surely, his partner had the line-up with him. It had only been about three hours since the uniformed officer knocked on her mother’s door. How had they found someone so soon? And why did it take so long for the nurse to get here? She should have been home already. She had already told everyone in Hell’s half acre what happened. She’d led the police to the gas station, showed them where it all happened. What more did they want from her? She wanted to see the nurse and go home. What did she have to do to make this happen? Scream it to the detective when he came back to the room? She was strong. She would stand up for herself. She only cried because she was scared. Didn’t Daniel understand this? She was only twenty. Too young to have kids. He said he loved her. Hadn’t he whispered those words in her ear just hours before, laying on top of her, his breath hot against her neck? And didn’t she love him? But her mother would freak out. What would her friends at the club say? They had appearances to keep up, after all. Alicia’s mind raced. Why didn’t they believe her? Things like this happen all the time. Women get raped. She wasn’t allowed to ride her bike in the city, for Christ’s sake. These things happen.

The door opened again, and the detective came in, followed by his partner. The second one was in better shape, but not by much. He shaved his head, and his shirt and tie were bright red. Classic power play. She could picture him picking them out of a closet and smiling at himself as he tied the knot in a mirror.

“This is my partner,” her detective said, and the new one reached out his hand to shake hers. Was she supposed to say pleasure to meet you? She gripped her blanket closer to her chest and lowered her head.

The power tie immediately lowered his hand. “Of course,” he said, “Sorry.”



Her detective ignored his partner's blunder and focussed on Alicia. "So, I have the line-up I was talking about earlier," he said, as he lay a closed folder on the table in front of her. "But before you look at it, I need to read you something."

He pulled out a laminated card from his notebook and read about how it was just as important to clear innocent persons from suspicion as it was to identify the guilty party. How things change, like weight, hairstyles, and facial hair, as if it was normal for a woman to forget so easily, the face of the man who raped her. He kept the sound of his voice neutral, as if he had been trained to read it just this way.

When he was finished, he tucked the card back into his notebook and motioned for her to open the folder. He said nothing more. The room fell away to silence. With two grown men in the room, men sworn to protect and serve, Alicia understood that she was alone in this. She thought of Daniel. The look on his face when he realized that the condom was broken. How the store that sold the morning-after pill was all out of stock. The stupid clerk's face when she asked if they had any *Plan B* in the back. She went straight home and jumped into the shower, taking with her the three pack of douche she ended up buying instead. Anything and everything to flush away an unwanted pregnancy. She loved Daniel, but her mother would kick her out of the house. Of that she was certain. And the look on her mother's face when she pulled the towel away from her hair, as if she had any idea what she had done when she called the police.

Alicia flipped open the folder and six men looked up at her pleading. Six mugshots begging for forgiveness. Pictures of bad men caught doing bad things. It was strange how number five looked so much like the man she pictured in her head when the story got away from her, one snowball of a lie turning into an avalanche destroying everything in sight. Number five looked like a man who would wear a dirty sweater purchased at Goodwill. A man who probably spent his days working, getting paid under the table to hang drywall, only to go

home and drink the money away with cheap beer and rice and beans. Men like the ones who cut the grass at the club. *Illegals*, she'd heard her mother say. *Surely undocumented*.

The detectives looked at her expectantly. "Take your time. Look at each one," the power tie said, and she could hear him screaming at her without saying a word.

She had to make a decision. She had to make this right. She dropped the blanket she'd been huddling under, uncrossed her arms, and rubbed her hands on her legs. The detectives didn't move. She heard the air conditioning kick on again. Cool air licked at the strands of hair stuck to the side of her face. She stared at number five and tucked her loose hair behind her ear. It was now or never. Right or wrong. She had to choose. She knew this the moment her mother picked up the phone and called the police. She didn't want to be here looking at these men, but her mother wouldn't listen, even after Alicia begged her not to call. She couldn't very well tell the police she was lying, anymore than she could afford to get pregnant. Where would she live? With Daniel? After the look on his face? Not hardly. And besides, they arrest people who lie to the police. She'd seen it happen on television. It's not as if any of this was her fault. She hadn't called the police. So, what other choice did she really have?

Number five stared up at her, his face blurred by the tears that welled in her eyes. She tried to swallow, but her tongue was a sack of dry cotton in her mouth. The detectives stared at her. Judged her. She closed her eyes, balled her hands into fists, and kept repeating to herself, *pick number five...pick number five...just pick number five*.