

Each box leaves a different collection of dust on Alex's fingertips. The smell of stale, untouched air and years of the same cologne soaked into the fibers of the carpet taunt her nose. Alex thumbs through boxes, finding collections of recent photos of her father and her brother, her father and her mother, hell, even her father and their family dog. But no Alex.

Her mother softly weeps into a tattered old cardigan hanging from the back of her father's desk chair. Alex's eyes ping pong around the room as she searches for the perfect comforting words. They don't come. They haven't come since he passed. She cares. Of course, she cares. But why can't she just find the words? Or at least fake it for her mother's sake?

*What a selfish daughter. You can't even put your personal views aside to mourn the man who raised you.*

The serpent of self-doubt creeps into her mind.

*It's okay to have mixed emotions. Mourning isn't linear or defined by anyone. Having had a complicated relationship with your father is more than enough justification to mourn at your own pace.*

The therapized version of said serpent chimes in. Her therapist, Barbara, highly recommended that she replicate the evil serpent in her mind to counteract any self-punishing thoughts rather than just trying to ignore them. Alex even named this nicer serpent after her therapist to keep her motivated during difficult times. She also gave it a fun pink cowboy hat.

"Do you need a tissue?" Alex finally chokes out.

"No, that's alright. Plus, I don't even think we have any left." Her mother, Anne, half chuckles through her tears.

A twinge of guilt pulses through Alex's mind.

*Why haven't you used any of the tissues yet? (evil serpent).*

The scratchy outdated carpet scrapes against Alex's leg as she scoots to her mother. From here, she gets a better angle of her dad's untouched desk. More photos of everyone but her. This time, to add insult to injury, they're framed.

Alex haphazardly rubs her mom's back with her best forced comfort. Her dehydrated and cracked hands catch threads along her mother's aged sweater. The cracks and pops ricochet off the walls in the otherwise silent room.

"I think I just need to lay down for a little while?" Anne breaks the silence. "Do you mind cleaning up in here?"

"Yeah, for sure." Alex's act of service love language training kicks in.

Alex helps her mom off the floor and watches her fade into the dim hallway light. She gathers the loose papers, pictures, and random memorabilia sprawled across the office floor and delicately stacks the cardboard boxes. With a rattle, she slides the mirrored closet door shut. Those same dry hands trace the grain of her father's aged wooden desk.

*Don't you remember sitting in his lap as a little girl? Watching him work so hard to provide a roof over your head?* (evil serpent again).

*It's okay to wonder what his last few years looked like at this desk. You set a boundary to not be around for them, and that's okay. Sometimes we need to be "selfish" to protect our peace, but it's still natural to be curious about what you've missed.* (Barbara, the pink cowgirl serpent).

It's hard for her to imagine that her dad was sitting here just a couple of weeks ago. Probably stressing over work. Yelling at a poor customer service representative over the phone about the electricity bill. Calling his brother in Idaho. Who knows what else.

Curiosity continues to get the better of her as she opens the drawers and rifles through more of his belongings. She pushes past scissors, tape, paper clips, rubber bands, and other countless items jammed into one of his drawers until her finger grazes the soft rounded corner of a small book. She secures the edge between her pointer finger and her thumb and wedges it out. The front of it reads:

*"Understanding your LGBTQ+ Child"*

Cold blood shoots up her back and into her skull. There are annotations and post-it notes sticking out. The front cover houses a folded piece of lined paper with her father's handwriting scratched all over it.

Gravity takes over, and she lowers herself into his office chair. Alex gingerly unfolds the paper to reveal a handwritten letter from her father dated just a little over a month ago. For the first time in two weeks, tears rush to her eyes.

*"Alex,*

*I don't know how to start this. To be honest, I don't even know if I will send it. I just need to get some things off my heart. I miss you. I miss having you around here. I want to see my baby girl running around with my grandchildren. Jason wants you to have a relationship with Juju and Benny, but I don't know if he will ever admit that to you. Probably not. He sure does take after me a whole lot and look at the example I've set. I've been too afraid to say something to you myself. But afraid of what? That, I'm not sure of. The only thing I can come up with is being afraid of the unknown. I bought a book recently to try and learn more about your values and who you are. I've learned quite a bit. Some things I disagree with still, but others I am willing to have conversations about. We've been doing a church series recently about animosity and its effect on your relationship with God. They record the sermons, so I can send them to you some time. (P.S. Your buddy Calvin from high school is the Wednesday Night pastor these days.) But it's*

*been getting me thinking about you. I don't want to continue how we've been. I want to speak with you again. I want to ask about your career and give you dad advice. I understand that these words don't repair what's happened between us. I've said hurtful things to you, and you have said some hurtful things to me. But I don't want that to be it for us. I love you, Lex. I may not always understand, but I am willing to try.*

*- Dad"*