

Behave

Lois Blommestein

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For everyone who had to learn to behave to survive.

‘In 2018, the police registered nearly 9,000 sexual offenses. In 2017, 8,400 crimes such as sexual assault and rape were registered. The number of sexual offenses has grown since 2016, while the total number of registered crimes continued to decline. This is reported by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) based on new figures.’

According to Statistics Netherlands.

Prologue

‘Stay focused, Alexandra.’

He slaps me in the face when I don’t react, grabs me by my hair, and pulls me to my feet. He pushes me against the wall and clasps my face with his hands. I cannot move, even if I wanted to.

It is dark in the bedroom. The only light comes from my night light. The edges of the cable ties cut into my skin. He removes the tape from my mouth. It burns and causes a nasty, painful sensation.

‘Behave yourself or I’ll hurt you even more.’

What else does he want to do to me? I tremble with fear and cold, while tears stream down my cheeks. My throat hurts and I cannot say a word. He takes something out of his bag and walks away, into the living room. It is a sharp, pungent smell. The scent of weed penetrates my nose. He is smoking, while I am writhing in pain. I feel a drop of sweat slide down my back. A frantic attempt to free my hands is to no avail. The cable ties are too tight around my wrists.

I look up and see him walking towards me. He is holding something shiny in his hand. As he gets closer, I see the silhouette of a knife. I freeze with fear. My mind is working overtime for an escape plan, but nothing comes to mind. My head remains blank. The smell of weed gives me a headache and makes me feel lightheaded. The smell continues to spread through the apartment and shows no inclination to leave through any crack. I try to focus again on the man in front of me, who is now standing even closer. The silver glitters in the light and holds my gaze.

‘I know you want to scream,’ he says in a high-pitched voice.

I get confused by his voice. One moment his voice is low and dark, a slight accent is audible. The next moment his voice is so high that I can't even place it. ‘You’re not rid of me yet.’

‘I won’t say anything,’ I whisper. ‘Please.’

The man tilts his head, but nothing more than a pair of glistening pupils is visible. The scary mask conceals the rest of his face. I recognize the mask from a horror movie, *Scream*. He moves even closer to me and lets the long side of the knife glide over my skin. The tip of the knife digs into my skin, bringing all my movements to a standstill. It feels cold.

'If you tell the police even one thing,' he hisses, 'I'll come back and we'll do this again. Do you understand?'

I try to swallow my saliva, but struggle with it. I nod without saying anything, to let him know I heard him.

'I know where to find you. Remember that.'

'I won't say anything.' My voice cracks with fear.

'We're going to play another game.'

I look at him silently and try to hold back my tears. I don't know what he means by it, but his intonation doesn't bode well. He lets his body hang over me. I feel my hands fall down as he unties the cable ties. He pulls me upright. I feel the tip of the knife in my back. He forces me to walk to the wardrobe.

'Just put on something nice. As long as it's sexy.'

The shivers continue as he stands behind me. I feel his erection against my thighs and fight the nausea. I wish I had the courage to fight him, but I am paralyzed with fear. I hate that I can't do anything. He gives me a nudge.

'Are you going to do anything?'

'Why are you doing this?' I ask.

'Hurry up,' he says and squeezes my neck. 'I don't understand why—' I scream as he grabs me by my hair and throws me onto the bed.

He hovers menacingly over me. His fist just above my face. His eyes look weird, probably from the drugs. I blink and close them to prevent impact. I feel my heart pounding fast in my chest.

'Please.'

'You don't want to test me,' he hisses. 'Do I have to fuck you again?'

I shake my head. When I think back on it, I feel a burning sensation between my legs.

'No.'

The tears start flowing. I try to hold them back, but I can't.

'Then do what I tell you. Grab those clothes and put them on.'

He steps off the bed and roughly pulls me upright. He watches as I grab a bra. He takes it from me and throws the garment away.

'Too ordinary.'

I try to overcome my emotions. I have to do what he wants if I want to survive this. He kicks the wardrobe to scare me even more. I cringe and

grab a blue bra, which he thinks is good enough. I put on a matching thong.

'Good job,' is his comment.

I grab a camisole and skirt and put them on. He watches from a distance. When I am finished changing, he walks up to me.

'That's how I like it. Come with me.'

He takes me to the living room. He stands behind me and places his hands on my shoulders. His hand drops to my chest and he squeezes it. I hold my breath as I hear his breath in my ear.

Ugh.

'I know you want to scream, but you already know the consequences, and they are your own fault.'

I shake him off. It is more of an act of desperation. I know by now that he is much stronger.

'Leave me alone.'

He turns me around and slaps me in the face. I reach my hand to my cheek and feel the heat radiating from it. When I lower my hand again, it starts to burn.

'Shut up and listen. I'm putting on some music and you're going to dance for me. Let me not have to say it again.'

I want to scream at him, to tell him he can forget about it. That I won't play any of his stupid games. He looks at me with a penetrating gaze when I stand still.

'Why?'

He comes to stand in front of me and towers over me. I brace myself for the impact and close my eyes, but nothing comes. I open my eyes and see that he is looking at me with a demanding gaze. He takes a step back with a sigh, folds his arms, and keeps looking at me.

'Okay, okay, I'll do it.'

He takes me to the living room, where the curtains are closed. He picks up the remote from the couch and turns on the television. He stops at the music channel and looks at me.

'Go ahead.'

I don't dare, but I know I have no other choice. He has sat down on one of the chairs next to the table and taps impatiently on the table with the knife. I try to put the fear and the pain aside and start dancing.

'I want you to move sexily and take off your clothes.'

I shake my head.

‘Do it!’

I try to switch off a button in my head, but it gets stuck. I try again and imagine myself somewhere else in my thoughts. A warm beach with a beach party, everyone taking off their clothes because of the heat and bodies starting to move. I listen to the music and start taking off my own clothes too. I am startled by the flashes and stop. I look at myself in the reflection of the living room door glass and feel the fabric of my lingerie still sticking to my body.

‘Why aren’t you continuing?’

I don’t answer. He comes towards me, grabs my arm, and drags me into the bedroom. I panic and grab my night light. I want to hit him, but he beats me to it. He grabs the lamp, throws it away, and punches my eye. I feel a small stream of warm fluid slide down my cheek. I touch my face with my hand and pull it back when I feel a cut on my eyebrow. My hands are covered in blood, and the pain is only now becoming palpable. I scream. He grabs my arm and pushes me in front of him. He places it in the curve of my back and pushes through.

‘Please, let me go.’

‘It is too late for that, Alexandra. I’m done with you.’

Before I can ask what he means by that, he drags me to the bathroom. The fear subsides and my flight instinct kicks in. With all the strength I have left, I scream at the top of my lungs. A punch to my stomach makes me collapse and gasp for air. I look around in panic as I try to regain my breath. He drops to his knees so he is at eye level and grabs my throat. He pushes me backward and pins me against the wall. I start to feel lightheaded and try to use my hands to get his hands off my throat. I want to beg him to let me go, but I lack the air to do so. The room starts spinning more and more. I try to kick myself free, but his grip doesn’t loosen for a moment. I let go of his hands and try to fight my way free by grabbing his mask. He releases my throat and quickly grabs my hands tightly. ‘Behave yourself.’

I pull my wrists free and fall backward from a punch he delivers. I fall hard to the ground and hit my head. Even more blood now runs down my face onto the ground, forming a pool of blood in front of me. I can still feel the warmth radiating from it, or perhaps it is due to the stress my body is currently under. He starts kicking my ribs, and I try to shield

myself by curling up into a ball. My vision becomes blurry, and I try to focus on the music playing in the background. I want to beg him to stop, but I don't have the strength for it anymore.

He kicks one more time. My vision disappears, and the music in the background is no longer audible.

Three days earlier

1

Wednesday, June 5 14:03 Amsterdam

Morals Police Department

Demi Lachten

The tapping on the keyboards distracted Demi, and she stared at a blank document for well over fifteen minutes. The italics kept blinking, waiting to be used. Around her, colleagues were pounding on the keys as if their lives depended on it. Administration was simply part of the job, but it wasn't her favorite activity. She placed her hand on her neck and massaged the muscles. They were tight, she realized. Maybe a masseur wasn't a bad idea.

When she was home, she would prefer to go straight to bed. For the past few weeks, sleep had been a luxury she could barely afford. She normally used little makeup, but she had to do something to cover up the bags under her eyes.

'Good report.'

It was her regular partner, Luuk Min. They had been working together for eight years, and Demi was happy to have such a good partner as Luuk. If anyone understood his work, it was him. 'Writer's block,' said Demi.

Luuk couldn't help a smile. 'Even the best of us suffer from that. How are things at home?'

That was a subject she preferred not to talk about. Luuk knew that, and he didn't mean any harm.

'Great. Have you contacted the victim's mother yet?'

They were trained not to become emotionally attached to victims. That was self-protection. Some of the cases they handled hit so hard that it was almost impossible not to bond with the victim. Although Demi wasn't a mother, she knew it must be terrible to hear and see that your child is in pain. The report she had to write was about a ten-year-old boy who had been abused by his father since he was six. The mother had caught him and hadn't hesitated to call the police. Demi was relieved

that the mother had acted correctly and saved her child from the clutches of that monster.

‘That is exactly what I wanted to do. Or just drop by, see how he’s doing.’

‘We can do that,’ said Luuk. ‘The father is being brought before the court on Monday, right?’

Demi nodded. ‘That’s why I need this report.’

‘We’ll do it together,’ Luuk suggested.

Luuk was a father of two children. For him, it was unimaginably difficult not to show his feelings. Demi noticed it immediately yesterday, when she was questioning the suspect. Luuk only grew angrier when the father admitted his actions. It was also too horrific for words, what a parent could do to their own flesh and blood. Demi took a break and spoke to Luuk. ‘Take a break. I’d like a coffee.’

‘I hope the little guy got some sleep.’

They walked down the stairs. Hundreds of different officers worked in the station, from mounted officers to detectives. They all had their own department. Amsterdam was divided into five districts: Center, North, East, South, and West. The agency where Demi and Luuk worked belonged to the Central district.

‘I hope so too,’ said Demi. Although she was certain that the nightmares would linger for a while. The little boy was still young. He would be well supported. With the right counselors and a good psychologist, it was possible that the boy would be left with as little lasting impact as possible. The trauma was very fresh at this moment, for everyone, and it was important that action be taken as soon as possible. They stepped outside. It was as if she had been slapped in the face.

‘Has it been this warm the whole time?’

It felt just as if a thick blanket was warming her body. She looked at the clouds. It wouldn’t be long before the rain cooled everything down.

‘A little while. A bit of rain would be nice right now.’

They walked to the parking lot and took their seats. Luuk behind the wheel.

‘Just call to say we’re on our way,’ said Luuk.

Demi buckled her seatbelt.

‘What if she doesn’t want to receive visitors? I can understand that, too.’

‘You wanted to be there for the victim, didn’t you?’

It wasn't a question.

Demi nodded. 'Didn't you?'

'Of course I did.'

'I feel a 'but' coming on.'

She looked at him questioningly.

'No, there isn't one. I just think it's so awful to see him eating himself up inside.'

'We all feel that way,' Demi agreed.

Demi called the mother and asked if it was okay for them to come. She hung up. 'Yes, she thought it was fine.'

'And otherwise we would have gone anyway.'

They might as well have walked, because driving in the crowds was very difficult for many people. People from outside didn't know how to drive and made a mess of things. It was Luuk who didn't want that and was even willing to take the car for just a few streets. Talk about environmentally friendly. It was a miracle that there was a free spot.

Demi saw that a group of boys were sitting around a bench. They were eighteen at most and watched her and Luuk as they walked towards the house. The smell of marijuana penetrated her nose and she breathed through her mouth so as not to have to smell the foul odor.

'It remains filthy stuff,' she thought.

'The youngsters clearly think different.'

'I think differently about it,' said Luuk.

'Maybe we were born in the wrong era.'

They crossed the street.

'I mean, you had it back then too, but it happened between four walls.'

'I had friends who did it outside as well, but the neighbors considered it a nuisance. The police came every time.'

'Were you such a rebel? I didn't know. Luuk, the gangster.'

Luuk smiled. 'It wasn't that bad. I felt I could spend my time better, so I skipped the joints.'

'Very sensible.'

They arrived at the house. It was an old building, like most houses in Amsterdam. From the outside, you could see it was leaning, but that didn't stop people from living in it. It was expensive to live right in the city center, and yet it struck Demi that most of the houses were occupied. Students often lived together to make ends meet. Demi rang the doorbell

and heard a woman shouting something. A moment later, the door opened and a young mother appeared in the doorway.

‘Good afternoon, Mrs. Veer,’ Demi greeted the woman. They had seen each other less than twenty-four hours ago.

‘Come in,’ said the woman. She stepped back and let them in. ‘Would you like coffee or tea?’

‘Thank you,’ said Demi.

‘Coffee, please. Black.’

‘Come in. Please sit down. Sorry for the mess. Daniel has been very busy.’

Toys were scattered all around them. Cars, airplanes, Lego, and jigsaw puzzles lay spread across the floor. Demi sat down in the armchair and Luuk on the sofa, where a black cat was sleeping. Music was playing in the background, and Demi recognized a song by Phil Collins.

‘How is he doing?’ asked Luuk.

‘You can see it,’ said Mrs. Veer. ‘He is very busy. Is that a good sign?’ She placed two coffee cups on the table. ‘Every child processes it differently,’ said Demi. ‘One says nothing about it, and the other goes straight to someone he or she can trust.’

‘I wish he had told us right away.’

‘Mom?’

Demi saw the boy standing there and a wave of pity washed over her. It was clear that he was scared. He looked at them with wide eyes.

‘Hello Daniel. Do you remember who I am?’

Daniel nodded. ‘Police.’

‘That’s right. We just wanted to see how you’re doing. You have a lot of toys. And I see you’ve made a police station. Did you do that by yourself?’

‘Dad helped.’

He walked cautiously toward his mother and climbed onto her lap. She put her arms around him, as protection. ‘Where is Dad?’

How were you going to explain to a child that your father hadn’t come home for a long time? Hadn’t his mother done that? ‘Darling, didn’t I tell you that?’

Demi could see his lip starting to tremble and his eyes turning red. He tried to control his emotions. He had been doing that for years, and now it was all becoming too much for him. He looked at the ground.

'I just can't get the image out of my head. You can't imagine what it's like to—' Her voice broke.

Demi said: 'It will never happen again. I can also arrange help for you, if you want. This is a blow for you too.'

She shook her head. 'No, I've already decided to go to my sister's for a while. Daniel loves it there. Right, honey? Then we'll go to the farm.'

'To the cows? Yes!'

She laughed. 'Yes, you get to milk them again.'

'Your sister has a farm?' asked Luuk.

'Yes, she lives in Schagen. When we get tired of the busy city life, we go to her.'

She gave her son a kiss on his forehead. 'We won't keep you any longer,' said Demi, nodding at Luuk.

He had understood the hint. It was all right. They said goodbye and walked to the car. Luuk's mobile rang.

'Min.'

Demi didn't get in, but looked at her colleague. Something in his facial expression told her that something was wrong and that it wasn't good news.

'We're going there now.'

He gestured for her to get in. Demi got into the car, pulled the door shut, and looked at him questioningly.

'Yes, we'll be there in a few minutes. Wait outside.'

Luuk had hung up, and she saw that the blood had drained from his face.

'What is it?' asked Demi.

'Anna was raped last night.'

A shock went through her body. Anna was Luuk's seventeen-year-old niece. Demi's mouth dropped open in surprise.

'You're kidding.'

She knew he had a good relationship with his family. Demi had heard a lot about his close-knit family. She had met Anna a few times and had thought her to be a very sweet girl.

'Anna. Damn it, she's seventeen. Who does something like that?'

'Doesn't she know who it was?'

‘She was very vague about it,’ answered Luuk. ‘We’re going. She’s in the Slotervaart Hospital.’

Demi could see that Luuk was having a hard time. He had his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly and his knuckles were white.

Wednesday, June 5, 16:09 Amsterdam
Student Housing Center
Alexandra Braza

The jingle from my iPhone interrupts the music while I stand in the shower. It is probably Lydia, who wants to know if we are going to do anything tonight.

I have been living in a student flat for two years now and have enjoyed it immensely from the very first day. The people who live there are all my age, around twenty. We get along well. I have good contact with my neighbor across the street, Michael. Almost every week we drop by to watch a movie.

While I wash my hair, I sing along to the latest hit by Sia.

The advantage of this flat is that everyone has their own kitchen and bathroom. This gives you more privacy. I was lucky, because my father happened to know the previous tenant. He moved somewhere else and was therefore able to rent this apartment. It is close to my school and I only have to take the metro a short distance to get there. At first, I found the noise pollution really hard to get used to, but eventually, it didn't bother me anymore. My parents also live in Amsterdam with my little sister, but they aren't bothered by the many sounds and people shouting or making music all night long. I've wanted to live on my own since I was eighteen. To be free. No rules to follow. My parents aren't strict, but they do want me to be on time for dinner and to go to bed on time if it's a weekday.

My iPhone rings again, and this time I won't let it ring. I wrap a towel around my body and dry my hands. I see it's Lydia and pick up.

'Hey!'

'So, are you still alive? I thought at least the world had ended when you didn't answer.'

I smile. Typical reaction for Lydia. She has been my best friend since high school, and not a day goes by that we don't speak or see each other.

'I was just in the shower for a moment. You know, that device that gives off hot water.'

‘Haha, you’re so funny,’ she says sarcastically. ‘I wanted to ask if we’re going into town later, because Pim is coming too.’

I roll my eyes. It’s guys who have a soft spot for her, but she’s a womanizer herself. She had sworn she would stay single for a while, but I knew better. Lydia is the type who doesn’t stay alone for long.

‘Don’t you want to go out with him alone?’

‘Of course not. It’s not a date. Come on, just come along. Then we’ll find someone for you too.’

‘Who says I want that?’

I wipe the condensation off the mirror and look at myself. Unlike Lydia, I am blonde, have blue eyes, and am tall and skinny.

‘Okay, I’ll come along.’

‘Yes! Shall I come over to you now?’

‘Okay. I was going to order pizza anyway.’

Lydia sighs. ‘Shall we swap bodies?’

She had said often that she wanted to. I wouldn’t mind having a bigger butt. At least then my pants wouldn’t sag. Lydia has to go to the gym a few times a week to keep her body as tight as-tight. She doesn’t snack much, but it is her physique.

‘Yes please. Then I’ll show every boy what a beautiful butt and tits I have.’

‘As if you don’t have that now, bitch. Okay, I’m going to dress you tonight and I bet the boys will be lining up.’

‘Sure,’ I say sarcastically.

‘Hey, don’t act like that. Okay, I’m on my way. Adios.’

‘Ciao.’

I turn up the music and open my wardrobe. I am a typical woman and you can tell immediately by the clothes. Boots, heels, skirts, tops, dresses. It’s not that I don’t wear pants, but I feel more comfortable in the other clothes. I put on tights, a denim skirt, and a green top. I put on appropriate boots. If Lydia doesn’t approve of this, I don’t know what to say. I pour a glass of wine and turn on the TV.

Lydia lives just a few streets away. In that student house, the bathroom and kitchen are shared. She was away more often than she was at the house. Nine out of ten times, she had found a place to sleep at a boy’s or—which also happened—a man’s.

I can't bear the thought of doing it with an adult, but there are plenty of girls my age who don't mind. My last boyfriend was twenty, just like me. We met at the pub and we spent more time at my place than at his. He was still living with his parents, so it made sense that we were at my place. After a year and a half, I'd had enough, and we decided it was better to break up. At first it hurt me, but it had been a good decision. In the eighteen months I had been single, I had shared the bed with two others, and I wasn't planning on having another one-night stand. I am looking for stability, but it is not as if I am jumping for joy at the prospect of starting a relationship again.

The doorbell rings and I let Lydia in.

'No, we're not going out like this,' she says.

I roll my eyes to the heavens. 'What is wrong with this?'

'How about everything? No, Alex. You have clearly didn't look in the mirror properly.'

She pours two glasses of wine and takes a big gulp. 'We'll take a look later. Have you ordered pizza yet?'

'No, I didn't know which one you wanted.'

'Hawaiian pizza,' she says, and she walks to my bedroom. 'You have to look good when we go out. Why don't you do something different for a change? You must have a pair of pants somewhere, right?'

'Yes, I do, but—'

'No buts. Just let me look for them, then you can order the food.' She gives me a kiss. 'You're a sweetheart.'

I laugh. 'And you're crazy.'

She throws a few items of clothing onto my bed.

'Just a little bit.'

I let her get on with it and call the pizzeria where I order often. I'm a regular customer and they know what my order is. 'A margarita. I'd like a Hawaiian pizza with it. Thanks! Yes, see you soon!'

'I've got it!' shouts Lydia. I take a sip of the wine and walk over to Lydia.

'Let me see.'

There is a set lying on the bed and I have to admit, it looks good.

'Good job, stylist.'

'I know. I'm the best.'

I have to laugh. 'Right.'

'Just put it on and you'll see later that the boys will want to pounce on you.'

'Come on, be normal.'

I put on the set and look in the mirror. It does indeed look nice and different. It is a tight black tank top and skinny jeans, with black long boots underneath. Lydia has styled my hair up. Around my neck I wear a silver necklace and my earrings match. I look good.

'Don't be so insecure anymore, honey.'

The pizza is brought out and we start eating while enjoying a glass of wine. The TV is still showing a news item. I hear that it is about rapists.

'A few years ago, one was roaming around Utrecht, and now there is a serial rapist active in Amsterdam. The perpetrator in Utrecht was never caught, and the police are doing everything they can to catch the perpetrator in Amsterdam.'

'Nice topic. Hello, I'm eating,' Lydia mumbles.

'I just hope they catch him.'

'Do you feel less safe now?'

'I don't know,' I say truthfully.

The fact that there have already been a few victims doesn't make the situation any better. So far, the police are groping in the dark.

'They'll definitely catch him. I'm certainly not going out any less often now that there's a pervert like that walking around. Besides, there are plenty of other idiots here. If they catch those too, there'll be almost no one left in the city.'

I smile and take a bite. Lydia switches to another channel and laughs when a celebrity says something. I have a new WhatsApp message and see that it is from Peter. He asks if we are coming over tonight. I say that it is an option.

'Are you meeting up with Casanova?'

She walks to the kitchen with the dirty plates. Peter and I get along well, but we don't see each other as relationship material. More like brother and sister. I can be myself with him, and I do find that important.

'He asks if we're going to his place for a drink.'

'I'll ask Pim if he wants to come over.'

She tapped on her phone like a madwoman, and it didn't take long before she got an answer.

'Yes, we're going to Peter's.'

She finishes her wine and opens the fridge.

'Shall we have something stronger?'

We drink a few mixed drinks and get ready to start the evening. I do one last check in the mirror, while Lydia sprays on another layer of hairspray. 'Yes, I think it's all good.'

'Who's insecure now?'

I pull her outside and close the door. She puts an arm around me.

'Alex, this is going to be a really fun evening. The men are lining up for you.'

I burst out laughing. 'You're out of your mind.'