

Flight, a novel

To: Edrith...for beating me there.

Part One: Flight from Rage Chapter One

Thursday January 11, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York

Lights from the eighth floor apartment shone bright amid the darkened windows of the neighboring flats. The hour was late, and as many of the building's inhabitants had retired to sleep, the fourth apartment to the right glowed with the remaining haze of city lights.

Olivia Benson stood inside the small bedroom of Apartment 84, separating her laundry into Whites, Darks and those In-Between. The dark-haired woman worked quickly, knowing that every moment of her time was precious. Large, dark brown eyes darted about the room searching for any errant articles of clothing and spotted the bottom half of a dark blue uniform that had escaped her laundry hamper.

She picked up the navy pants and tossed them into her Dark pile with a smirk on her face. The pants were part of a complete police officer's uniform, though she had purchased them with a completely different purpose in mind. Olivia had been a plain-clothes, New York City detective for nearly a decade, and the idea of having to wear a uniform was more than abhorrent to her, however, she had bought an additional one that fit just a size too small. Olivia had no intentions of wearing the tight uniform in front of the other detectives in her unit; it was meant solely for the man she had been seeing for close to two years.

Jonathan Halloway had relished over the idea of Olivia playing "dress-up" for him and for once, she did not mind the game. Her case load had been higher than ever; each one more upsetting, more heart-breaking and more devastating and she had needed something to take her mind off her work, if even for one night.

Olivia was a detective in Manhattan's Special Victims Unit and all her cases dealt with the violent scourge of humanity. Child molestations, rapes, rape-homicides, child sexual abuses and any type of sexual crime that a human could imagine. She had not seen it all, but she had seen far more than she would have liked. Even the strongest and most stable of New York detectives only lasted two years in the SVU; Olivia had been there for more than eight.

Having finished her clothing separation, she gathered her Whites into the blue, plastic laundry basket, picked up her keys and made her way to the laundry rooms in the basement of her building. Olivia had cleared the doorway, when she caught sight of tall, dark, black man folding his own clothes by the set of dryers along the far side of the wall. He wore a white wife-beater and a pair of navy basketball shorts, showing off large muscles on both his arms and legs. A smirk spread across Olivia's face as she quietly set down her basket.

"Bringing out the old wife-beater, eh?" Olivia said setting her clothes on the nearby machine.

"Yeah," he said, with a scoff. "You gotta problem with it?"

His voice held the long, Southern drawl of a Houston native and always brought a smile to her face. Olivia had met Adam Jackson the day he moved into the building, and although they both had respective significant others, they had gone out for coffee and developed a flirtatious, but benign friendship thereafter. Adam had lived two floors above Olivia for several years, and for several years, they had shared their various innuendos and flirtatious exchanges without anything ever coming of it.

"Well," Olivia said with a hint of arrogance in her voice. "I think it might be a little inappropriate...even for the laundry room."

"What would you like me to do?" he said matching Olivia's arrogance with his own voice. "Take it off?"

"Maybe...you can do what you want." Olivia winked at him and they exchanged glorious, pearly smiles.

"Spouse I could," Adam said slyly. "It is, after all, laundry night."

He slowly pulled his wife-beater off, allowing Olivia to stare at his bare chest for a moment.

"It's a Thursday," Olivia said. "Shouldn't you be out clubbing with two or three ladies on each arm?"

"That's for Friday," Adam said raising his eyebrows at her. "Tonight's just for you, babe."

Olivia laughed and they went about their respective business silently. Adam gathered the rest of his clothes and gave Olivia a little pinch on her side as he left the room. She let out a girlish shriek and watched him walk away, an act of which Adam was fully aware.

Setting her own load in the laundry, Olivia returned to her apartment and organized the files on her desk. Flirting with Adam in the laundry room was one of the few moments of "fun" she had throughout her week of dealing with the city's lowest criminals. Her eyes fell upon the framed image of herself and Jonathan, and she allowed a smile to play across her face.

Jonathan was the youngest son of New York's Halloway family, one of the older and wealthier families in the city, with a long list of political connections and a history of destroying the "common man" to further their own interests. Instead of falling into the family business of buying, selling and splitting apart corporations, Jonathan became a corporate attorney and built his own fortune without the help of his affluent relations. He was considered the black sheep of the family, going into his own business and dating women with whom he could hold a conversation and actually fall in love, instead of the gold-digging, well-to-do women the men of his family often married. Most of the time, he was subtle and only those closest to him would know the amount of family money that stood at his disposal.

Set up by her friends Jillian Harfort and Sarah Hyman, Olivia had been duped into a blind date with the "lesser known" Halloway two years earlier. She had no idea who he was when she first had dinner with him and he had refused to divulge his last name for the first three days they had known one another. It was not until Jonathan saw in Olivia someone he could trust and someone he was sure was not looking for a wealthy husband

to solve her problems that he let on about his family. After the initial shock wore off, they settled into a more or less stable relationship that flourished mostly because they both worked long hours and varied times. The little time they did have for one another was meant for the simple things and unlike past boyfriends, Jonathan never once asserted the idea that Olivia should find different employment. He respected what she did and she respected his ability to remove himself from his family.

Each time a difficult case would come to her, Olivia felt the need to push him away, an act that strained their relationship more often than not. When her partner, Elliot, had been shot months earlier, Olivia had refocused all of her attention onto him, much to Jonathan's disdain, and that had erupted into a month-long argument, complete with yelling and insults. In the end, however, Jonathan would always apologize for being smug or rude, regardless of whether he was, and they would continue as if nothing had happened. Most recently, Olivia jumped on the opportunity to work with the federal government as an undercover agent without telling anyone important in her life. In her own line of personal importance, Jonathan, unfortunately, came third, and it was only upon her return three months ago, that she realized that Jonathan had been completely left out of the information loop. He was furious when she finally contacted him, but as usual, he apologized without knowing why he had and they fell back into a routine.

As the weeks turned into months, Olivia saw herself falling in love with Jonathan. In May of 2007, she would be turning the big 3-8, and with every relationship that ended, Olivia felt she was one moment closer to spending the rest of her life alone. It was not that she felt the need to settle at this point in her life, but her biological clock was loudly ticking and with each passing day, she felt her remaining youth fade a bit more. At thirty-seven, she was still single and childless, though she was not sure whether or not she wanted to remain such. Her own alcoholic mother had not been much of an example, and most men were either turned off by her line of work or turned on in a way she would just as soon not relate.

Then there was also the question of never knowing what she might pass onto to potential children. Olivia never knew her father, as he was the man who had raped her mother, and the fear that she would impart his violent genes onto her own children was ever present. Many of those in her life questioned her choice of volunteering to work in the SVU given her history, but she knew she was doing the right thing. Who better to assist rape victims through their difficult time than someone completely involved in said situation?

She pulled a file from her newly organized stack, tucking a strand of dark hair behind her ear, and studied the cover for a moment, hoping for inspiration on the case. Someone was murdering children; not really out of the norm in her line of work, but the case managed to flip her stomach more than usual. A vague image of Elliot came to mind as she thought about how he must be internally dealing with the case, having a son just the victim's age. Whenever Olivia heard of some tragedy happening to children, she immediately considered the only children with whom she had constant contact: Elliot's. She knew, although he would never voice his reservations to her, anytime a case dealt with children, and a fair amount of their cases did, Elliot would automatically think of his own.

Jacob Lewendale had just celebrated his Bar Mitzvah when he was found three days later stuffed into a cardboard box, sodomized and strangled to death. The frightened

expression etched on his face was what struck with Olivia most. Jacob had lived on the Upper West Side, yet had been found miles away in Tompkins Square Park, and he had not been missing for more than 24 hours when he was found. His parents had not even filed a Missing Persons report yet. The only reason they were able to identify him was that an officer at the scene was a friend of the Lewendales and recognized Jacob instantly. The last time anyone had seen him was when he was talking to a dark-haired man in a truck, but there were no other leads to follow.

Olivia opened the file and stared at the large image of the thirteen-year-old boy paper-clipped to the manila folder. Jacob's face was still round and youthful, but a brush of acne appeared to have erupted in small, red blotches on his forehead and chin. Large blue eyes offset by light brown hair gave anyone who viewed his seventh grade yearbook photo the instant feeling that Jacob had enjoyed a normal, happy childhood and would have gone on to lead a normal adolescence had his life not been cut short just five days earlier.

The yearbook photo varied greatly from that of the crime scene photo paper-clipped opposite the class picture. Jacob's naturally tan skin had lost all vestiges of colour, appearing grey though the image was not, yet red marks still marred the skin around his neck in the shape of something that had been long and thin. The box in which he had been found was no bigger than a standard moving box and was sold at retailers across the city. In the top photo, Jacob had been folded, nude, inside the box, smears of blood along the inner sides appearing as if the murderer who had set him there was too hasty to get rid of the body to wash his hands first.

The Lewendales had no enemies, no large debts and no real problems. No one could understand how someone could hurt Jacob in such a way and it was all Olivia could do to stifle a somber sob when the memory of Deborah Lewendale's wail upon learning that her son had been murdered came to mind.

She flipped through some of the notes on the case and, in her head, remade the list she and her partner had created days earlier regarding the killer: possibly a friend of the family, possibly a complete stranger, possibly a garden-variety pedophile, possibly a hate crime against Jews. She had seen enough rape-homicide cases to lean toward the idea of the pedophile, but she also knew that sociopath murderers often had a way of thwarting her even most basic instincts.

Olivia pulled a second folder from her pile: rape victim, Evelyn Rivers, her newest case. She had spent the majority of the day staying with Evelyn throughout the lengthy process of a hospital rape kit and then the near ritual of obtaining a statement and simply comforting her. Even after all that had happened with the case, Olivia could do nothing to make Evelyn file charges against the abusive boyfriend who had raped her and left her to bleed to death in their apartment.

"Are you *sure* you don't want to file charges, Evelyn?" Olivia had said.

Evelyn Rivers shook her head quickly, straight black hair falling into her eyes. "No," she breathed. "I-I...I can't. He'll come after me."

"*Not* if he's serving time at Rikers," Olivia had said.

"But he'll get out eventually...and then he'll come for me." Evelyn brushed a tear from her grey eyes. "I can't live like that, Olivia...I just can't. B-Besides...he's said he's changed. He promised he wouldn't do it again."

Olivia sighed. Micah Diorel was no different from any of the other perps she had seen abuse and rape their girlfriends, and like so many of these victims, Evelyn was falling into the trap of thinking the apology she had received was for real. Olivia knew all too well that no matter what they said, they always did it again.

"Evelyn," she had said. "Micah beat and raped you and if your neighbors hadn't heard the commotion, you would have died in your apartment. Do you really think he means it when he says he's sorry?"

"...Maybe," Evelyn had said giving a long shrug. "But...I don't know. I think he was really just having a bad day. But, it doesn't really matter because I can't talk against him. He'll kill me. I know he will."

"I wish you would change your mind," Olivia had said shaking her head.

"He said he was sorry," Evelyn said with a little more backbone in her voice. "I was the one who screwed up and he just reacted. I'm not going to press charges against him, when I know he didn't really mean it."

There was a finality to Evelyn's statement that had made Olivia's heart ache. Evelyn was just part of the vicious cycle that probably wouldn't end until her boyfriend murdered her.

Olivia made a mental note to stop by Evelyn's apartment on Saturday to make sure that she was not only okay, but that Micah Diorel saw that the police were watching Evelyn very carefully. Sometimes it helped; many times it did not, but she had to try.

She changed her laundry load and returned to her desk to organize the rest of her notes. She came across her planner and opened it to Saturday with a bemused expression on her face. Regardless of the amount of planning she put into any event, the job always came in the way. She kept buying pages for her leather-bound planner because it seemed like something she ought to have, but she rarely wrote in it, knowing how quickly her schedule was likely to change in just a few hours. Six days ago she had been planning a winter getaway with Jonathan at one of his family's cabins out in the country, but Jacob Lewendale's murderer had halted her plans.

Olivia flipped to the address book in the back of the planner and made a second note to call Sarah to see if she was available for dinner. She rarely got to see her as Sarah had three children and her own career to chase after and even though they had been close while at Siena College, they were more or less acquaintances at this point in their lives.

She glanced over the Lewendale file once more and rose to pour herself a glass of cranberry juice from the refrigerator. The phone that hung on the wall near her refrigerator rang once and she picked it up absent-mindedly.

"Hello?"

"He's leaving his wife!"

Olivia paused a moment, unsure if she understood what had just been shouted at her through the telephone.

"Maya?" she said.

"Livia! He says he wants to leave his wife!"

She glanced at the clock on her microwave and sighed. Maya Shah had been a part of Olivia's life since before she could remember. They had gone to college together and unlike her dwindling friendships with Jillian and Sarah, Maya remained her best friend, just as she had been throughout her life. Maya had been the first person Olivia had called on her return from Oregon, and one of the things she missed most while

undercover was the sordid details of Maya's numerous affairs. Their lengthy friendship notwithstanding, Olivia sometimes felt the antics of her Indian friend almost irritating.

At thirty-seven, Maya still lived off of her parent's money and held no qualms about the fact. She had gone to law school and had even passed the bar exam, but did little to acquire clients for her practice, preferring instead to date an Indian doctor who was willing to dote upon her, as well as several others at the same time. Her newest fling, a Mason Garriston, had been a pain in Olivia's side for the past year as he was always the foremost topic on Maya's mind, and while she was always laden with work and she found the entire situation more than ridiculous, the sparkle had yet to fade from the story. Olivia was always ready and willing to dispense advice to her scatter-brained friend.

"What makes you think he wants to leave his wife?"

Maya made a disgusted sound into the phone. "*Because* he just left my apartment saying that he wanted to leave his wife and be with *me* all the time."

"He's got kids," Olivia said sitting on her couch.

"I know! The way he says it, he acts like he want to marry me or something...and I just wanted him for the sex."

"Honestly, Maya. I don't think you have much to worry about."

"Why's that?"

"These guys never leave their wives. You know that. Did any of the others leave their wives?"

"No, but this is different. He says he's so unhappy with his wife and he's just a little too interested in the Hindi language and India, in general."

"And what," Olivia laughed. "You don't want any *light* brown kids running around?"

"Don't be a bitch," Maya said laughing as well. "I don't want any kids in *any* shade of brown and I sure as hell don't want to marry him."

"Well, you know what you can do?"

"What?"

"Break up with him and stop cheating on Amit!"

"Olivia! Come on. I'm serious."

"So am I. How long do you really plan on keeping this up? Amit's been dropping hints that he wants to marry you for ages now."

"Exactly. How long's he going to drop hints before actually doing something?"

"So, what? Are you actually going to stop seeing other people if Amit proposes?"

Olivia was met with silence on the other end of the phone for a moment. "Yeah... Yes. Yes, I will."

"Good because he asked me if I knew what your ring size was a week ago."

"Olivia, don't be a bitch. Are you serious?"

"Of course I'm serious. Break up with Mason."

"Yeah, I know, I know," Maya said. "Oh shit!"

"What?" Olivia said worried that something had happened to her friend.

"Mason just popped up on my Caller ID."

"Break. Up. With. Him. Marry your Indian doctor and live happily ever after."

"Okay, I know. You're right...but, Livia...?"

"Yes?"

"You don't really think Mason'll leave his wife, do you?"

Olivia rolled her eyes and sighed into the phone. “Maya, *śubha rātri*.”

“Yeah, good night yourself, Livia.”

As soon as Olivia had set down her telephone, there was a knock at her door.

“Who is it?” she asked with the door still closed.

“It’s Mark.”

She hesitated for a moment before opening the door. She was about to simply lie and say that she was about to go to bed to avoid seeing her neighbor across the hall, but she thought better of it. Mark Landon had often alerted her to odd things happening in the building and he had the aggravating, but helpful habit of taking it upon himself to look out for her well being, regardless of how many times she informed him that she could take care of herself. Standing at just over five feet tall, Mark was nearly a foot smaller than Olivia, but she was always amused by his willingness to offer himself as her “protector” time and time again.

“Hi,” she said just barely opening the door.

“Hey!” he said far too enthusiastically for the late hour. “I...uh...thought I heard you struggling with some laundry earlier. Do you have another load to do, ‘cause I’m going down in a sec?”

“Thanks, Mark,” she said with a smirk, “but I think I can handle washing my own clothes.”

“Okay,” he said. “Just thought I’d ask, ‘cause you never know who’s wandering ‘round the building at night, ‘specially since that big, *black* guy moved in. God knows who *he*’s been letting in.”

Olivia stared at Mark with a blank expression for a moment. What fascinated her most about bigots was their assumption that all those around them shared their same beliefs. For all of Mark’s many endeavors to win her few affections, his assumptions about her life always killed any thought she could gather about even having dinner with him.

“Adam’s a good guy,” she said.

“Yeah, but I saw him on the elevators wearing just a pair of shorts. No shirt. Do we really need that in our building?”

Olivia attempted to hide a smile. “He was probably coming from the laundry room and it’s late. Who cares?”

“I do. It’s not right. I don’t like him.”

She sighed. “Mark...it’s late, is there anything else you wanted?”

“No,” he said caught off guard by her sudden change of topic. “Just wanted to know if you needed anything...”

“I’m fine and even if I wasn’t, I’m not about to let you do my laundry for me.”

“Well...y-you know, I know you’re busy, so I just thought I’d ask.”

“Thanks,” she said, not meaning the words. “Good night.”

She shut the door on the little man and gathered the remaining files from her desk and into her bag. She wanted to make as much of Friday as she could and the best way to do such was to ensure that she was organized.

Fridays typically meant that lab results would come back to the unit far slower and witnesses would be far less willing to cooperate, wanting instead to get their respective weekends started quicker. Olivia could barely remember the last time she had a weekend to herself, constantly bogged down by one case or another. On occasion, she

would take a personal day just to allow her mind some time to relax before she dove back into the sexual deviants with whom she daily contended.

She took another moment to tidy her apartment a bit more, pausing briefly over the old cello that leaned in the corner of the living room. She longed for the days when she could sit and play for hours just because the moment had moved her, but as always, work came first. She had once played the violin, which sat in the Hope chest she used as a coffee table, for a younger rape victim who had been hospitalized for several weeks to entertain her for a bit and keep her spirits high. The little girl, Amarie was her name, at seven years old, had enjoyed Olivia's small performance and Olivia later learned that she was inspired to take up the violin herself.

A small smile appeared on her face, but she quickly sighed away the memory. The job did not end at 5 o'clock or on Friday. It did not end even when the case was won or lost in court. Each case continued on for months or years after the fact. She was still in contact with victims she had cared for during her first months as an SVU detective. It was a difficult job that had consumed nearly every facet of her life, but still, she loved it.

Her apartment buzzer rang a little after one o'clock, and she crossed the room in three long strides to answer it.

"Who is it?"

"Girl scouts!" a masculine voice attempting to sound like a young girl said from the speaker on her wall.

She smiled and bit her lip. "Girl scouts...? I'm on a diet."

"Please Miss! Let us up! We've got Thin Mints. Loads of them!"

"Sorry, I give to The United Way and we don't want any cookies."

"Olivia, seriously," Jonathan said breaking into his natural voice. "Open the damn door. It's freezing out here."

"Oh hey, Babe! Did you buy any shortbread cookies from the girl scouts?" she said laughing.

"Olivia...."

She could hear that he was growing impatient with their little game and she buzzed him into the building.

"Hey!" she shouted when he finally got to her apartment. "You're not a girl scout!"

Jonathan wrapped his arms around her, the cold from his clothes seeping into her skin through her t-shirt and cotton pajama pants.

"I missed you," he said into her hair.

"Well, why don't you take off your coat and stay awhile." She unwrapped herself from his grasp. "Or at least get warm before you touch me again because you're *freezing*."

"Yeah, well I parked nearly a mile away," he said, jet black hair shining in the lights of her apartment.

She rolled her eyes. "Why didn't you just take a cab over?"

"Felt like taking the Jag for a drive. He doesn't get to leave the garage much and I figured now was as good a time as any."

Olivia nudged him. "Only you would park your Jaguar a mile away from my building and leave it there all night."

"If he gets stolen, I'll just get a new one. He's getting on in years anyway."

She rolled her eyes again. "Come on. Time for bed."

"Oh boy," he said unenthusiased, but taking off his jeans to reveal flannel pajamas.

"Like a boy scout," he said his bright blue eyes sparkling when he saw Olivia had noticed his ensemble. "Always prepared."

She walked into her bedroom and set her alarm clock for five-thirty in the morning. She was not going to get a lot of sleep, but perhaps she might have the rare opportunity to sleep through the night. So often was her slumber interrupted by the news that someone had been involved in a sexual catastrophe, that she had grown accustomed to living on less than five hours of sleep a night.

"So," Jonathan said, pulling back the covers of Olivia's bed, with a smile. "When are we going to play 'Bad Cop, Good Civilian' again?"

She tried not to smile at his boyish grin, but she could not help herself. "I don't know...maybe if you're good...we'll see."

"Oh boy," he said as she settled into the bed beside him.

"Why do we always sleep at my place?" Olivia asked after they had wrapped her many blankets around themselves. "You hiding a wife or something at your place?"

"Of course not!" Jonathan said with a false indignation. "At least not as of yesterday."

She gave him a slight kick under the covers, but he just laughed.

"It's 'cause my place is so stark and unloved and designed by an interior decorator. Yours has got you all over it and it has something extra special in it that I just love."

"Oh," she said yawning. "What's that?"

Jonathan said nothing, but simply nuzzled her between her shoulder and the side of her neck. All thoughts of Jacob Lewendale's murderer and Micah Diorel's crimes began to melt away as Jonathan wrapped his long arms around her.

Olivia smiled into her pillow and as exhaustion finally caught up with her, she let loose a happy sigh. Unlike so many of her past relationships, Jonathan never needed to be told when she was or was not in the mood. He never needed a hint as to how her day had gone and he never wanted her to tell him all about her day. He always knew precisely what she needed and wanted, and she loved him for it.

Thursday January 11, 2007
Woodside, New York

It was just past eleven o'clock at night when a light flickered in the third floor Queens apartment. The bathroom lights never quite reached full brilliance the moment their respective switch was hit, as they were fairly old and hummed for a full second before showing even the slightest relics of light. They sputtered a short blast of light a few times before they continually stayed lit and it was that initial blast of light that Elliot Stabler hated the most about his apartment.

The two-bedroom flat was comfortable and Elliot had no reason to complain. A friend of a friend held a rent-controlled apartment, and Elliot managed to get it at far less

than market value for the area. It was simply its purpose that destroyed him each time he left work for "home."

Elliot and his wife, Kathy, had been separated for more than a year and a half, yet leaving the home they had shared and in which they had raised four children was the memory that sprung to mind each time he entered his bathroom. Bathed in the light of his new apartment, he was only reminded that he was no longer at home with his family.

He removed his clothes, leaving them in a heap in the corner and stepped into the shower. He knew he would take a second one early in the morning, but before he could even attempt to relax for the night, he needed to rinse the stink of human frailties off of his skin. Elliot had spent the greater part of his day watching a young man named Micah Diorel lie through his teeth while his partner, Olivia, cared for Diorel's victim.

Working in the SVU, Elliot had seen it a million times and he wished, as he had watched Diorel make up lie after lie regarding his whereabouts the previous night, that he could round up all the women of the world and warn them all at the same time to stay away from men like Diorel. What frightened him most about Diorel was that he held the kind of allure that could entrap anyone, even one of his own three daughters.

It never failed to set him in awe: guys like Diorel, who were charming at first, could beat their significant others a hundred times, but the women continuously came back to them. He had wanted to throw a chair across the room when Olivia had told him that Diorel's girlfriend refused to press charges against him. After he had beaten and raped her and left her for dead, Diorel was going to walk home a free man; free to repeat the acts again and again, until he finally killed her.

Elliot allowed the hot water to run down his face and the rest of his muscular body. Regardless of how the majority of the day went, he still felt slightly relieved. The same friend of a friend who got him his apartment, enabled him to get basketball tickets to a semi-professional team and Elliot took the time to take his son, Dickie, out for the night. Though it was a Thursday, Kathy had agreed and as Dickie was spending the night at his father's apartment, Elliot had been "allowed" to spend an additional day with his only son and youngest child.

He had wanted to take Dickie's twin sister, Lizzie along as well, but she was going through a phase where she did not want to be associated with anything that was not feminine and "girly," making a basketball game with her father and brother completely out of the question. He had made sure to ask around the precinct for tickets to any "feminine" events and Olivia had passed him tickets to a ballet she was not using. Elliot planned on surprising Lizzie with the ballet tickets when she least expected it.

He got out of the shower, wiped the steam off the small mirror and stared at the forty-three-year-old man staring back at him. He ran a hand over his receding, close-cropped brown hair and squinted through hooded, large blue eyes into the mirror, all the while wondering about time and age.

Where had all the years gone? It seemed like just yesterday he was at the hospital with Kathy when Dickie and Lizzie were born. His oldest daughters, Maureen and Kathleen, were about to graduate from college and high school, respectively, and the twins had just been confirmed in the Catholic Church. He had never intended for his job to come before his family, but the SVU was easily one of the most demanding units on the force, giving a detective little to no time for his or her family. The job required his full attention, which meant the majority of his time was spent with the other detectives in

his unit, specifically his partner, rather than with his family. He never wanted it to be that way, but it was the way of the SVU and he had explained it to Kathy more times than he could remember. He had missed birthdays, holidays and important events in his children's lives, moments he could never get back, all for the job he loved for twelve years.

Most recently, he had sacrificed his marriage, and although he had signed the divorce papers a few weeks earlier, after dragging his feet for months, he still hoped that his wife was simply going through her own mid-life crisis and would let him come back home. He and Kathy had married when they were just nineteen and not under the best circumstances. A generation earlier would have called it a "shotgun wedding," but Elliot knew he had done the right thing marrying her. They were just kids, but Catholics just the same, and he knew that no *real* man would leave a pregnant woman to have a child out of wedlock. Yet, since they were so young when they married, they each held a fair amount of growing-up to do before becoming the people they were, and somewhere along the line it seemed they had simply grown apart from one another.

Kathy had told him when she was leaving with his children, she was tired of him being angry all the time, and he knew truthfully that he *was* indeed angry all the time. In his unit, however, it was difficult not to be such. After watching criminals like Diorel walk free, if not by the fruition of their victims, then by some flaw in the legal system, anger was simply a primary response. One could only take so much of society's filth before the weight of the world would seemingly fit straight upon one's shoulders.

Kathy had also told him, on more than one occasion, that she was unsettled by the fact that he would not open up to her, but he could never quite explain that to her. How could he tell her *everything* he saw in his day? Did she honestly expect him to tell her about the women found raped with scissors or the little boys sodomized to the point they would never walk again? If there was one place he did not want to bring what he saw during the day, it was in his home, with his family. The fact that she would not understand his position, instead pointing out that he opened up to Olivia and not her, simply angered him all over again.

Elliot put on his bathrobe and dressed in his own bedroom, noting the light coming from the guest room that served as a bedroom for each of his children when they spent the night.

The phone rang and he quickly picked it up, hoping it would not wake Dickie and also was not a call stating that someone else had been raped or murdered with sexual connotations.

"Stabler," he said into the phone.

"Hey, Dad," replied a young female voice.

Elliot smiled into the receiver. "Maureen. How you doin', Babygirl?"

"Good," Maureen said.

Maureen, his eldest and, although he hated to admit it to himself, his favorite, attended Hudson University and was majoring in Psychology. A part of him hoped that she would pursue the same field as her father, while another part of him, the part that always saw her as the blonde toddler he had watched take her first steps into his arms, prayed that she would take another path. Several months earlier, though, Olivia had informed him that Maureen had called her wanting a woman's perspective on the NYPD.

"What are you doing up this late?"

“Well, it’s still technically early in college time, Dad.” Elliot could hear Maureen smiling.

“Oh, right,” he said.

He did not have the chance to go to a traditional four-year college when he was Maureen’s age, as he had to take care of both her and Kathy, and he loved knowing that she experienced many of the opportunities he missed by marrying young.

“Everything okay?” Elliot asked switching gears. “Do you need any money or anything?”

“No,” she said. “Everything’s fine. I’m just procrastinating because I’ve got a paper that’s due to tomorrow.”

Elliot laughed. “Okay. As long as you get it done.”

“I will, Dad,” Maureen said in the same voice she had used when he nagged her as a teenager.

“So...uh, how’s Jared...er...Johnny...er...”

“Justin,” Maureen said. “God, Dad. Jared? Where’d you get that one from?”

Elliot shrugged although he knew Maureen could not see it. “Knew his name was somewhere along those lines.”

In all actuality, he knew Maureen’s boyfriend’s name; he just liked to mess with her from time to time since she was away at school. In fact, he knew nearly everything there was about Justin Wheeler: his primary school, his high school, sports he played, number of speeding tickets he had had, jobs he held, what both his parents did for a living, what his siblings had done with their lives; the list continued endlessly and was part of a process he had used since the first day Maureen had announced she had a “boyfriend” while in the third grade.

Anyone who came into contact with her was subject to gross scrutiny and if, and only if, they appeared to be clean and decent individuals would Elliot even bother acknowledging them with Maureen. For all the rest, and with his daughter, there were many, he simply made his presence well known, as well as the fact that he was cop and had the ability to throw someone in jail for a day, just because he looked at his daughter the wrong way.

“He’s fine,” Maureen sighed. “He’s been working a lot on his thesis lately, so we haven’t seen much of each other.”

Good, Elliot thought. The less they saw of one another the less likely Maureen would be to repeat the same mistakes he and Kathy had made at her age.

“Marilyn’s moving in with her boyfriend at the end of the semester.”

Elliot felt his heart skip a beat as he considered his daughter’s roommate’s many dramas that oft times involved Maureen. “Don’t you get the same idea. I’m telling you right now, your mother and I will *not* approve.”

“I know, Dad. I’m just telling you so you’ll know why I’ll be looking for a new apartment in a month.”

“You have any place in mind, and keep in mind that Daddy isn’t exactly made of money?”

Maureen chuckled and Elliot could feel her rolling her eyes across the phone. “I know, Dad. I was thinking of something farther from school, like around Tompkins Square Park.”

Elliot thoughts flitted to his impending caseload and his latest case, which had brought him to the very park Maureen had been considering. "I don't know if I want you that close to Alphabet City."

"I'm almost 23. When are you gonna start to let go?"

He sighed. "You know that's never going to happen. The sooner you figure out that I'm your father for life, the better. What about Chelsea?"

"Chelsea," she whined. "That's closer than I wanted to be."

"But think of the nightlife you'll have for your last year at school."

"Not my last year," she corrected. "I sent out applications for Columbia and St. John's Master's programs."

"Master's? You might as well go for your doctorate."

She groaned. "Dad, not again. I'm not going to med school and I don't see the point in getting my Ph D in psychology."

"You don't have to go to med school. You could do the same thing a psychiatrist does. Everything except prescribing the meds."

"And I don't want to do that, so the subject is moot."

"Maureen, psychology is a good field. Especially in this city."

"You know what," she said impatience watering her voice. "I think I've got some inspiration on my paper. Talk to you later."

"Hey!" Elliot said. "Don't leave like that. It was just a suggestion. Besides, you have a few months yet before you have to make a real decision. Have you thought anymore about internships?"

"Yeah," she said. "I...uh...well, I last semester I interned at the Manhattan DA's office."

Elliot sat silent for a moment wondering how best to approach the subject. It was not that he disliked district attorneys; far from it. However, he had seen his fair share of them destroy cases that were more than solid when presented to them. The SVU had a specific DA assigned to it, and while Casey Novak did an outstanding job, he had watched as numerous criminals slipped through her fingers into acquittals and back onto the streets.

His own disdain for the other side of the criminal justice system notwithstanding, he did not want his eldest child to become a lawyer. He knew her too well. She would start out with the district attorney's office, but then switch sides obeying her ambitious side instead of her conscience. The very idea of Maureen defending the same criminals he spent his life trying to put in prison sickened him.

"Dad?" she said. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here," he said still stunned. "Why didn't you say anything about it earlier?"

"Well, I know how you are sometimes about lawyers."

"But, if that's what you want to do..." He allowed his voice to trail to silence.

"You could've still told me or your mother."

"Well, I told Mom forever ago, but I guess..."

It was Maureen's turn to fall silent and Elliot tensed knowing the reason. Kathy had been good about relaying important details of their children's lives onto him in the past, but in the recent months, she had become far more passive. He was only notified when major moments came about, like Dickie fighting at school or Kathleen just barely passing her proficiency exams. Kathy had obviously felt that Maureen's possible choice

of vocation was a detail too unimportant to relay to Elliot and he felt a hot flash of anger swell over him.

"Well," he said after a moment of shared silence. "Whatever you decide to do, just think about it for a bit. Don't just go rushing into something because you think it sounds cool."

"I know, Dad. It's Maureen, remember?"

Her snide comment referred to her younger sister's ability to bandwagon jump with greater occurrence and far more accuracy than most teenagers her age. Kathleen did whatever her friends were doing, no matter how ignorant. Her friends drank as freshmen in high school and Elliot and Kathy were forced to have a long-winded discussion about alcoholism with her after she came home drunk at just 14. Her friends dated older men and Elliot found himself pulling Kathleen out of a car from a twenty-one-year-old deadbeat she claimed she loved.

Elliot knew he had lost control of his second child sometime around the same time he lost control of his marriage and the rest of his life, and it came as no surprise to him that Kathleen seemed to be taking his and Kathy's impending divorce harder than the rest of his kids.

"I know, Sweetie," he said. "I just want what's best for you."

"Eventually you'll have to trust me," Maureen said.

"I'm getting there."

She laughed. "Okay. Well, now I really do need to get to my paper."

"How much have you got left?"

"Well, including the eight pages I did over the past week...twelve."

He shook his head. "What time's it due?"

"Eight."

"In the morning? God, Maureen," he said noting his alarm clock.

"I know," she said quickly. "I'm on it. Bye Dad!"

"Love you," he replied and set down the receiver.

Elliot suddenly felt the need to procrastinate, not wanting to return to his world of murder victims and shattered lives. He was about dress for a few quick laps around the block, but he thought better of it. Jacob Lewendale's family would never have a conversation similar to the one he had just had with Maureen with their son. They deserved to know who murdered their child and they deserved that answer as soon as possible.

He headed out into the living room wearing sweatpants and t-shirt and sat down with a copy of Jacob Lewendale's file on his coffee table, hoping to get a greater grasp of the case. He normally would not have had the cases in the open while his kids were present, but Dickie was most likely about to go to bed and he knew that he would have time to close anything not meant for his thirteen-year-old's eyes.

He opened the file, took one look at Jacob's large, blue eyes and closed it immediately. He did not want to let this case get to him, but nearly alone in his apartment, he was not ashamed to let his own fears show. Everyday since he started with the force, he feared for the lives of his wife and children. Since joining the SVU, those feared had tripled. The Lewendales were an average family whose lives had been ripped apart by the loss of their son, and Elliot could not help but relay those same emotions onto his family.

At thirteen, Dickie's blond hair was turning brown, lighter than Jacob's, but his blue eyes shone just as bright as Jacob's had and it was heart-breaking to think of what he might do if it was Dickie in that file instead of a stranger. He had voiced what he wanted to do to all the criminals with whom he dealt on a daily basis and those words had him brought before the police commissioner. He was not about to make the mistake again, but feelings still raged, especially with cases such as this.

He opened the file once more, focusing immediately on the crime scene photos and the dozens of questions that had come to mind in the five days he and Olivia had been working the case came rushing back to him. Was it simply a pedophile? Some guy who liked early teenaged boys instead of grown women or even grown men and killed Jacob when he fought against what was done to him? Was it someone Jacob might have known and trusted, like a parent or a teacher? Jacob, like Dickie, had played soccer and played on an indoor soccer league during the winter months. Perhaps there was someone who frequented the soccer fields involved? Was this only the beginning of a serial killer's spree?

The last question that came to mind bothered Elliot the most. They had had the case for five days and while there was a man's DNA found from semen on the body, there was no match in the New York City database, no fingerprints on the body or on the box and no witnesses. Everyone who was even remotely close to Jacob and the rest of the Lewendale family had been questioned relentlessly, yet only one of Jacob's teammates had any information about the last night Jacob had been seen alive. The boy's own parents had simply assumed he stayed at a friend's house following soccer practice, and since he was constantly out and about with school, sports and friends, they had not even considered their son missing when he was found in Tompkins Square Park. There were simply no leads to follow and it seemed like yet another criminal was going to get off Scot Free.

Elliot ran a hand over his face and sighed. He considered putting the file away to consider another he had on his caseload, when the door to Dickie's bedroom opened.

"Hey," Elliot said, quickly closing the Lewendale file.

"Hey," Dickie replied, his voice still young and childlike. "Later, Dad." He had on his coat and was heading for the door to the apartment.

"Hey!" Elliot yelled standing from the couch. "Where do you think you're going?"

"David's," Dickie said innocently.

The Kalinger family lived a block West on Heiser Street and their youngest son, David, went to Dickie's school and played soccer with Dickie as well. When it had come time for Elliot to find another place to live, he chose an area of Queens that would keep him close to his children's schools and also close to his former residence, just in case Kathy or the kids needed anything.

Elliot glanced at his watch and then stared at his son with furrowed brows. "It's eleven o'clock."

"I'll be back by one," Dickie said as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"On a Thursday night?"

"Dad, we're gonna be doing homework."

"Well, why didn't you tell me you had stuff to finish up before we went out tonight?"

Dickie shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

"How 'bout this afternoon?"

"I was out."

"That's all you've got to say? Out?"

"Come on, Dad," Dickie said becoming exasperated. "I'm there a couple of hours and I'm back by one. What's the problem?"

"The problem is you had all day to do whatever it was you were supposed to do. I'm not going to let you go wandering the streets just because you chose to procrastinate."

"But, it's due tomorrow and I already told him I'd be over!"

"Well, I suggest you this remarkable invention known as the telephone to call David and do your homework over the phone."

"Dad," Dickie said. "Come on... Mom would let me go."

Elliot paused before issuing a retort. Unlike his daughters who always referred to his separation from Kathy with either tears or forlorn expressions, Dickie used the issue to his advantage at times, knowing it was the one and only soft spot Elliot had formed throughout Dickie's life.

He sighed. "We both know she wouldn't. Now, go back to your room and take care of it over the phone."

"Jessica's gonna be there!" Dickie finally shouted, his hands held out as if pleading for understanding.

A smirk spread across Elliot's face as he stared at his son. Dickie's long-standing crush on his partner had begun to subside slightly, and the newest dark-eyed love of Dickie's life, Jessica Barrow, lived three doors down from the Kalingers.

"So," Elliot said, "This is going to be a homework par-tay?"

Dickie rolled his eyes. "Come on, Dad. I promise I'll be careful and I'll be back at one. It's just down the street."

Elliot's eyes gave an involuntary glance toward the case files sitting benignly under day-old newspaper on his coffee table and then back at his son. "No," he said sternly.

Dickie shook his head in a fashion Elliot had seen more than once in Kathy. "This blows!"

He stormed across the living and slammed his bedroom door shut.

"Tell me about it," Elliot sighed to himself.

He hated being the disciplinarian, especially now that he was completely removed from his children. Even when he and Kathy had been together, she was always the parent of the household. Elliot saw his family so infrequently that he was more or less the guy who simply brought home a paycheck.

He sat back on the couch and picked up Jacob's file again trying to imagine the face of his murderer instead of dwell on the similarities between Jacob and Dickie. The killer would most likely be male, judging from the crime scene images, and would have an average face, a face a boy of thirteen would be prone to trust. From the only eye witness statement, Elliot supposed the killer would have most likely known Jacob, had the chance to get close to him, even become his friend.

Elliot shook his head at the face of the murdered child, gathered his files and went into the unoccupied bedroom. He knew he had had enough of imagining Jacob

Lewendale's killer, but he still could not wait to have the bastard in his squad room. Elliot loved the interrogation process as much as he loved running down perpetrators in general. He had caused criminals to cry, wet themselves or even call out for their mothers while enduring his interrogations. After so many years as a detective, Elliot was the complete professional and he knew exactly which words could make a suspect confess everything, which made Micah Diorel so very frustrating. Even after three hours of Elliot's interrogating, Micah still claimed that he had not touched Evelyn Rivers, regardless of the fact that a hand print that matched the size and shape of his hand, glowed red on her face.

He ran a hand over his hair wondering if it was the stress of the job that was causing the hairline to slowly creep farther and farther back on his head or if it was just his genes at work. He shrugged off his own question choosing instead to lie on his back on the bed that was not nearly as comfortable as the one he had once shared with his wife, hoping for some semblance of sleep to come quickly before he was awakened by yet another case in the middle of the night.

Some nights he wished that every criminal or would-be criminal could simply hold up his or her crimes in favor of other undertakings just for one night so he could get the full night's rest his body so terribly craved. Just one night.

A creak outside Elliot's bedroom door caused his eyes to fly open at one-thirty in the morning. He instinctively grabbed his gun from his nightstand drawer, but set it back down remembering that Dickie was spending the night and was most likely half asleep, walking to the bathroom like he did as a child.

He opened his bedroom door to find Dickie fully-dressed and in mid tiptoe, halfway across the living room and going back to his bedroom door. Father and son stood a moment staring at one another, each staring back at the other in disbelief; fear building in Dickie's eyes, rage building in Elliot's.

Elliot shifted his weight on his feet and put his hands on his hips. "Where the hell have you been?" he hissed.

"I-I haven't b-been anywhere," Dickie stammered.

"You haven't been anywhere? Why are you wearing jeans and your shoes?"

Dickie glanced down at himself and his eyes darted toward the side of the room.

"I needed...like a...drink of water."

"And you put your shoes on for that? And your jacket?"

Dickie's searched around the living room again.

Elliot squinted at him. "I'm gonna ask you again: where you have been?"

Dickie took a deep breath. "David's."

"After I told you not to go!"

"You were being unreasonable," Dickie said, now nonchalant and rolling his eyes.

"Unreasonable! I don't care if you *ever* think I what I say is reasonable. When I say no, it means no!"

"Dad, it's just like I said. I was out at eleven and back at one."

"It doesn't matter! I told you not to go and you did it anyway! What, did you wait until you thought I was asleep and sneak out?"

Dickie stared at the floor. "We got the project done and I'm back home safe. I don't see the problem."

"You don't see a problem with doing exactly what I told you not to do?"

"You were being unreason-"

"Unreasonable! You don't even know why I told you no! No, you know what? All that matters was you disobeyed me just because you thought you could get away with it."

Dickie continued to study the floorboards.

"What if something had happened to you? I'm expecting you to be here and safe, and you're out wandering the streets with whoever!"

"Not whoever. David, Jessica and a few other peo-"

"I don't care! I need to know where you are at all times."

"You knew where I was going."

"No, I knew that I sent you to your room and you should have been there until breakfast tomorrow, this morning!" Elliot was so angry he wanted to shake his son. "Go to your room. You're grounded."

Dickie's eyes grew wide. "For how long?"

"Til I say so."

"How the hell long is that gonna be?"

"Until you learn you are not going to run the streets whenever the hell you feel like it!"

"I wasn't running the streets! Dad, I was at David's working on *homework* for Chrissake!"

Elliot threw his son a cold glance at the use of God's name in vain and Dickie fell silent immediately.

"You talk to you mother like that?" he said sternly.

"Mom would've let me go."

"If you hadn't waited 'til the last second, I would've too, but you did, so I didn't and now you're grounded."

"For how long?"

" 'Til I'm not pissed about this anymore."

"Fat chance that's ever gonna happen."

"Well, then I hope you had good time with your friends tonight because you won't be seeing them anytime soon."

Dickie started stormed past him. "What, are you going to lock me in my room?"

"I'll do what's necessary."

"Whatever. I gotta go to school in the morning, don't I?"

"Dickie!"

Dickie took the finality in the sound of his name to heart and raced into his room, slamming the door shut. Elliot sighed as he settled back down on the couch. He held his face in his hands and closed his eyes. Things were easier when the kids were little. For the most part, they did as they were told. Now that they were older, it seemed like they were all turning against him at the same time. He sighed, not knowing if this was just his children acting as teenagers or acting out because of what had happened with he and Kathy.

He got up and poured himself a glass of water making a mental note to tell Kathy what Dickie had done in the morning. Elliot still could not believe it. Dickie was thirteen

and already sneaking out of the house. Dozens of questions came at him at once. How long had he been doing this? What if he had not have woken up as Dickie was coming back home? Would he simply continue doing this until Elliot found *him* in a box on Tompkins Square? What if something had happened to him? How could he explain it to Kathy? How would he live with himself?

He went back to his bedroom and saw that Dickie's light was still lit. He wanted to barge into the room and demand that Dickie go to sleep immediately, but decided against it. Elliot had done enough to damage the relationship with his son for one night.

Glancing at his alarm clock that read close to two o'clock in the morning, Elliot lied on his bed and simply stared at the ceiling. Maybe he could get three or four hours before he needed to get up and make his trek back into the SVU's thunder.

He turned toward the window and closed his eyes. He would have to deal with Dickie in the morning, but he was unsure how to do it. They only had so much time between the two of them and he hated the idea of spending that little time at odds with his son. Feeling the waves of sleep overtake him, Elliot allowed his mind to drift into the precious REM sleep he so rarely achieved.

He was unsure how long he was asleep before he heard the ripping chirp of the cell phone that set on his nightstand. Elliot groaned and glanced at his clock. Four-seventeen. He let out a deep sigh and flipped open the phone after fumbling a bit.

"Stabler," he said exhaustion emanating from his voice.

"Detective Stabler," a male voice said with a heavy accent. "This is Officer Keith McKillen from the 1-6."

"Yes," Elliot said knowing precisely what was about to be said.

"You're one of the SVU detectives on-call tonight, and we have a situation here at Tompkins Square."

Elliot's ears perked up immediately. "Who's been found?"

"Still unsure at this point," McKillen said. "It's a white male. 'Bout twelve, maybe thirteen."

"Was he found in or by a box?" he asked thinking of the case that set on his coffee table.

"No, but he was found nude, near the same place that other body was dumped a week ago."

Elliot sighed. "I'll be there in thirty."

He pushed "End" on the phone and quickly pressed "Star 2."

The phone rang twice before a less than familiar, groggy male voice answered the phone.

"The West Side of Olivia's bed speaking."

Elliot sat silent for a moment while he heard some slight rustling and then Olivia's voice.

"Give me the phone, Jonathan," he heard her say a distance from the phone.

"Benson," she said after a few moments more.

"Olivia," Elliot said. "There's been another one."

"Tompkins Square?" she asked.

"In the same place as Jacob Lewendale."

Olivia let out a low, heavy sigh into the phone. "I'll be there in a bit."

"Yeah," Elliot said closing the phone and running a hand over his head.

Thankfully, his apartment was in walking distance of Dickie's school and Elliot knew Dickie had friends to walk to school with in the morning, but the situation exasperated him nonetheless. He did not want to be gone when Dickie woke up in the morning, as that had been the situation far too often in the past, but depending on how long it took for he and Olivia to go through the crime scene, interview witnesses and canvass the area, it would be past nine o'clock before he would even have a moment to think. Any thoughts of having "make-up" breakfast with his son faded quickly and Elliot rose from his bed to dress and face yet another young victim.

Unknown Time and Place

He felt her shudder under his touch and the shivers ran electric under his fingertips. He would be done with this one soon and then...then he would be ready for another.

She whimpered, knowing what was about to happen and he relished in the moment. The pitch black of the room kept her from seeing him, but he had been there for so very long. He could see her just fine. She was beautiful in the light that just barely peered into the room from the door only he could locate.

He had taken her again and again for ages now, but he still had a use for her. She sold well and he enjoyed her on and off the clock, but boredom was edging on him day by day. He would need a new one. Not one of the others he kept away, but someone new altogether. Someone who had not come to anticipate what he was about to do. Someone special; someone great.

It would need to be someone exceptional and strong and he did not want to fork over another couple grand for one who had been weakened by beatings and other abuses. He needed someone he could break and train and mold into a wonderful possession, all of his own. Someone feistier, with a little zest to make the productions a little less monotonous and his nights all the more fun.

He had his sources, but for now he would simply have to wait. Wait until the perfect one came to him. They always came by fate and eventually *came* to him in fear. But for now he would have to wait and take this one, as well as the others, as often as the urge reared him to them.

Chapter Two

Friday January 12, 2007

Tompkins Square Park, New York

Tompkins Square Park by day was a beautiful inlet to the city, with its large, old-growth trees and picnicking areas, its baseball field and quaint, yet urban pathways. By night, the park was illuminated by the lights of the bordering streets of Avenues A and B, and single persons walking through carried a step quicker than that taken North or West

of the park. The bitter January wind rustled the residual leaves that lied on dirty snow piles and the park itself seemed to shiver against the cold.

Elliot stepped out of his precinct car, thinking of Sunday afternoons he had spent in and around the park as a child himself, and those spent when he and Kathy were young and still without children. Less than a hundred feet from where he had parked, the red and blue lights of NYPD squad cars lit the surrounding trees and pavement in a flashing purple light. He walked toward the scene quickly, preparing himself with each step. It was a ritual he had performed with every murder scene to which he was called and this morning would be no different.

"You sure it's the same guy?" Elliot asked in the direction of the medical examiner as he approached the scene.

"I can't say for an absolute certainty yet," the black woman, medical examiner replied standing from the tree-covered area.

Her long, curly, black hair was pulled back into an elegant pony-tail and her large, dark brown eyes were inquisitive, yet filled with sorrow for a picture she had seen far too often as a medical examiner in the city. As the county medical examiner associated with Manhattan's Special Victims Unit, Dr. Melinda Warner worked with the murdered victims of rapists and child molesters every day, and though she saw the worst filth society could produce many times a day, she was still not quite accustomed to it.

"I'm willing to bet he is," Melinda continued. "Just from the positioning of the body and the ligature marks on his neck. He was beaten and sodomized...the same as the Lewendale boy."

"No box this time," Elliot said forcing his hands into the fingertips of a latex glove.

"No," Melinda said. "And, I don't see anything on the ground to denote that he ever laid one down here."

"This is the other side of the park," Elliot said as he looked around through the flashing lights. "Jacob Lewendale was found by the baseball field. The basketball courts are just up the way from *here*."

He often spoke his thoughts aloud, mostly in Olivia's company, just in case anyone around him could add any insight to his observations.

"We're starting a canvass of the area," an older, uniformed officer informed Elliot. "We're guessing this guy's gotta be local."

Elliot only nodded as he came upon Melinda's vantage point and stared at the lifeless body of a twelve-year-old boy. They had shared this view several times already since the New Year and Elliot hoped this was not indicative of the rest of the month.

The boy's blond hair was browned from the mud and dirt from the surrounding ground under the trees and he looked so very thin that Elliot simply shook his head. He probably never stood a chance against his attacker.

"How are we on an ID?" he asked.

"Nothing at all, yet," Melinda said. "We just got lucky with the other one."

"Not lucky enough," Elliot whispered.

"What've we got?" Olivia's voice shouted from the patrol cars a few yards away from the scene.

Melinda sighed. "Another white male, approximately twelve years old. He's been raped and strangled."

"Just like Jacob Lewendale," Olivia said when she finally got to where they were standing.

"Minus the box," Elliot said.

"We sure it's the same guy?"

"The ligature marks on his neck looks the same, but..." Melinda stood over the boy's body. "Doesn't look like there's any fluids present, though."

"Wonder why he decided to wear a condom this time?" Olivia asked aloud, more to herself than to the doctor and the detective standing before her.

"He's getting better at what he does," Elliot said.

He bent down and took a long look at the solemn face that would never again wake and made a mental note to check Missing Persons reports as soon as he and Olivia got back to their precinct.

The air grew colder even though small rays of light were beginning to shine on the horizon, and Elliot took out a weathered note pad as his eyes began to fully take in the scene. He could see Olivia doing the same a few feet away from and a right, old ritual began.

They had been working together for a little more than eight years, and all those in the SVU could see, few partnerships were as solid as theirs. In a unit where people left sometimes days after volunteering or being assigned, Elliot and Olivia had stuck it through together. Sometimes the partnership was seamless and they were like a machine. They could work in tandem and few words were needed to track down a criminal or investigate a dire situation. Elliot could count on Olivia to simply *know* and she could do the same. Like with many pairings between males and females on the force, there had always been a bit of speculation on just *how* in sync they were. All talk aside, they had been nothing but professional throughout the course of their partnership...until last May.

Elliot nodded toward Olivia who strode off in the direction of several officers on the scene to begin her line of questioning. As he nodded, he caught something in her eyes that told him they were still not in sync; still not back to where they used to be. The connection he had valued to the point that he had taken it for granted was still lost.

They had argued heavily over their last major case and he wondered whether they could get back what they used to have. His anger combined with her sarcasm and snide comments during the case had led them to a place he would rather not revisit.

Olivia had tried everything in her power to get Elliot to open up to her when he was going through the beginnings of his separation. She had seen it building over several years; he was slowly losing his place in his family and he refused to talk about it. She had offered herself as someone he could talk to, but he continuously pushed her away from him.

Although she could never openly discuss cases with her, Olivia had often spoken of her worsening partnership with Elliot to Maya. Maya would always give a positive quip, stating that perhaps they needed some space from one another; space and *time* to put things back into perspective. They received both last May after Olivia had come too close to one of her marks. The child rapist, Victor Gitano, had been holding two children hostage and she had been a step too close behind him when he had lashed out with the blade he held. Another moment closer and it would have been the end of her.

When they finally tracked down Gitano, he had murdered one of his hostages and nearly killed Elliot when he took him captive as well. A frequent nightmare of Olivia's

was Gitano telling her that he would kill her partner before her while she held him at gunpoint. Once Gitano had been taken down by a sniper cop, Elliot and Olivia had time to talk and their conversation turned down a road that made Olivia's inside squirm. She could not shoot Gitano when he had Elliot by the throat because she would not chance Gitano killing Elliot first, and Elliot ran to her side when Gitano had knifed her instead of pursuing Gitano, resulting in the death of one of Gitano's hostages. She and Elliot had become too close and she decided to leave the unit. Once she had had a taste of time away from Elliot, she was only too excited to jump on an offer from the FBI's New York branch months later in August.

Even after Olivia had returned to New York and the SVU, things between she and Elliot were still tense. They had said things to one another; things they had never once uttered let alone allow show in facial expressions or movements. Instead of their partnership flowing effortlessly like it had in the past seven years, there was now strain, anxiety and, of course, conflict. May had sparked a match in their relationship and their separation in August did nothing but fan the flames. They noticed things in one another they had deliberately ignored in the past; a sway of hips or shifting muscles, the pure blue of one's eyes or the white flash in the other's smile. Each knew the only things that kept their emotions from turning pubescent were Olivia's current relationship and the state of Elliot's past one.

Olivia began her line of questions to the surrounding officers and they each stood respectfully and answered one by one. Technically, there was no real difference between a uniformed officer and a plain-clothes detective, but there was a reverence held for detectives, especially those in the SVU.

A few yards away, Elliot questioned a second set of detectives.

"Who found the body?" he asked the shortest of the three standing before him.

"Guy named Drover," the officer said. He pointed toward the well-lit patrol cars. "He's over there. Pretty shook up too."

Elliot nodded. "What's he doing out here? It was probably three in the morning when he found the body."

The officer shrugged. "Said he was takin' a walk."

Elliot smirked. "A walk?"

The officer smirked in return. "A *walk*."

"Well, all right," Elliot said.

He began to stride off in the direction where Jeffrey Drover stood near the line of flashing squad cars. The moment he began walking, he saw an officer point Olivia in Drover's direction, and she too began walking toward him. They caught eyes and nodded toward one another. They came together and made a direct track toward Drover. Together they towered over most of those encountered and although his broad shoulders sometimes dwarfed her thin frame, they always walked in perfect stride. Their every movement together commanded nothing but respect and veneration.

"Jeffrey Drover?" Olivia said once they had reached him.

"Yeah," he said turning to face them.

"I'm Detective Benson," she said, "and this is Detective Stabler. We need to ask you a few questions."

"Yeah, sure," Drover said solemnly.

Elliot took in every part of Drover as Olivia began to question him. He was thin and his long, drawn face, though oddly undistinguished, gave the impression that he was a bit older than his thirty years would suggest. Large, grey eyes that refused to reach Olivia's, perfectly reflected the patrol car lights as they stared at the ground. His face, covered with a light, blond stubble, was soft, likeable and attractive and appeared fairly tan against his dark brown hair. He held a face that anyone could trust.

Drover's black, spring-like jacket flapped open and shut as Olivia rattled questions at him and his loose-fitting jeans seemed stiffened against the cold. While the jeans could be fitting for any occasion, Elliot did not like that Drover was wearing a light jacket in the middle of January. Even without a heavy coat, Drover did not look at all chilled by the winter air, which raised the question: *What had he been doing to keep so warm?* He gave Drover another quick glance and decided that he did not like him; from his all-too-handsome and trusting face to the way he had his hands stuffed into his jeans pockets.

"I just can't believe someone would do this to Connor," Drover said shifting on his feet.

"You identified the victim?" Olivia asked eyebrows high on her forehead.

"Yeah," he said. "I used to coach his U-10 soccer team. I've trained him and a bunch of other kids on and off for the past couple of years." He sighed. "I just can't believe someone would do something like this to him."

"How well did you know him?" Olivia said.

Drover shrugged. "Well enough, I suppose. Came from a normal, nuclear family. Never caused any trouble...well, anymore than any of the other boys. He was a really great kid."

"What were you doing out here this early in the morning?" Elliot asked, little sympathy reflecting in his voice.

Drover blinked twice at Elliot, a bit caught off guard by the question. "I was just going for a run."

"In your jeans?" Elliot said squinting in skepticism.

"I've got some spandex pants on underneath," Drover said without missing a beat.

"Wouldn't sweats or something been a little better?"

Drover nodded. "I thought about that, but it's laundry day tomorrow and I figured that bigger jeans would be warm enough. I just haven't been able to sleep recently. I'm sure you guys know what it's like to lose sleep over your job."

"Truly," Olivia said scratching on her notepad. "Did you notice anything out of the ordinary when you were out tonight? Any cars in the area, anything on the ground?"

"You mean besides the dead kid I've known for years," Drover said toward the ground.

Olivia sighed softly. She normally took better care of those who found children in the city. He deserved a little more tact, especially since he had known the victim. "Did you notice anybody in the area when you found him?"

Drover shook his head. "No. No one was out here."

"Did you touch him at all when you found him?"

"I just called the cops the second I saw it was...was a person."

"How'd you notice him?" she asked.

"I saw something white near the trees and...I don't know, I figured someone had dumped something in the park." He sighed and shifted on his feet again, shaking his head. The detectives could see his eyes were beginning to shine. "I still can't believe it...I mean I just saw him a couple weeks ago. I just can't believe it."

Olivia reached into her pocket and pulled out a white card. "This is my number. Please, call me if you need anything or just need someone to talk to."

Drover took the card, nodding his head. "Thanks," he said softly. He stared at Olivia for a long time, almost as if studying her face. "Thanks a lot."

"Talk to the officers over there and they'll make sure you get a ride home," she said breaking the eye contact.

Drover nodded again not really hearing what she had said and just stared at her card, while she and Elliot began to walk back to the crime scene.

"Well," she sighed. "Do we want to start on Avenue B and work our way West or do you wanna start from the other end of the park?"

"Avenue B," Elliot said. "And I want to talk to him again."

"Who? Drover?" she said surprised.

"Yeah," he said. "I want to bring him in."

"What?" Olivia had stopped walking. "Elliot, we haven't even talked to anyone else yet."

"There's something...off about him," Elliot said. "You didn't see it?"

"I didn't notice anything *off* about him, except for maybe running at three in the morning. But he's not the only New Yorker who gets his jollies risking an early-morning run."

Elliot shook his head. "I don't like it. My gut tells me we should look at him a little more."

"Why?"

"Come on, Liv. What're the odds that the victim's old soccer coach is the one who finds him on an early-morning run?"

"The same as the odds on one of the first cops to the scene identifying Jacob Lewendale. What makes you want to jump on Drover? There's nothing about him that seems liked he'd be anything less than a red-blooded, all-American."

"Who goes running in regular street clothes in the middle of the night?"

"He didn't have a drop of blood on him or look even remotely dirty, Elliot. He would've got *something* on him if he dumped the victim here."

"He didn't look remotely cold either," Elliot said. "It's the middle of January. Who goes out anywhere without a coat? Running or not, his story already isn't adding up."

He began to walk down the path, but Olivia caught up with him in three strides.

"Well, I *still* want to know if anyone in the surrounding apartments noticed or heard anything, before jumping on Drover. You know, do a little *police* work rather than rely on hunches."

"Sounds good," Elliot said sardonically and they began trekking East toward Avenue B.

They canvassed each of the buildings and their respective tenants over the next four hours. They had given instructions to several sets of the officers at the scene to

question those in the surrounding buildings on Avenue A and East 7th and 10th streets, but enacted their own canvass in silence between one another.

By nine o'clock in the morning, only one tenant on Avenue B had seen anything; the same black SUV driving past the park continuously around one o'clock. The detectives noted the information, but both doubted the reliability of the neighbor, who looked like he had spent the majority of the previous night drinking a great deal.

"Want to grab a cup before we go in?" Olivia asked Elliot. He agreed and within in thirty minutes, they were sitting in a busy coffee shop at Sixth Avenue and Eleventh Street.

The coffee shop was small and always crowded, with old images of faces smiling in a New York long past. The detectives were regulars to the shop, and while the little man who ran the shop was characteristically rude to the sporadic customers and those who referred to his shop as being on "Avenue of the Americas," he always made sure Manhattan's SVU detectives were well-served. Elliot and Olivia had successfully apprehended the man who had attacked his daughter while she was closing one night, and aside from his tearful thanks when the rapist had been convicted, he always made sure to slip them a piece of pumpkin pie for free.

They both sat silently drinking their coffees and looking over respective notes from the early morning canvass. Elliot stuck a fork into his generous slice of pie; Olivia had declined hers stating it was far too early in the morning for sweets. Although they were just beginning their investigation in the murder, the case was already reaching a disheartening state with virtually no witnesses and few options available, most of which would leave them empty-handed. And, the silence was killing both of them.

"So," Olivia said, her coffee drained, "when do you want to track down Connor Whickfield's family?"

Elliot stared at her for a moment. "I think Warner's already working on the positive ID. She'll be calling any minute now.

Olivia nodded and allowed her eyes to wander over the rest of the shop as silence fell over the pair of them again.

"Maybe..." Elliot began. "Maybe I was a little premature jumping on Drover this morning."

A wave of relief rushed over Olivia as a small smile crept to her lips. "I understand why you did though." She paused. "If this is the same guy who killed Jacob Lewendale, we've got to find him before he gets a better taste for this."

It was Elliot's turn to nod at his partner. He pulled out his notepad and flipped the sheets to notes made several days earlier. "What notes did you get last night? I want to compare with the Lewendale case."

"Yeah," she said taking out her notes. "Same park for both of them, but no box the second time."

"Hang on sec," Elliot said pulling his phone out of his pocket. "Stabler."

"Elliot," Dr. Warner's voice said through the phone. "It's Melinda. I made a little headway on this morning's case. There are definitely spermicides present and the ligature marks on his neck are the same as those on the Lewendale boy. I've also made the positive ID on Connor Whickfield. He's from the Upper West Side too."

Elliot sighed staring at his notes. "Where?"

He heard some papers shuffling through the phone. "210 West 66th. Parents Leroy and Hannah. He's been in the system as a Missing Person since Tuesday. The parents gave us a few of his things to lift his prints."

He wrote down the address, nodding into the phone all the while. "All right. We'll be by in an hour to get a photograph."

"Okay."

He hung up without a valediction and looked up at Olivia who was staring at him expectantly. "That was Warner. She made the positive ID on Connor Whickfield."

"Missing Persons?" she asked.

"Since Tuesday," Elliot said, putting on his coat.

They both headed toward the front door of the shop where the owner told them their coffees were free and that his daughter just made Dean's List at Hudson University.

Whickfield Residence
210 West 66th Street
11:48AM

The Whickfield home so resembled that of Jacob Lewendale's it made Elliot's stomach turn. The bright, busy streets home to many people raising families, held an almost innocence that was rarely seen in the city. The apartment buildings of the two boys looked nearly the same and Jacob Lewendale's family lived just three blocks North of the area.

The detectives quickly walked the steps to the Lewendale home and with just one knock, the front door opened to reveal a frantic woman in her early forties.

"Yes!" she nearly yelled at them.

Elliot and Olivia removed the badges from various pockets and flashed them at the woman.

"My name is Detective Stabler," Elliot said. "And this is Detective Benson..."

"Roy!" she shouted running into the apartment. "Roy! The police are here!" She came back to the door, tears forming at the brim of her eyes. "Have you found any word on Connor? Please tell me you have something!"

"May we come in, ma'am?" Olivia asked.

"Why are asking to come in!" she shouted. "Just tell me! Tell me now. Where is Connor?"

Olivia steadied herself as a gentleman came running to door. *He had his father's eyes*, she thought.

"I'm Leroy Whickfield," he said putting his arms around his wife who had dissolved into tears.

"Mr. Whickfield..." Olivia said. "We found Connor. I'm so sorry, but he's dead."

She heard a, now all too familiar, wail come from Mrs. Whickfield and Olivia only saw a rush of greying blond hair come toward her as she felt a hard shove come to her midsection. Her balance completely thrown, Olivia felt herself falling backward and braced herself for the impending fall against the stone steps. Elliot's arm shot out from his side, grabbing hold of Olivia's side and coat flap as she began to fall. When he managed

to steady his partner, Elliot shot a glare Mr. Whickfield who was holding his wife to his chest to keep her from launching further attacks on Olivia.

His partner could have been seriously injured. A backwards fall down eight stone steps was likely to break at least one bone and depending on how hard she hit and if she had hit her head, Elliot would have been spending the next few months in and out of hospitals visiting Olivia. All this notwithstanding, his stare toward the Whickfields was also filled with compassion and understanding. They had just received the worst news that any parent could ever hear and Elliot knew, if put in the same situation, he might have reacted in a similar fashion. After delivering the same somber to news to parents over and over again, he had been slapped, punched, kicked, screamed at and thrown against walls by parents who refused to believe what they had heard. He hated having to do it and it varied each time the ritual was performed. Some parents were speechless, in a daze of confusion and tears when they received the news. Others acted much like Mrs. Whickfield had. Most were a combination of tears, disbelief and fury.

"H...how? When?" Mr. Whickfield said over his wife's screaming into his shirt.

"We're not sure when," Elliot said, "but it looks like sometime within the past forty-eight hours. He was strangled." He did not know whether he should include the fact that Connor had been sodomized at that point. The mother was still screaming over the news of hearing that her son was dead and news of how he died might send both mother and father over the edge.

Mrs. Whickfield removed herself from her husband's grasp and fled into the living room, falling just before reaching the sofa placed perfectly in the room.

"Is there a place where we can talk?" Olivia asked quietly.

Mr. Whickfield nodded and ushered the detectives into the apartment.

"He was always so good. That's what everyone would say to us. Connor was such a good kid."

Leroy Whickfield's hands trembled as he attempted to rest his teacup onto the table that sat in the small dining area."

"He's our only child," he continued. "We married young, Hannah and I, and we tried for years to have children. We both've come from large families and wanted at least five, but...the doctors could never tell us what was wrong. All the tests and everything, and no one ever knew what was wrong. And when Connor came...he was our little miracle."

Elliot and Olivia sat opposite Mr. Whickfield, both with their hands folded and neither touching the tea the grieving man had made.

"Never caused one bit of trouble. Ever. I can't remember having to tell him to do anything more than once. He was always ready to go to church on Sundays, always had his homework done. He always had a lot of friends and got excellent grades...Hannah and I would lie awake at night and wonder how God blessed us with such a perfect child."

"Mr. Whickfield," Olivia said softly wishing she could allow the man to continue on about his son forever. "Do you remember anyone paying Connor any extra attention lately? Anyone who looked out of the ordinary around him or the rest of your family?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I really wouldn't know. Connor was always so popular...he was always telling us about someone new he had met."

"Can you think of any reason anyone might have to hurt you or your family?"

Mr. Whickfield shook his head again and sighed. "Look, I know you're probably used to dealing with mobsters or something, but we were just ordinary, boring people. We don't gamble or owe any large debts and we aren't involved in any illegal activities or anything. We just work, we pay our taxes and we loved our son."

Olivia felt Elliot shift in his seat next to her and she wondered again just how much this case was already affecting him.

"You said Connor had a lot of friends," Olivia began. "What kinds of things did he do? Did he do a lot of sports or did he hang out a lot?"

"He was always out," a voice said from the dining room doorway. Mrs. Whickfield, having recovered from the initial shock of hearing of her son's death, stood just behind where the detectives sat, looking extremely distressed. Her blonde hair with its slivers of silver was tousled and standing on end in places, and blue eyes appeared dull behind the torrent of red in what should have been the whites of her eyes.

"Connor played football and basketball and soccer," she continued stepping into the room. "He was constantly active. The only way we could keep track of him was through his cell phone."

"When was the last time you saw or spoke to him?" Elliot asked.

Mrs. Whickfield took the untouched tea that sat in front of Olivia and slowly sat down next to her husband. "Monday night. He had indoor soccer practice that night and he was supposed to call us once they were finished so we could pick him up. When he hadn't heard from him by midnight, we immediately called the police...It's strange because we thought the worst, but really didn't believe it. To think that something could have happened to our little boy. Our perfect little boy..."

Her voice trailed off and she dissolved into tears once again as her husband enveloped her in his arms.

"When you're up to it," Olivia said. "Do you think you can give us a list of Connor's friends? Anyone who knew him well?"

Mr. Whickfield nodded, but continued to rock his sobbing wife.

Thirty minutes later, the detectives were walking back toward their car, bickering slightly over Elliot's last comments before leaving the Whickfield home.

"Do you know a Jeffrey Drover?" Elliot had said as he and Olivia were walking out the door.

"Yes," Mr. Whickfield had said. "He was Connor's soccer coach a few years ago. He gives the boys personal training sessions about once a month now. Why?"

Elliot had paused a long moment before replying. "He was the one who found Connor this morning."

Mr. Whickfield stared at him in disbelief. "You don't think...", he had said. "I mean we've known Jeff for years. He's always been great with the kids. You don't really think..."

"We'll be talking with everyone in Connor's life," Olivia had interjected, half dragging Elliot out the door.

Minutes later the detectives were snipping back and forth at one another.

"You had no right to bring up Drover!" Olivia shouted as they reached the car.

"Olivia," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, he's a suspect, and we are obligated to find out the truth about him."

"You can't just go around telling anyone who'll listen that you like Drover for this! He just rubbed you the wrong way and now you're launching some kind of war against him. There was no reason to mention Drover to them, especially since there's no reason to suspect him."

"He says he just happened to be walking around at midnight. In the same park where Connor was found. That's just too convenient for me."

"Elliot, there is no evidence that Drover's involved with in anything other than having poor judgment."

"How much are you willing to bet we find a correlation between Drover and the Lewendale boy, too?"

He glared at her as she stood mouth open, unable to reply. On face value, Elliot had a valid point. It was more than intriguing that the Whickfields had had a close relationship with the man who found their son murdered, but on the other hand, she had heard of stranger coincidences previously. They also needed to consider that letting Drover's name out too early in the investigation not only impeded on his civil rights, but could also cause him run if he was actually involved.

"Elliot...what if...what if they'd said he was a creep because they just didn't like him. That one thing could've led us on a wild goose chase after Drover when he's completely innocent."

"It wouldn't be the first time that mistake had been made."

"But it doesn't mean we can just go after Drover like that."

"I don't understand why you're going to bat for a guy who may have had contact with both victims. Our first real suspect."

"And, I don't understand why you're pulling out all stops for a guy *you* decided that you just didn't like, right from the start! Besides, Elliot," she continued. "We haven't talked to anyone else in Connor Whickfield's life and we don't know *who* he could've met the night he was killed."

Elliot shook his head at her and broke eye contact, staring at the car door.

"And it's like you said, *'may* have had contact...' If we talk to the Lewendales and they mention Drover...maybe he'll be worth looking at, but not until we have proof of *something*. We need something more to go on aside from gut feeling. Do you really think Casey'll be able to get a warrant to search him if we've got nothing but praises from the victim's parents and a bad feeling from you?"

"We both know that gut feeling has saved people than it's screwed over."

Olivia sighed.

"Okay fine," he said. "We'll lay off Drover for a bit, but how are you going to feel when he's killed a few more kids and we coulda had him after this one?"

"The same way I'll feel if we find out he's killed these two kids and he bolts because he knows we're onto him and then we can't get any resolution for their families."

Elliot shook his head and got in the car, slamming the door shut in the process.

Their little tiff had drawn a bit of an audience from people walking by and Olivia felt her face grow hot at the idea that she and Elliot had let their argument escalate the way it did. She got into the car and they drove to Connor Whickfield's middle school in silence.

MS 251 Ulysses S. Grant School
283 West 70th Street
3:08PM

Middle School 251's red bricks shone bright as the sun showered the small building with light and gave the appearance of comfort and warmth despite the striking cold. Pre-teen children were streaming out of the doors and began congregating around the concrete steps in front of the school. Small groups appeared almost instantly separating the grinning jocks and the tense nerds, the blond popular girls and the sullen late-bloomers and not even the winter air could quell the flirtatious attitudes of the more adventurous youths.

The navy, police-issued Taurus pulled in a space found across the street from the school and the detectives quickly strode across the street. They stood out immediately, drawing stares from a few of the students, as they walked in silence into the school. The task before them was sometimes just as gruesome as the one from which they had come. Kids, especially pubescent ones, had the tendency to be even more unpredictable than adults when confronted with news of death. They also lied more often and stymied the detective's best efforts to find the truth about any individual, usually to the detriment of all those involved.

Inside, the building was brightly lit, and the school's trophy case brandished several awards in athletics as well as academics, though the latter were scattered further back in the case. Students crowded around lockers that lined the walls, gathering coats and hats, most faces filled with delight that school was finished for the day.

The detectives found their way to the school's front office, flashing badges to one of the braver hall monitors who had asked if he could help them, and asked if the principal was available.

Principal Harry Randall was a massive man at six-foot-four and appeared to have handled his share of middle school fights and difficult cases in general, but despite his unyielding demeanor, the brims of the aging man's eyes grew red behind round glasses at the news of Connor's murder.

"I just can't believe it," Randall said, sitting into the weathered leather chair that sat behind the faux-oak desk. "Connor...Are you sure?"

Elliot nodded. "We made a positive identification with his parents this morning."

"My God," Randall said as he put a hand to his furrowed brow. "I just talked to them yesterday. I told them they shouldn't get too worried just yet. That he'd turn up all right."

"Is there a way you could give us some information on some of Connor's friends?" Olivia asked. "His parents had the numbers for a couple, but we didn't want to push them considering..."

Randall nodded. "Yeah...uh...there's Carter Latham. Those two are...were always as thick as thieves, but...uh...It's hard to think up anyone too specific right way. Connor has always been so popular. The kids are really going to have a time when they hear about this."

"We understand," Elliot said softly.

"There's Chris Stradding and Steve McPhillips. They live close to Connor and I think they all went to elementary school together. And, yes, Branden Hastings and Nicholas Baumgardner. I think all five of them all played soccer with Connor. But...uh...I'd talk to Carter first. If there's anyone who might know if Connor was up to something, Carter would know."

"Do you have a list of his teachers?" Elliot asked. "We'd like a chance to talk to them if we could."

"Yeah, I can get you his schedule," Randall said turning toward the computer on his desk. "Just give me a second."

"Have you noticed anyone watching the school lately?" Olivia asked while he typed. "Anyone who's been paying special attention to Connor or any of his friends?"

"We're a middle school, Detective," he said sternly. "All of the staff are trained to keep an eye out for individuals who shouldn't be around the schools. If anyone had noticed anything, they would have notified me."

Minutes later in the teacher's lounge of the school, Elliot and Olivia spoke with all eight of Connor's teachers in one setting. Each one of them had the same things to say: Connor was an angel, everyone like him and that they were completely shocked. Two had asked what this world was coming to and another actually erupted in tears. A short while later, after promising to do what they could to find the person or persons responsible for Connor's death, the detectives were making their way through Manhattan traffic back to their police precinct, the 1-6.

The tall, multi-story building was a flurry of blue and white as officers wearing various uniforms actively carried out the mission "To Protect and Serve." Elliot and Olivia rode the elevator to the fifth floor, the Special Victims Unit, and his early caffeine fix waning, Elliot poured both he and Olivia a cup of slightly old coffee.

The small, brown coffee stand overlooked the array of desks and tables that scattered the floor of the SVU and it was a crucial element of the unit's atmosphere. All those in the unit were overworked and as a good night's sleep was such a rare commodity for either the desk clerks or the detectives themselves, the coffee pot was constantly delivering a stream of the dark stimulant.

Elliot handed Olivia her coffee, dark with two sugars, and sat down at his desk with his own, dark three sugars, that was set opposite against hers. Every inch of space was used on either desk, covered by countless open cases, follow-up notes, and pending court appearances. The brown tops were weathered, slightly scratched and held several ring stains where coffee cups had sat, continually filled, well into the midnight hours.

He kept multiple pictures of each of his children and kept the sole image of his once whole family hidden behind his stack of phone messages. On Olivia's desk sat a series of framed photographs that were each at varying degrees of exposure due to her own stacks of paper: one of she and her mother, one of she and Maya from when they were in college, and one of Jillian's sons who referred to her as "Aunt Liv." She had considered adding an image of her and Jonathan to the array, but decided against it after remembering a comment Elliot had once made about her having to change the picture in the "boyfriend" frame quite often.

Elliot glanced up at Olivia as she took a long drink of her coffee and thought for a moment on all the others who had sat in that seat throughout his years in the unit. His

first partner in the unit, Detective Flannery, had showed Elliot the proverbial ropes when he first came to the unit and taught him everything he knew. After Flannery there had been two others who did not last long and then there was of course, Olivia. When she left for Oregon in the summer past, Elliot was given a new partner. Dani Beck, the curly haired beauty, struck Elliot in a way unbecoming of NYPD detectives and, thankfully, she did not last long in the unit. As he recalled the pure delight that ran through him when Olivia once again occupied that desk across from him, she handed him a file he needed to sign and he snapped back to the present.

A few feet away from Olivia and Elliot's desk pair sat the desks of Detectives John Munch and Odafin Tutuola.

Munch had been on the force for more years than anyone could remember. The bespectacled, three-time divorcee had worked as a detective in Baltimore's Homicide for more than twenty years, before deciding to come to Manhattan and continue on a different path. He had previously thought that dealing with something other than the constant murders seen in Homicide would make a better, brighter path for him, however, Munch, like so many others who came to the SVU, found that dealing with so many living victims was far worse than the more straightforward task of tracking down murderers. Living victims meant an actual person who could describe every, single thing that happened to them. In the end, however, Munch enjoyed knowing that his work eventually helped victims and could send them on better paths rather than simply providing empathy to families after-the-fact.

He had a way of keeping the dark setting of rapes and child molestations on a lighter side, by cracking jokes when he could and adding an air of conspiracy theory wherever possible. For Munch, everything was connected and even his work in the SVU, regardless of whether or not others wanted to hear about it, held some kind of intrigue to it.

John's demeanor contrasted sharply with that of his younger partner. Odafin, nearly always called "Fin," had been transferred into the SVU after serving in Narcotics for several years. The light-toned, black American rarely opened up to the other detectives preferring instead to remain stoic and keep a cool vigilance. His time with Narcotics had hardened him in many ways and Fin had ways of retrieving answers from suspects that was matched by few others. Over the years, Fin had let down his guard through the constant stream of heart-breaking victims to even the acceptance of his homosexual son.

Fin had joined the unit seven years earlier, and while he had not planned on it being a permanent shift, he stayed regardless. He had been told some of the horror stories regarding the SVU prior to coming, but Fin, as the tough New York cop he was, felt he could handle anything. Most cases affected all of the detectives, but Fin remained strong against all the crimes against humanity he had seen. Every once in a while, however, he removed himself from a case when he knew he needed time away from the unit.

He had grown so accustomed to the conspiracies and "shake-downs" of criminals in Narcotics that it took him a while to gain a sympathetic ear and allow himself to feel for the victims. Fin would never openly admit it, but the hugs from rape victims he had helped and the overflowing thanks he received from the parents of children he had saved from the hands of pedophiles was all he needed to keep him going.

Fin threw a nod of his head in the direction of the detectives to acknowledge their presence and continued updating a case from his own hefty caseload. Elliot nodded back and rubbed his hands across his face, taking in the rest of the unit's space out of sight for a moment.

The unit was open and spread out across a large, arena-like space. It was crowded and filled with desks, tables and multiple dry-erase and state-of-the-art electronic bulletin boards throughout the office to aid the detectives as they mapped out the actions of criminals and victims. On the far end of the center stood the office of Donald Cragen, Captain over the Manhattan Special Victims Unit.

The captain had reached his position nearly twenty years earlier, however, due to a number of political issues arising in his career, he could not manage to get promoted. Problems with alcohol reoccurring every once in a while notwithstanding, Cragen remained diligent to his work. He held a kind face beset by soft, brown eyes and although the majority of his hair had long since gone, the few wisps of grey that remained shaped him well.

Cragen stood from his desk, taller than average with a build that suggested he was once an athlete, and stared through the blinds of the large window into his office. He too had been awakened with the news that a young boy had been found in Tompkins Square Park and he had just gotten off the phone with his boss who wanted an immediate account of his detectives' efforts to find this murderer. As the day proceeded, he had been updated with a few pieces of information regarding the case, but he primarily depended on his two lead detectives to feed him what he needed.

He glanced behind him at the white-faced clock that hung on the wooden panels of the office and sighed. Catching a glimpse of the many photos and accommodations that lined the walls of the office and led the eye to the rollaway bed that stood in the corner of the office, Cragen knew it was going to be a long weekend. They were only just beginning the case, and the more dire the case, the more likely it was that he would be spending his nights on the hard mattress of the bed he kept in the office.

"People," Cragen said, as he marched out of his office, his hand square in his trouser pockets. "What have you got for me on this newest victim?"

He spoke directly to Elliot and Olivia and though they had each had at least ten opened cases bearing down upon them, they knew exactly of which victim he spoke.

"We talked to the parents and the teachers," Elliot said. "And we're going to give his friends a chance to get home before questioning them."

"Anyone have anything on him so far?" Cragen asked, a frustrated wrinkle appearing in his brow.

Olivia shook her head. "Nothing so far. Everyone we talk to just keeps saying the same thing. Connor was an angel. Connor was such a good kid..."

"We found one tenant," Elliot said, "on Avenue B who said he saw a black SUV going around the park a few times around midnight."

"But," Olivia said. "He'd been downing tequila alone for most of the night, so there's no telling what he actually saw."

Cragen stared at a space past the two detectives for a moment. "Wasn't there someone from the Lewendale case who said something about a black SUV?"

Olivia picked up a manila folder and rifled through several pages.

"Yeah," she said. "Marcus Valentino played on Jacob Lewendale's soccer team... he said the last time he saw Jacob, he was talking to someone in a black truck."

Quiet fell over all of them as the realization that they were truly dealing with a serial killer hit home.

"What did the medical examiner have to say about the two of them?" Cragen asked.

"There's no DNA this time," Elliot said, "But Melinda says everything looks nearly identical in both murders."

"Suspects?"

Olivia and Elliot exchanged glances and the level of tension rose several degrees in the room. Fin shook his head at the pair of them and returned to his gaze to his paperwork. He wondered vaguely whether or not his co-workers would be able to get themselves back together. The detectives shared an icy stare for almost a full minute before Elliot spoke.

"There's a guy," he said. "Jeffrey Drover. He found Connor Whickfield and he also knew him."

"What did the parents have to say?" Cragen asked.

"They said he was a stand up citizen," Olivia interrupted. "And I know I didn't see anything otherwise in him."

Elliot glared at her. "I don't like him. When he found the body, he said he'd been running, but he was dressed in street clothes."

"But, he there was nothing else extraordinary about him this morning," Olivia added.

Cragen glanced between them and frowned. "Well, daylight's burning and the longer it takes for us to find a lead, the longer it'll take us to track down this guy. I want you two to start on the friends of the Whickfield boy. Bring up this Drover and then see if there's any other connection to Lewendale case. Fin, you and Munch will talk to the neighbors once Munch gets back. You're also catching tonight."

Fin nodded, but said nothing, having already known he would be the detective on-call that night. Elliot and Olivia stood, their respective coffees just barely beginning to tingle in their bloodstreams and grabbed their coats.

"Well, that was two hours I'll never get back," John Munch said as he strode into the squad room.

"Where've you been?" Cragen asked he walked toward them.

"Wallowing in that heated menagerie of lies, deceit and black robes," he said.

"Hell?" Fin asked a small smirk appearing on his normally stoic face.

"No, the courthouse," Munch joked. "The perp's back in his jail cell and his lawyer's being held on contempt charges when he tried the screaming approach when it came to me. Perhaps they'll have a chance to re-strategize while sharing bunks for a few days."

Elliot shook his head and he and Olivia walked toward the elevators on the floor.

Carter Latham had the same dark blond hair and bright blue eyes seen in Connor Whickfield, but his face was covered in a dusting of freckles that would most likely

disappear by the time he finished high school. He had a despondent expression on his face that looked eerily similar to the one on Connor when he was found.

Carter's parents sat on either side of him, his mother gently rubbing his back while tears welled in her eyes. The entire family sat on one side of their dining room table, and Connor sat with his chin in his hands and his elbows propped up on the table.

"Are you sure?" Carter said, squinting across the table in Olivia's direction. "I mean...How could he be dead?"

Fat teardrops splashed from his mother's eyes onto the table and his mother wrapped her arms around him.

"It's okay, Baby," she said. "It'll be okay."

Olivia felt Elliot shift beside, the second time that day, and she instantly thought of how Connor, Carter and Dickie all looked so very similar.

"Carter," Olivia said with the soft voice she had honed perfectly for victims and their families. "When was the last time you saw Connor?"

Carter shook his head and did not look at Olivia. "Not since Monday."

"What time Monday did you see him?"

"During practice," he shrugged.

"Did you see where he went after practice?"

Carter shrugged again. "I thought Jeff was giving him a ride home, but he just walked off."

"Okay," Olivia said, her voice losing some of its high-pitched air as she gave Elliot a side glance, "from the indoor soccer fields, what direction did Connor start walking?"

Carter stared at the wall behind Olivia. His expression had not changed and though he was not crying, he rarely blinked.

"Do you have any idea what might've been bugging him," she asked. "I mean, you said he'd been out of it lately...what'd you mean by that?"

"I don't know," he said, his voice growing lower and more dejected. "He wouldn't talk to me about it. He said he could talk to Jeff though. I think it musta been about a girl he didn't want me to know about."

"Why wouldn't he want you to know about a girl?"

Carter shrugged. "Happened last year, 'cause it was a girl we both liked, but other than that we talked about everything."

"This Jeff," Elliot said after remaining silent for the majority of the exchange. "He's your coach?"

"Well...he's more like an assistant coach. He's a trainer."

"Yes," Mrs. Latham said. "He's always been so great with all of the boys. Always supportive and always there for them."

Mr. Latham cleared his throat. "We're actually quite thankful the boys have him in their lives. We know there are things they won't talk to us about, but Jeffrey's always been someone they could talk to."

Someone they would be prone to trust, Elliot thought.

Elliot turned his attention back to Carter. "Why did you think Jeff was going to take Connor home on Monday?"

"Connor said he'd talked to Jeff that weekend and since he was *there* that night..."

"Is Jeff around your practices a lot?" Elliot asked.

Carter looked up for the first time and squinted at Elliot as if he did not understand the question. He glanced at Olivia and squinted as if saying, "Is he serious?"

"Uh, yeah...he's our trainer. He's always there."

Elliot paused briefly remembering the escalated conversation he had had with his own thirteen-year-old son. "Did he ever seem inappropriate with you guys?"

"No," Carter said. "Jeff is cool. He's *always* cool."

"Okay," Olivia said sensing that Carter was getting agitated. "It's okay. We just want to find out what happened to Connor."

"Well, why are asking about Jeff?" Carter said his blond brow beginning to furrow. "You make it seem like he did something."

"No," Olivia said though Elliot had opened his mouth to respond. "We just want to know where Connor went on Monday. If there was anyone who talked to him or anyone he would've gone off with."

"I told you, I don't know!"

"It's okay," Olivia said. "I understand..."

"No!" he shouted his voice cracking. "You don't understand! How could he be dead?"

He stood up and backed away from the table. "I don't believe you! Connor just ran away or something. He's fine. He's fine!"

Mrs. Latham rushed and grabbed her now crying son. She just held onto him and wept with him. Mr. Latham simply sat in his seat shaking his head.

Elliot and Olivia stood from the table.

"We'll come back," Olivia said pulling one of her cards out of her coat pocket and handing it to Mr. Latham. "When he's calmed down a bit."

"Yeah," Mr. Latham said and the detectives left the apartment.

The visits to the homes of Connor's other friends faired no better. Each time the detectives were met with either anger and tears or solemn testimony with few words. Nicholas Baumgardner confirmed Drover's "coolness" with the boys, but no one knew anything about where Connor was going or had any information regarding who might have taken him.

Drained, both emotionally and physically, Elliot and Olivia returned to their precinct with little more information than they had when they started. It was nearing eight o'clock and they had been attempting to find something, *anything*, related to the case that could help them find who killed Connor, yet nothing had been forthcoming.

Olivia sat silently at her desk, a solemn expression on her face, while Elliot phoned his wife to explain a situation with his son. Elliot had told her what had happened with Dickie, on the drive from Connor's school, and while Olivia felt that Elliot had blown the situation out of proportion, she knew she had no place to tell her partner how to raise his son. She sat instead, pondering on the night ahead of her in the squad room, instead of what she had hoped she would be doing with Jonathan that night. Olivia had hoped that she could relax in his arms this Friday, but she knew with her 4AM wake-up call came the idea that she was automatically expected to spend the majority of her night pouring over this case. In the past, either she or Cragen would send Elliot home to spend at least *some* time with his family, but no such allowance was coming tonight. Given that they had literally nothing on which to base their investigation, Friday night was to be

devoted solely to coming up with information on Connor Whickfield and Jacob Lewendale.

"...and make sure he stays inside," Elliot said over the phone.

"Well, how long do you expect to keep him holed up here?" a female voice asked on the other side of the phone.

The level of annoyance in Kathy Stabler's voice was apparent and biting, and it was all Elliot could do to keep from escalating the situation based only on her tone.

"I mean," she continued, "you're not the one who has to play prison guard for him for the next couple days."

"It's not my fault he's decided lying to me was the best thing he could do."

"You should've just let him go."

"At eleven o'clock at night?"

"Why didn't you just take him over there?"

"It's the principle of the thing," Elliot said his voice growing a bit louder. "He procrastinated. He shoulda told me he had something to do and I could've rescheduled for him. The point is, he shouldn't've lied to me."

"How long do you expect me to keep him like this?"

"At least until he apologizes for lying to me. Until he realizes that sneaking out at night is not acceptable here with me or...at home with you."

Elliot was met with silence and he wondered for a moment if she had simply hung up on him.

"Well," she said after a full minute of silence, "just as long as you know that he's practically on lock down until *you* say so. I'm not going to undermine you, but if this continues on too long..."

"I know, Kath," he said. "I got it. But tonight, he's not going anywhere."

She sighed into the phone. "All right, Elliot. He'll be okay." She paused again. "Has Kathleen called you recently?"

His eyebrows furrowed together in alarm at her sudden change in topic. "No," he said. "Why? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kathy said quickly. "She's just been...I don't know how to describe it. She's just been so quiet lately and I know something's wrong."

"Have you asked her?"

"Yeah, because she's always so open with information in the past."

"You never know."

Kathy sighed again. "Just...when you talk to her listen for anything...I don't know...strange."

"I'll listen," Elliot said. "*When* she decides to talk to me."

She did not answer immediately. "Well...I've got to go. I'll talk to you later."

He only nodded into the phone, though he knew she could not seem him and did not reply.

"So," he said, once he hung up his phone. "We've talked to nearly two dozen people today and everybody is saying that Connor was an angel and no one knows what happened to him that night..."

"Just like Jacob Lewendale," Olivia said absent-mindedly.

They sat in silence for another moment before Olivia spoke again. "We need to track down every kid on Connor's soccer team and see if anybody knows anything. There's no way that *no* one saw Connor after he left his practice that night."

"Well, we have the names of all the kids," Elliot said. "And...I think we should talk to Drover sooner rather than later."

Olivia threw him a cautionary glance, but he continued. "Look Liv. He came up in every conversation with every kid we talked to today."

"Because you brought him up."

"And, if you remember we were told to."

"But all of them, Elliot? No one has one word against him and none of these kids are even slightly behaving as if Drover's done something to them."

"Carter Latham was upset. More so than the others when we...I brought up Drover."

"Elliot, we had just told him his best friend had been murdered. He reacted as any thirteen-year-old boy would."

"But, his response in regards to Drover was the strongest out of all of them." Olivia simply glared at him. "If he and Connor were best friends, then the odds are high that if Drover was abusing one he might have abusing them both. I think we need to bring him in because he's the only lead we've got so far on this case."

Olivia allowed her eyes to linger on his with a tired, yet angry expression set upon her face. "Let's talk to everyone on Connor's team first, before we drag this guy in for no good reason."

"Fine," Elliot said standing. "But if anyone, *anyone*, says anything crazy about Drover..."

"I'll drive to his place myself to bring him," Olivia finished.

He gave her a slight smirk. "All right. I'll be back. Nature calls."

She nodded and began to write notes as to how the case was progressing. A constant stream of reports detailing the case was necessary for not only her superiors, but also in the event that they found the criminal responsible, her documentation would be essential to the court case that would follow.

Her telephone gave its shrill cry from its place on her desk and Olivia picked it up quickly, expecting it to be Jonathan or Maya inquiring on why their plans had been destroyed for yet another evening.

"Benson," she answered knowing she had to be professional at all times.

"Uh...hi, Olivia?" a young voice said. "This is Kathleen. Is my dad around?"

Olivia looked up toward Elliot's desk though she knew he had just left. Elliot's second oldest daughter was calling *her*, but his phone never once rang. Her brow furrowed in slight confusion over why Kathleen had not simply called her father's desk or cell phone from the start.

"Well...no," she said. "He's not around me at this second, but I can get him. Hold on."

"Wait!" Kathleen said. There was an urgency in her voice that Olivia did not like. "I...uh...actually wanted to talk to you...if that's okay?"

Olivia was silent a moment before answering. "Um, yeah. That's fine. What's up? Is there something wrong?"

"Well...no. I just..."

As Kathleen's voice trailed off, Olivia felt apprehension growing within her. While she had talked to Kathleen outside of Elliot's presence in the past, and more recently had done so as she pleaded with Olivia to talk Elliot into returning home, Olivia still did not like the tone of her voice. The conversation was bound to turn somewhat ominous.

"Kathleen?" she said. "Are you okay? Do you need help?"

"No, no, no," Kathleen said quickly. "I just...uh...wanted to talk to someone about...something."

"Okay...is it something important?"

"Well, no...not really, I guess."

Olivia repressed a sigh, not wanting Kathleen hear her growing annoyance, but it was difficult. Elliot's daughter had called her specifically, but she was being less than cooperative when it came to the facts.

"Are you sure it's not important?"

"Well...no. It's not. Well...I-I guess I just don't want to talk about it over the phone."

"Do you need me to meet you somewhere?"

"Um...yeah. Actually, could we meet in the city? There's this café near NYU...Schreider's. Do you know where it is?"

"I do," Olivia said. "What time 'cause I'm still at the station house?"

"Uh, yeah, I know...How 'bout tomorrow? I'm taking Dickie to his indoor soccer practice early, so maybe like...around eight in the morning?"

"Okay...that sounds fine."

"Great." The relief that resounded through Kathleen's voice was nearly overwhelming and Olivia felt slightly unnerved.

"Are you sure you don't want me to get your dad because he's just around the corner?"

"No," she said, again too quickly for Olivia's taste. "He doesn't need to know. In fact, I was kind of hoping you wouldn't have to tell him at all?"

Olivia felt her breath catch involuntarily. She had never cared for secrets, especially between her and her partner, and whatever Kathleen needed to talk to her about was going to be something secretive. Something Kathleen wanted neither of her parents to know. Olivia felt a chill run down her spine as she considered actively helping one of Elliot's children keep a secret from him.

Another secret, she thought attempting to push away an old memory at the same time.

"Well," she began slowly. "If it's important, I'm sure he'd want to know."

"He will," Kathleen said. "Just...not right now. I want to talk to someone else first."

"Okay," Olivia said nodding into her phone. "So, tomorrow morning, eight AM at Schreider's."

"Yes," Kathleen confirmed. "Thanks so much, Olivia."

"No problem."

She hung up her telephone, but allowed her hand to rest on the receiver, unsure of the next step to take. She tried running down a list of all the things Kathleen could feel comfortable talking about with Olivia and not Elliot: school, hair, makeup, boys, sex,

alcohol, drugs, pregnancy, college... The list seemed to go on forever, and Olivia did not feel comfortable talking to Kathleen about any of them outside of Elliot and Kathy's permission.

"You ready?" Elliot said as he strode toward their desks.

She perked up immediately and stood, grabbing her coat. "Yep."

"Something wrong?" he asked when he saw the quick change in her demeanor.

"No," she said. "Everything's fine."

Elliot nodded at her and did not pursue the issue further. As they walked out of the squad room together, notes on the members of Connor Whickfield's soccer team in hand, Olivia felt a weight upon her shoulders that she simply could not shrug off of her.

Northbound on Amsterdam at Broadway

Upper West Side, New York

9:50PM

Elliot pushed his foot on the gas pedal of the navy Ford, breezing through another green light as he drove up Amsterdam Avenue with Olivia sitting beside him silently. She was leafing through pages of notes they had both made after visiting the homes of eight of Connor Whickfield's indoor soccer teammates. With eight homes down, thirteen when Connor's closest friends were included, and still no significant information on the victim's whereabouts, the case was looking more dire than it had earlier.

The detectives had five more homes to visit before they would return to their precinct to regroup. Olivia had earlier suggested that she and Elliot run the two crime scene details through their system to see if a similar MO appeared and they decided they would spend the rest of Friday doing such once they had interviewed everyone.

As much as he hated to admit it, Elliot knew that Olivia had been more or less correct in regards to Drover. Each of Connor's teammates had nothing but wonderful things to say about him. They each said in various ways that Drover was a "stand-up" guy, always enjoyable and never seemed even remotely inappropriate with any of them. While he did not have personal training sessions with all of them, the ones whom he did train on the side fervently confirmed that Drover was a normal person.

One boy, David Campbell, seemed less enthusiastic in regards to Drover and more complacent about the idea that one of his peers had been found murdered, but Elliot chalked the boy's demeanor up to shock. The boy had said that Drover sometimes behaved as if he wanted to be his teammates' role model and that the idea bothered him, however, from simply listening to him talk about the sport in general, it was apparent that David was being forced to play and take separate lessons by his parents and had long since lost any passion for soccer.

All the praise poured into Drover's direction notwithstanding, Elliot could not help but feel that there something off about Drover. Maybe it was simply the way he looked that morning. He did not seem as shocked about finding a child's murdered body as Elliot would have expected him to be. Maybe it was simply the way he had looked at his partner when she questioned him.

He gave Olivia a sideways glance and shook the idea from his head. Maybe it simply had to do with the fact that his son had had team trainers on his soccer teams and they always looked just like Drover. There was also the issue that someone was murdering boys just Dickie's age, likeness and demeanor. The similarities between Dickie and both Connor Whickfield and Jacob Lewendale were so striking that it took a fair bit of strength to keep from revealing to Kathy that night his real reason for keeping his son in the house was more a precaution than a punishment. A flash of Connor Whickfield's image on the mantel of his parents' decorative fireplace sprang to Elliot's mind, and when the face dissolved into Dickie's, a cold shiver ran through him.

As he turned right onto West 82nd Street, Elliot's thoughts turned to his prior conversation with his estranged wife. He and Kathy always kept the majority of their conversations quick and to the point, rarely leaving them room to discuss anything more than a situation regarding the children. As the night stood, Elliot wondered how much Dickie hated him at that moment and he felt a slight burn in his stomach when he thought about what could be wrong with Kathleen.

There seemed to always be an issue with Kathleen lately and Elliot knew it all stemmed back to his and Kathy's marital problems. He had seen the same issues arise in other children throughout his career with the SVU, and while he never wanted to imagine the same problems falling onto his own children, Elliot knew he probably should have seen it coming. Of the four, Kathleen was taking the impending divorce the hardest and, of the four, she was also the most hostile to both he and Kathy.

Olivia sighed next to him and she flipped her notepad to a new sheet in preparation for delivering gruesome news to yet another family. Elliot's mind sprang forth the memory of the look on Olivia's face when he had returned from the restroom just before they left the precinct. She appeared worried, like something was not quite right with her and that same preoccupation rested on her face hours later. After nearly a decade of spending the greater part of his waking hours with her, Elliot could read Olivia exceedingly well and a part of him wanted to ask what was bugging her, but he did not. Eight years together had also taught Elliot not to probe her until he was absolutely certain something was wrong.

He gave her another sideways glance and looked away as her eyes came up to meet his. Perhaps she had just been checking up on a victim from one of their last cases.

She's always been so good at that, he thought to himself.

Olivia gave a slight shiver in her seat and Elliot instinctively turned up the heat in the car. She was not actually cold, but simply could not stifle the bodily reflex that occurred when her mind was focused on many things at one time.

She felt a myriad of emotions weighing on her with every breath and the idea of having to break somber news to yet another young life was not helping. There would also be the matter of the press to attend to if not that night, then certainly the next and the reporters were always relentless with their questioning. She was also simply annoyed that their entire day had been devoted to this one case and yet they were no closer to tracking down a suspect than they were the moment they had found the victim. The fact that she and Elliot had spent a good part of the day arguing over Drover had not benefited her mood and while she and Elliot had shared a quick, but more upbeat dinner than they had had in the past, she still did not like where they were as partners. Regardless of her efforts

they were still not back in sync and she attributed some of her own unwillingness in attempting to close the gap to her looming conversation with Kathleen.

Olivia stared out the window at the family homes and apartments that lined the street and wondered if she should just tell Elliot that his daughter had requested to speak with her. If what Kathleen needed to talk about was serious, she would have to tell Elliot, and she knew he would be angry to learn that she had not told him the moment she knew something was wrong. As Elliot parked the car alongside a row of neatly parked vehicles, Olivia felt more drained than she had all day. Running now on only the chocolate covered espresso beans she kept in her desk drawer and sheer perseverance, Olivia got out of the car and followed Elliot up the stone steps to the home of the Dyseki family to speak with twelve-year-old Everett.

Several minutes later, Mrs. Dyseki was telling the detectives that she had already heard about what had happened to Connor and that she wanted to do anything possible to help them find the person responsible. Everett, taller, but the thinner than the other boys on his team, informed them that had Connor left the indoor soccer complex on West 108th once their practice had ended and headed toward Central Park on his own.

“Why’d you let him go off on his own up there?” Mrs. Dyseki said with a very condescending tone to her son. “We’ve all told you a thousand times not to go walking off alone when you’re around the fields. You never know who’s watching.”

Everett sighed and stared at the beige rug on the living room floor.

“Are you sure he went toward the park?” Elliot asked. “Because Connor’s house is West of Columbus. If he was going toward the park, he’d have been going in the opposite direction of his house.”

Everett shrugged. “He went towards the park. I know because I remember thinking he was maybe going to just catch a cab or something and that it seemed stupid because he could’ve just gotta ride with me or Carter or any of the other guys or even Jeff.”

His eyes darted toward his mother at the mention of Drover before quickly settling back on the floor. Both Elliot and Olivia noticed this and Elliot gave Olivia a look to perform a well-rehearsed diatribe with the mother.

“Mrs. Dyseki,” Olivia said. “Could I trouble you for a glass of water?” She revealed a single pill from her coat pocket. “I just needed to take my, uh, asthma medication.”

Elliot suppressed a smirk knowing full well that Olivia had just quickly removed a sugar pill from its package that lied inside her deep pockets and did so to get Mrs. Dyseki out of the room for a moment. They had used the same routine dozens of times to allay parent’s suspicions. They were not specifically lying to speak to minors alone, but without the more underhanded techniques, younger witnesses tended to keep quiet about pivotal pieces of evidence. In cases when the parents seemed overbearing, as with Everett’s mother, Elliot thought it necessary to talk to the boy without her for a moment.

“Everett,” Elliot said once Olivia and Mrs. Dyseki had left the room. “Now, you’re sure Connor went towards the park on Monday? It’s very important.”

“Yeah,” Everett said. “He went towards the park. I remember him going out the door and towards the park.”

“Okay.” Elliot nodded his head. “What about this guy Jeff? You said Connor could’ve gotten a ride from him. Why him? What’s special about him?”

Everett glanced toward the doorway through which his mother had disappeared and looked down at the floor sighing.

"It's okay, Everett," Elliot said in almost a whisper. "You can tell me. It'll be just between us."

"It's not anything," he said. "Jeff...he just..."

Elliot stared at him expectantly. If he could just say the right words, they would have *something* on Drover and finally a break in their case.

"Jeff..." Everett continued. "He used to date my mom, that's all."

"I see," Elliot said ensuring that no disappointment aired in his voice.

"I thought they were going to get married or something a while back, but my mom broke it off. She's still really weird about it, but he's actually pretty cool. He doesn't, like, call me out during practice and training and stuff."

"He's a cool guy," Elliot repeated, having heard the same statement made a dozen times that day.

"Yeah," Everett said. "You know, he'd help me with my homework and took me to pro soccer games and stuff. Just...you know stuff like that."

"Okay," Elliot said nodding.

They shared a pregnant pause before Everett broke the silence. "Is it true, what I heard? That Jeff actually found Connor this morning?"

"Who told you that?"

Everett simply shrugged as Olivia and Mrs. Dyseki returned from the kitchen. Olivia gave a nearly undetectable nod of her head toward the doorway and Elliot returned it with a nod that was just as invisible.

"Thanks a lot, Everett," he said. "You've been really helpful tonight." He pulled his card out of his pocket and handed it to Everett. "If you think of anything else, you can call me at anytime, okay?"

Everett nodded and Mrs. Dyseki opened the door for them.

"Thank you," she said as they were leaving. "Please, let us know when you find out anything."

"We will," Olivia said, knowing that Mrs. Dyseki and Everett would most likely learn the details from the same sources that informed them that she and Elliot were coming, long before they would hear an official word from them.

"What'd he have to say about Drover?" she then asked Elliot once they were back in their car.

"Same old story," he replied. "Drover's a great guy who even helped with his homework."

Olivia nodded, but Elliot continued. "But, he did say Drover dated his mother."

She scoffed. "Well, maybe Drover likes his women in their latter years. I'm told some women seem to be more fun-loving when they start to approach their golden years. I think it's something with getting that last itch scratched before they're too old to get things started."

Elliot smiled for the first time that day and simply shook his head as they drove toward the next house.

Three hours later, Elliot put the dark Ford into "park" on 10th Avenue and stared at Olivia as he turned off the car. They had spent the past hours going through dozens MOs of past sexual offenders in their system, after receiving no further significant

information from the last three boys on Connor's soccer team. They were both coming close to twenty-one hours on their feet investigating the case and a little after twelve, Cragen had sent them both home, claiming they had done all they could for Connor Wickfield that day.

Elliot did not always drive Olivia home after work, but as he still had to cross the East River to get back to his apartment, he ended up dropping her off at her apartment more often than not. Sometimes she protested, insisting that it was not worth the trouble and many times she simply left hours after him to take a cab home instead. Tonight, however, things still seemed unsettled between them and Elliot did not have to coax Olivia into the car for a ride home.

"I want to apologize about Drover," Elliot said with a sigh. "You...you were right. I really didn't like him the second we saw him."

"El," she said. "It's okay. I mean at least we can more or less cross him off the list."

"But, I do still want to talk to him just to know what he and Connor talked about this past weekend," he added quickly.

Olivia nodded. "Understandable."

"It's just," he continued, "I can't help seeing Dickie in all those faces. I know I've even seen a couple of the kids we talked to tonight on teams he's played soccer against before. And Drover...it's like he's every soccer or baseball coach I've ever met. I think it just hits a little closer to home than usual because I know that Dickie would probably like a guy like Drover."

"I know, Elliot," she said rubbing his arm.

"And now...I can't even go home and hug them and know that it'll be okay."

She nodded again. "How are Kathy and everyone else doing?"

Elliot shook his head. "Fine. Everybody's fine." He wanted to open up further to Olivia, but something, whether it was pride or shame, kept him closed. "What about Richie Rich? How's he doing?"

Olivia smiled and nudged him. "Jonathan is doing fine. Not that I've seen much of him lately, but I assume he's doing fine."

"I liked his little greeting this morning. 'West of Olivia's bed.'"

"You like that, eh?" she said sardonically.

"Yeah, it was cute. Just what I'd expect of him."

She smiled again and wondered if this would be a good moment to tell him that Kathleen had called her. Silence fell over them as she thought and it was an awkward silence, the likes of which they had had more often now than they had in the past.

"Well," he said, breaking her thoughts with a smile. "It's late. Get the hell out."

Olivia gave him a light pinch in the arm and left the car. As she opened the outer door to her building, she heard someone come up behind her.

Her immediate tension was relieved when she saw Adam holding the door behind her.

"It's one AM on a Friday," she said with eyebrows raised as they entered the elevator. "What are you doing home this early?"

"What are *you* doing home so late?" he replied with mock agitation.

"I was out cleaning up this city. What's your excuse for being home so early?"

"Well...", he began. "I was 'sposed to meet my girl at this bar on 104th, but she never showed, and when I called her and to tell her I was going home, she said she was at this place on 123rd with a bunch of her girls."

"She stood you up?"

"She says she'll think about coming back down here to see me, but she's probably too drunk to get in a cab by now."

Olivia shook her head. "She'll make it up to you."

"Yeah," he said. "Hey! D'you have still have that book you said was supposed to be good?"

"What? Brown?"

"Yeah, let me borrow it."

"You didn't watch the movie?"

Adam scoffed. "I can't even coordinate a meet-up at the bar with my girl, let alone go the movies. Do you still have it?"

"Yeah," she said with a smile. "You can just have it actually. I didn't really like it."

"Didn't live up to the hype?"

"Not even close."

They chatted in her apartment for a bit while Olivia retrieved the book and she felt relief in having a lighthearted conversation with a man that had nothing to do with work or her own relationship. She cherished each laugh they shared and any meaningful conversation they had that did not remind her of the gloom that stood over her profession.

When Beyonce's "Irreplaceable" rang from Adam's cell phone, he stared at the number on the phone with a frown.

"Hang on a second," he said to Olivia. "Yeah...what...calm down...well I didn't know...you shoulda called me the sec-...okay, okay...just calm down...Girl, calm down. I'm at my neighbor's...yeah, I'm in the building...I'll be right-...my neighbor Liv... yeah, so...Look, I'll be there in a second!"

He hung up his phone and rolled his eyes. "That's Taysia. Apparently, she's been downstairs buzzing my apartment for the last ten minutes and now she's losing her mind down there."

"Wow," Olivia said. "You'd think she would've called you earlier."

"That's what I was saying, but I'll deal with it later. See you and thanks for the book."

Olivia had changed into her slippers and was about to call Jonathan when she heard knock at her door.

"Who is it?" she asked cautiously, the door chain still in place.

"It's Mark."

She rolled her eyes and looked at her watch.

"Mark," she said as she opened the door. "It's almost two in the morning."

"Yeah, sorry," he said. "It's just that...uh...I saw that black guy from the tenth floor down here again, and I just wanted to make sure that he wasn't bothering you or anything."

Olivia sighed and gave an exasperated roll of her eyes that she ensured Mark saw.

"I know you say you don't need me to look out for you, but everybody needs somebody to keep a look out on things. I don't want him bothering you and I could even have the super talk to him too."

"Mark, I don't need-"

"And, I could do something about him too. You know...I *know* people."

"Look, Mark. There's nothing wrong with Adam. I like him. He's a friend and I know you're concerned, but I can take care of myself. And most importantly, I'm a cop and I don't want to hear anything about any *people*."

"Okay, okay," he said defensively. "I'm just..."

"You're just looking out for me and I appreciate it, but just...lay-off."

"Okay. Well, have a good night."

"Oh, and Mark."

He turned around expectantly. "Yeah!"

"That black guy's name is *Adam*, and I think it would do you a lot of good to get to know him."

Olivia then closed her door and locked it immediately. She shook her head thinking about the interruption. Sometimes Mark's sheer nerve and overwhelming ignorance managed to surprise her in new ways every time she came into contact with him.

Chapter Three

Saturday January 13, 2007

Woodside, New York

7:38 AM

Elliot was running from his squad car, tears burning in his eyes.

How could this have happened?

He shoved uniformed officers out of his way; male or female, he did not care. His child, his only son! *How could this have happened?*

Red and blue flashing lights blinded his already blurred vision momentarily as he came onto a clearing in Tompkins Square Park. A white sheet covered the form of something small lying on the ground and Elliot ran to it feeling his heart burn from the strain of its own rapid beat.

Olivia stood next to the form on the ground. "Elliot...wait," she said with eyes wet.

Elliot would not listen to her and pushed against her until she too moved out of his way. He pulled back the sheet and let out a cry of terror and absolute anguish. His son, his only son, lied on the ground, violated and strangled. His blue eyes were glazed and empty and his sun-touched skin appeared grey in the flashing light.

Elliot pulled Dickie's lifeless body to him and shivered against his son's cold skin. He never had a chance to say he was sorry for the past night. He never had a moment to talk to his son again, to tell him everything was okay, to tell him that he loved him. Tears flowed from his eyes like rivers and Olivia's outward sob was completely overshadowed by his scream upward to the heavens as if asking *Why* with his tears.

Elliot sat upright in his darkened bedroom completely covered in sweat. His breath was coming in jagged huffs and his hands were shaking. He looked around quickly and sighed realizing he had just awakened from a terrible dream.

It was the not first time he had had the nightmare that he found one of his own children murdered in the city, and like all the others, this one was specifically related to his current most troubling case.

Elliot turned to face the ceiling while he lied in his bed. He glanced at his alarm clock and winced. He had wanted to sleep until at least nine o'clock, but his tumultuous thoughts had forced him wide awake. He sighed and closed his eyes becoming quickly chilled from the drying sweat on his body.

He had talked to Dickie prior to speaking with Kathy the previous night and he had wanted to take him to his indoor soccer practice this morning, but Dickie flat out refused. His punishment still fresh in his mind, Dickie had all but said he wanted nothing to do with his father for the time being. Elliot had hoped to patch up things between him and his son on the drive, but as teenagers went, Dickie was not cooperating.

Thoughts of his dream floated back to his mind and bits of psychology classes taken long ago intertwined with the vivid memory. Obviously, he had been worried about Dickie's safety since he and Olivia had been more or less unsuccessful with finding out any further information on their current killer, but he was still morbidly bemused by how his mind worked. Olivia had been among the many faceless officers, but he did wonder: *Where was Kathy?* He wondered why his subconscious had not thought to place her on the scene as well, but the sounds of a car with a faulty muffler passing by his apartment drove the thought from his head.

He sighed again and rose from his bed. Neither a good night's sleep or weekend to sleep past eight were going to be possible as long as the person who had murdered Jacob Lewendale and Connor Whickfield still lurked Manhattan's streets. He would go to the gym early and hope to run and weight lift the memories of his past dream out of his mind...for the time being.

Schreider's Café
21 West 8th Avenue
7:54 AM

Olivia sat a booth in the small restaurant, tucked away from the majority of the milling crowd, and took a sip of her two-sugared black coffee. She got to the café early to make sure she got a table out of the way just in case Kathleen's intended conversation turned to something she would just as soon not have uttered to a restaurant full of people.

The café was filled mostly with college students taking in their last moments of freedom before having to return to classes the next Tuesday. She was surprised to see the place as crowded as it was on a Saturday morning and she wondered just how and why Kathleen picked the restaurant in particular.

While it was located a ways from Kathleen's own home, it was also well-removed from the 1-6, which reduced the likelihood that she and Olivia would be seen by anyone who knew her. She had put a lot of thought into this meeting and Olivia felt her eyebrows furrow slightly as she grew concerned. The restaurant was as far as possible from anyone Elliot's daughter could know, but in perfect walking distance to Olivia's apartment. Kathleen had planned the meeting almost *too* carefully. If Olivia had been as paranoid as Munch, she would have assumed Elliot's daughter had planned a hit on her for that very moment.

From her booth, Olivia could see the front door of the restaurant and when the doors opened again, she sat up expectantly. Two kids in their twenties walked inside looking like a cup of coffee was the only thing that was going to keep them from falling over while on their feet.

Sighing, she opened the newspaper she bought from a newsstand on her walk to the restaurant. On the second page stood a large article claiming that the NYPD was still stumped as to who had murdered Jacob Lewendale and that the same killer seemed to have struck again with Connor Wickfield. She rolled her eyes wondering who at the 1-6 had made some off-handed comment to a reporter. They would be beating down hers and Elliot's doors if not by the end of the day, then definitely by Sunday.

Both Jacob and Connor had come from more respectable families and their faces were sure to be spread across the Times and the tabloids alike. Faces like theirs sold newspapers and it irritated her that the public would soon become outraged that the police had yet to find the killer of two blue-eyed boys, but when children were murdered north of 120th Street, interest in justice on their behalf would always seem to diminish.

She set down the paper when the door to the restaurant opened again and she straightened in her seat as Elliot's daughter walked inside with a slightly worried expression on her face.

Olivia flagged her down and Kathleen broke into a large smile as she hurried to the booth.

"Thanks *so* much for coming, Olivia," she said removing her coat and sitting across from her.

"No problem," Olivia said.

She hoped that Kathleen would simply jump into her intended conversation, but instead she ordered eggs, toast, cantaloupe and orange juice from the stout waiter who appeared the instant Kathleen took her seat.

They made small talk while they waited: Kathleen was doing better in school, staying out of trouble and was looking forward to going to college somewhere warm; Olivia was still seeing the "wealthy guy," Jonathan; Lizzie was stealing Kathleen's makeup and Dickie was constantly hogging the remote control at their house; work was tough as usual.

"So, Kathleen," Olivia said after a half hour of fervently waiting for the other shoe to drop, "what did you want to talk to me about?"

Kathleen set down her fork full of eggs midway on its trip to her mouth and frowned.

"Well...I wanted to just thank you about not saying anything to my parents about last year..."

Olivia pursed her lips as she remembered the incident.

“Why are we here!” Olivia had shouted a year earlier. “It’s so loud, I can’t even think straight!”

“It’s supposed to be loud, Livia!” Maya had shouted in return.

They were seated at a table in a dark, noisy bar in Midtown and as Olivia took a swig of her Apple Martini, she wished that she declined Maya’s invitation to come out to the newest “it” bar in the city. Maya had wanted her to come so they could, in Maya’s words, “look beautiful and be hit on by younger guys,” but Olivia quickly tired of shouting to have simple conversation and found herself wondering why she indulged Maya as much as she did.

“You’ll have to break up with him eventually,” she said as same song played for the third time that night.

“But, he’s fun and new,” Maya said, moving her shoulders to the music. “And besides, in six months, I probably won’t even know Mason anymore.”

“That’s what you said about that grad student. What was his name...Eric, or something? It was a year before you got rid of him.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “That was an isolated incident. I’m telling you. I give him three months. Six tops!”

Olivia shook her head and laughed. She allowed her eyes to scan the room as she drained the new Long Island Ice Tea a blue-eyed twenty-three year old had bought for her to half full.

Her line of sight hit a flash of hair just beyond Maya’s shoulder, but on the other side of the room. At first, she thought the three and a half drinks splashing in her stomach were taking a far faster toll on her than normal, but as she continued to stare past Maya, Olivia knew she was not seeing things.

“What?” Maya said turning in her chair. “D’you see somebody we know?”

Unable to answer because her mouth now sat gaping, Olivia continued staring at a blonde form dancing with a dark haired man with a large daiquiri in her hand. The blonde girl was twirled by her beau and her eyes crossed the room as she laughed, her drink overtaking its sides as she twirled. Her gaze met Olivia’s and she stopped dead as her eyes grew wide.

Olivia tilted her head forward, her mouth still gaping and still hoping that she was imaging what she was seeing. Elliot’s seventeen-year-old daughter was staring at her from the other side of the room.

“Livia?” Maya said. “What’s wrong?”

She stood, keeping her eyes on Kathleen across the room who had just mouthed “Oh shit” with her own eyes fixed on Olivia.

“Can I get you another?” a twenty-something said sliding into Olivia’s view.

She scorned at him and quickly tried to get around him to find Kathleen again in the crowds.

“Aw, c’mon,” the boy said. “I love big, brown eyes.”

Olivia brushed past him as he shouted something about her skirt and squeezed through the horde of people until she saw a flicker of long blonde hair nearly sprinting toward the back exit.

Nearly slipping in her heels, she took off across the dance floor and followed Kathleen out the heavy metal door.

“Kathleen!” she shouted into the cold January air. “Don’t make me chase you all the way across this goddamn city!”

Kathleen, several meters away, came to a stop at the mouth of the alley between the bar and club next door to it, and Olivia quickly caught up with her.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod,” Kathleen said continuously, shifting on her feet as Olivia approached her.

“I can’t even believe this!” Olivia yelled staring at Kathleen who, wearing a dress that left very little to the imagination, appeared very pale in cold night air.

“Oh my God. Oh my God, Olivia. Oh my God, Olivia, please don’t tell my dad.”

“That’s the only thing you’re worried about!” Olivia screamed. “You were dancing with a man twice your age and drinking something that would’ve made *me* too drunk to figure out where I was!”

“I know, I know! And I’m sorry, but please, *please* don’t tell my dad.”

Olivia put a hand to her forehead as her breath came in quick hyperventilated huffs. She had never been so angry in her life and Kathleen was not even her child.

“Olivia,” Kathleen continued, her breath making wisps of heat in the cold. “This is the first time I’ve ever done anything like this and I swear to God I’ll never do it again, but you can’t tell my dad. He’ll kill me. I know he will.”

“Kathleen,” she began with punctuated words. “I don’t think you understand the severity of what I just saw.”

“I do! Olivia, I-”

“No! You don’t! You’re at a bar rubbing up against a grown man you just met and you’re only worried about getting in trouble with your father. This is...crazy!”

“I came with a bunch of friends, but they all left and I still wanted to have a good time, but I was ready to leave anyway when that guy came and started dancing with me and I was going to just get a cab and go home. I swear to God, I was just about to leave...”

Olivia ran an icy hand over her face and stared at her partner’s child who was looking at her with wet eyes. Sympathy swam over her as she remembered the number of times Elliot looked aggravated or tired over a new situation with Kathleen.

“After all your father did for you after you got caught drink driving...You’re in here, under aged and drinking like a goddamn sailor.”

The innocence left Kathleen’s face as a mild indignation appeared in her eyes and she folded her arms across her chest.

“Hey!” she said defiantly. “I saw the drink you had in front of *you*! It was half gone and it was twice the size of mine!”

All sensations of chill vanished from her skin as Olivia suddenly grew hot with bridled rage. Her bottom lip fell for a moment as she glared at Kathleen.

“*I’m* not seventeen fucking years old, Kathleen! *I’m* an adult and I can do whatever the hell I want! *You’re* too young to even be in a club, let alone draining a daiquiri with a grown man!”

“I know, I know,” Kathleen said, taking a step backward. “I...I...”

“How the hell did you even get in there!”

As if on command, Kathleen produced an ID from inside her dress near her shoulder and quickly handed it to Olivia.

Olivia snatched it from her and held it up in the dim light of the alley.

“Who the hell is ‘Laura Stanton?’”

“I...I don’t know. My friend Melissa had them made up. She just asked me for a picture and some money and she got them done. I swear this is the first time I’ve ever used it.”

Olivia stared at the fake license again and glanced at Kathleen vaguely remembering the first fake ID Maya had given to her when they were Kathleen’s age. A part of her thought she was being slightly hypocritical speaking to Kathleen about her actions, when Olivia could remember performing a similar action years earlier. One of Maya’s sisters had nearly caught her, but Olivia had made it into a cab before Maya’s sister caught up with her. Another part of her, however, knew she could not let Kathleen away without some kind of punitive measure.

“All right,” she said. “I’m taking this.”

“Yes, absolutely,” Kathleen said nodding her head furiously. “I totally understand.”

Olivia scoffed. “Yeah, I bet you do.”

“Just...for the love of God, Olivia, please. You can’t...You can *not* tell my dad. He’ll go crazy and not in a good way. Please. You know how he can be. If he finds out, I’m grounded ‘til I’m thirty.”

“And you should be!” Olivia said shaking her head, growing angrier again. “And, if I remember correctly, your father was just telling me a few days ago that you were grounded this weekend for sneaking out of the house *last week!*”

“I know, which is why you can’t tell him. Please. Olivia, *please!* I swear to God. I didn’t even want to come out tonight, but my friends...they just kept telling me that this place was opening tonight and that we *had* to go. I didn’t even want to come because I knew I was grounded.”

“If you knew it was wrong, then why am I freezing my ass off listening to you give this sorry excuse?”

Kathleen pursed her lips and shook slightly, either from the cold or extreme stress; Olivia did not know which.

“I’m so sorry,” Kathleen continued. “And I swear on my life, I’ll never do anything like this again, but...just take the ID. It cost me two hundred dollars and that was all the money I’d saved for months, but please...Please! Please don’t tell my dad. I’m *begging* you. He can’t find out about this.”

Olivia put her head to her forehead wishing she had accepted the drink from the boy in the bar.

“Livvia?” she heard Maya’s voice call a minute later.

“I’m here, Maya,” she said never taking her eyes off Kathleen.

“What the hell?” Maya said. “That guy bought us both drinks even though you took off. What are you doing out here?”

Kathleen’s eyes grew wider at the thought of another party privy to her lapse in judgment. Olivia simply shook her head and sighed as Maya approached them.

“Who’s this?” Maya asked brightly.

"Kathleen, this is Maya," Olivia said in a low voice. "Maya, this is Kathleen... Elliot's daughter."

"Oh!" Maya said starting to smile, but then the situation quickly dawned on her and her smile quickly faded. "Oh...Okay... Well, I'll be up by the door for a bit."

Olivia glared at Kathleen who was staring back, eyes turning pink and very pale.

"Please?" Kathleen repeated. "I'll give you anything-"

"You don't have anything I want."

"I'll *do* anything. Anything you want, but please don't tell my dad."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "Well, the first thing you can do is apologize for ruining my night..."

"I'm so sorry," Kathleen said quickly. "I'm so, so sorry. And, I swear I'll never do anything like this again. I swear to God."

"All right. That's enough swearing for one night," Olivia said ushering her toward the sidewalk. "I'm putting you in cab and you're going *straight* home. And, I expect to hear that you've been doing things to help out your mom over these next couple of weeks too. I should be able to say to your dad, 'Hey. How's Kathleen doing?' and I better hear something like, 'Well, she's been doing the dishes and the laundry and doing everything she can to help her mom around the house.'"

"You will," Kathleen said nodding her head again. "I sw-...I promise."

Olivia managed to hail a cab quickly and pulled some bills out of her purse. "This should get you back home. You have my cell and I want you to call me from your house phone the second you get back there."

"I will. I will. The second I get through the door."

"And I assume you won't be going anywhere for the next three weekends. Right?"

"I won't be going anywhere," Kathleen said still nodding her head as she got into the cab. "I'm going to Queens, please."

"I'm not doing boroughs," the cab driver said turning toward her.

Olivia rolled her eyes and slid twenty dollars through the slot in the plastic partition. "You are for now...And, Kathleen. As long as you keep up your end of our little bargain, I won't tell your father, but if I hear about one slip up..."

Kathleen pursed her lips and her eyes looked tearful once more. "I promise, Olivia. Just please...please..."

"I won't," Olivia said. "Now, go home."

"Thank God," Maya said the moment Kathleen's cab had driven down the street. "It's about time. It's two degrees out here! C'mon, I know the bouncer. I'll get us back in and we won't even have to pay the cover."

"No," Olivia said shaking her head again. "I'm...I'm done for the night. That was just a little too much reality for my Saturday."

Another passenger-less cab appeared as if on cue and Olivia quickly backed toward it.

"I'll call you," she said to Maya. "But, um, find my coat in there if you can though. I just got that from Barney's..."

"I thought we agreed we wouldn't speak of it again?" Olivia said, snapping out of her reverie.

"Right, right," Kathleen said bouncing in her seat slightly. "Well, I don't know if my dad said anything to you or not, but I've been dating this guy, Mike, for a while now..."

Olivia tilted her head in Kathleen's direction. "Okay...?"

"And..." Kathleen refused to meet Olivia's eyes any longer. "We've been... talking for a long time about our...uh...relationship and stuff."

Olivia nodded her head and bit her lip. A knot appeared in her stomach and she suddenly had the light taste of bile at the back of her throat. She knew exactly where this conversation was heading and she immediately wished she had spoken to Elliot earlier. Perhaps then, Kathleen would have been forced to find another confidant.

"Well," Kathleen said so soft Olivia could just barely hear her. "I was just wondering if maybe...maybe you could give me some advice on birth control or something."

Olivia swallowed the coffee she had let sit in her mouth and took a deep breath. "Birth control?"

Kathleen nodded at her with eyes wide and expectant.

"You know, Kathleen," Olivia began, "this is really something you should talk about with your parents."

She and Kathleen stared at one another for a moment, simultaneously thinking that a conversation about birth control with Elliot would be nothing short of a disaster.

"I mean, your mother, at least," she added quickly.

"I know," Kathleen said, pushing her eggs around her plate. "I tried, but Mom just keeps trying to talk me out of it. She won't even listen to me. It's not like I'm gonna go race off to sleep with him. I just want to know stuff and she keeps changing the conversation to my grades instead."

"Well, it's 'cause she wants what's best for you."

"Yeah, but when I say that we've talked about it, Mike and me, she says we're too young and that we just shouldn't. She doesn't even want to talk about the 'What if.'"

Olivia stared at the eighteen-year-old girl sitting across from her. She remembered the feeling of wanting so badly to go to her own mother about this same scenario and knowing it was not even a possibility. Her mother only allowed her to spend much of her childhood and teen years with Maya and her family because she wanted Olivia to learn another language and culture. Outside of the Shah family, Olivia's mother did not want her associating with anyone, especially boys.

"And, I can't talk to Maureen about it," Kathleen continued. "'Cause she'll just go into big-sister-protection-mode, and I know she'll go straight to Mom and Dad." She paused. "Olivia, I wouldn't've bothered you, but I need to talk to someone about this and I...I just didn't want to go to any of my friends because sooner or later it would be all over school and I just don't need that right now."

"Kathleen, you are not a bother to me. You can always come to me. Anytime, with anything. It's just that..." Olivia allowed her voice to trail unsure how best to proceed. If Elliot knew what she was even considering to discuss with his daughter, he would throw a violent fit, if she were lucky. He and Kathy might just get back together in their mutual hatred for her upon finding out about this discussion.

“Well,” she said unable to disguise the resignation in her voice. “Have you two talked about it? I mean, *really* talked about it.”

“Yes,” Kathleen said nearly shouting. “We’re in *love*.”

Olivia suppressed a roll of her eyes remembering that not too long ago, Kathleen was in “love” with a completely different boy.

“Okay,” she said. “But, you know you can be in love with someone without having sex.”

Kathleen sighed and set down her fork, pouting slightly. Olivia was losing her and she knew that if she did not give some advice, *any* advice, Elliot would most likely become a young grandfather.

“Well,” Olivia continued, “if you two really think you’re ready...” Her voiced trailed again and she looked down at her half empty coffee cup, unsure of how to proceed with the conversation.

She had gone to her far more experienced friends back when she decided that she was ready to have sex and she silently wished Kathleen had done the same. Olivia never had an older woman in which she could confide and she never spoke to her own mother about sex. Not once. There was also the issue of Kathleen’s mother. Olivia felt a hot flash as she thought about how irresponsible it was for Kathy to refuse to discuss this with her daughter. She knew that Elliot and Kathy got pregnant when they were not too much older than Kathleen and one would think that Kathy would do everything in her power to make sure the same thing did not happen to her own daughter.

Kathleen sat still eyeing her expectantly and Olivia knew her only options were to either dispense advice or allow Kathleen to go off on her own.

She sighed, suddenly too warm and the knot in her stomach growing tighter. “What were you two thinking of for protection?”

“I figured just condoms, but I heard that guys don’t really like them, so I was wondering if there was anything else.”

“In the end,” Olivia said, “it’s not a matter of whether or not they like condoms. It’s a matter of protecting yourself.”

“I know,” Kathleen said slightly dejected and pushing her eggs around her plate again.

“Are you sure?” Olivia said. Perhaps she could put Kathleen on the defensive or maybe scare her just enough to make her rethink the decision. “Because it’s not just pregnancy you have to worry about. There’s Herpes, AIDS, Hepatitis, Gonorrhea, Syphilis. The list goes on. Condoms are your only protection against STDs. Well, besides not having sex.”

Kathleen simply nodded. “Okay, so we should just use condoms then? You know, until I know he doesn’t have anything.”

Olivia shook her head. “Your birth control should not be an “either-or” option. It’s more like...uh, your fall back, in case the condom breaks.”

“They break?” Kathleen said, her eyes wide.

“Yeah, they do,” she said as she quickly recalled an unfortunate experience in college when said event happened to her. “More often than you’d think.”

“Whoa, I didn’t know that. Why don’t they tell you these things in school?”

Olivia shrugged. “I guess that’s why I’m here.”

Kathleen gave her a big smile and Olivia continued.

“Okay, so first thing’s first: the both of you have to get tested for any STDs.”

“But this’ll be the first time for either of us,” Kathleen said, her eyes almost dreamlike.

Olivia paused a moment, trying her best to put the idea into perspective for a teenager. “I’m not saying anything against...Mike, but there’s no real way to tell if a boy’s had sex or not.”

“But, he said-”

“Okay. If he says he’s a virgin, fine, but this way, you’ll both know for sure. If you both get tested at the same time, it’ll be like...I don’t know...a bonding experience for the two of you. Just imagine the relief of knowing for an absolute certainty that you’re both free of anything.”

Kathleen stared at her plate, but nodded her head.

“Kathleen,” Olivia said. “If he loves you, he’ll agree.” She immediately felt bad for saying it. There was a real possibility that Kathleen and her boyfriend could very well be as much in love as kids their age could be, but he could become completely aggravated at Kathleen for even suggesting that he could pass an STD onto her.

Kathleen gave her a small smirk, but still stared at her plate.

“So,” Olivia continued. “Like I said, condoms are an absolute must. I suggest latex Trojans.”

“And they protect against everything right?”

“Yes, as long as they don’t break. But you’ve got to get the latex ones. There are sheepskin ones out there and they just barely keep you from getting pregnant.”

“Latex,” Kathleen said finally meeting Olivia’s eyes. “Got it.” She looked as if she were making a list in her head as Olivia spoke.

“Right. So, there’s lots of different birth control types. There’s the pill, of course.” Olivia felt herself launching into a readied mantra for this discussion. She had given the birth control talk to several other young girls who had come to her looking for someone they knew they could trust, and she almost had the entire conversation memorized.

“But,” she said. “There’s also the patch, hormonal injections and the ring. Plus, there’s also-”

“Well, which one do you use?” Kathleen interrupted.

Olivia felt her face grow slightly warm. “I use a combination of things. I use the pill, and condoms and I have a diaphragm.”

“Diaphragm. That’s like a condom for girls, right?”

“Not exactly. It fits inside of you and you have to use a spermicide to make sure it’s effective. And it’s not something you can just pick up at the drug store. You have to be fitted for one with a gynecologist.”

Kathleen sighed. “That means I’d have to go through my parents to get one, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes,” Olivia said, knowing what was coming next. “Yes, it would.”

“But, I wouldn’t need them with the pill?” Kathleen asked.

“You would still need a prescription from your doctor, but...” She wanted to say that Kathleen could get the pill without her parents knowing, but the words could not come. She could vividly imagine the argument with Elliot and probably Kathy too, if, *when* they found out that she had given their daughter advice on birth control, and helped

deceive them in the process. She was about to change the subject onto how the pill should be taken, but Kathleen made the connection regardless.

“I could get it without them knowing about it?”

Olivia simply nodded her head. Somehow nodding did not feel like she was actually giving Kathleen the green light to get around her parents.

“And you use the pill and condoms *and* a diaphragm...at the same time?”

It was Olivia’s turn to sigh. The conversation was becoming far more complicated than she had hoped and far more than she had been wanting for a Saturday morning. She did not want to lie to Kathleen, but she was not sure she was prepared to tell her about her own experiences.

“If I’m dating someone,” she began, “and we’ve both been tested, *and* we’ve been together for a *very* long time...we might...*might* not use a condom. But, I always take my pill and I’ve only ditched the condom when I knew for certain that he didn’t have anything and if...”

“If?” Kathleen pressed.

“...if the moment warranted it,” she said in quick succession. “But, again, I always take my pill.”

“Okay,” Kathleen said nodding and visibly adding to her mental list. “So, which one do you use?”

“Well...there’s lots of them out there-”

“But, which one do *you* use?”

“Nordette. There are several generic brands of it, but it works for me.”

“Why do you use the pill? ‘Cause the other day, one of the girls in locker room was showing off her birth control patch and she said that most people use it.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. At times she forgot about the absolute ignorance of teenaged girls, running around and parading just how sexually active they were. “I use the pill because I know it works. It’s been around forever and I know it’s effective and it’s safe.”

Kathleen nodded. “What about, like, weight gain and stuff? I heard the pill makes you fat.”

“Old wives’ tale,” Olivia said. “It happens some times, but as active as you are, I doubt you’ll have much to worry about.”

“Did you? I mean, when you first started taking it?”

Olivia shook her head. “No, but your hips are going to get a little wider, because the pill basically makes your body think it’s pregnant until you take the placebo pills and you get your period.”

Kathleen’s eyebrows shot up at the mention of placebo pills and Olivia continued. “If you decide on the pill, you’ll get them in this 28-day pack. The first twenty-one will be the actual birth control pills. The ones with the hormone. The last seven will be placebo pills and once you’re done with those, you’ll get your period.”

“Okay,” Kathleen said nodding again. “So, I’m gonna have wide hips?”

Olivia smiled. “Well, not so much that it’ll be automatically noticeable, but yes. But, on the plus side, your cramps will be very light and you won’t have any pimples.”

“So, what else? Do I just take them in the morning or what?”

“You start taking them on the Sunday before your period or the first day of it.”

“Why Sunday?”

“Tried and true practice, I suppose. I guess since it’s the first day of the week, it’s easier to keep track of yourself that way.”

“Is that what you did?”

“Yep. And you have to make sure you take it every, single day, at the exact same time.”

“Oh. Or, what happens if you don’t?”

“Well, then you’re gonna get pregnant.” She hated having to be so blunt with Kathleen, but she still half-hoped that she could talk Kathleen out of considering sex with her “love.” Olivia also figured she would have a much easier time trying to relay this conversation to Elliot, if she could be certain that Kathleen got the full message. “Missing a pill here or there is how most of the kids in this world are born.”

Kathleen stared at Olivia with wide eyes. “Okay, so every day. Don’t miss it.”

“Right.”

“What time do you take yours?”

“I take mine everyday at seven in the morning. But, I suggest you take it at a time you’ll know you won’t miss it. Maybe it’ll be better for you to take it at night or before you go to bed. Just as long as you take it at the same time everyday.”

“Like, to the minute or-”

“Within an hour, or else you’re just asking for trouble.”

“Okay. So, how long does it take before...you know.”

“It takes at least...fourteen days before it’s effective,” Olivia lied. She knew it was seven days and she knew there was a strong possibility that Kathleen knew it was seven days, but Kathleen seemed to be taking her every word at heart. Perhaps if she had to wait a little longer, maybe there would be time to talk her out of it or at least get her to talk to her parents.

“But,” Olivia continued, “to be on the safe side, you should wait until you’re on it for about a month. That way you know how your body will react to it.”

“A month?”

Olivia nodded. “Fraid so. But, at least after a month, you’ll know that you’re absolutely ready.”

Kathleen nodded to herself. “You said the pill was like something to fall back on. Does it sometimes stop working?”

“Well, no method of birth control is a hundred percent effective. Only abstinence.”

“But, I mean, it’s safer than other things right?”

“If you take it diligently, every day at the same time, then it’s about ninety-eight to ninety-nine percent effective.”

“And what happens the other two percent of the time?”

Olivia shrugged. “Anything can happen. The pill is supposed to keep your body from releasing an egg. Sometimes, it doesn’t.”

Kathleen sighed. “That just doesn’t seem fair. I mean, if you’re taking it everyday like you’re supposed to...”

“Well, like I said, nothing is a hundred percent. Even in cases where women have had their tubes tied, they still end up getting pregnant. It’s one of those mysteries of life, I suppose.”

“Yeah,” Kathleen said, lost in thought.

Silence fell between them and Kathleen started nibbling on her toast. Olivia felt the worst was over, but she wanted to get out all of the possibilities then instead of dealing with dozens of calls in the coming weeks that she would have to hide from Elliot.

"You have any other questions? Anything else you want to know?"

"No, not really," Kathleen said matter-of-factly.

"Okay," Olivia said. "If you have any other questions, just let me know."

"Yeah. I will."

Kathleen looked at her watch and started to gather her things. "I'm about to be late for Dickie." She took out her wallet.

"No, no," Olivia said holding up her hand. "It's all on me. Do you need a ride?"

"No, I'm okay," she said with a big smile. "Thanks Olivia."

"No problem at all."

She started to walk away, but then stopped and returned to the booth."

"You're not gonna tell my dad about this are you? 'Cause if he finds out-"

"I won't," Olivia said unsure of how true the statement was. "I promise."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot."

"Oh, and Kathleen," Olivia said as she started to walk away again. "Please... *please* come talk to me before you do anything okay?"

Kathleen nodded and took several steps away from the table, but turned around and sat back in her seat. "Wo...would you come with? To go to the doctor's office. You know, to get the prescription?"

"Well, if you decide you don't want your mom or Maureen to go with you...yes. Just tell me when and where."

Kathleen smiled and came around the table to hug Olivia. "Okay, now I really do have to go. Thank you so much, Olivia."

"Anytime."

After Kathleen left her presence, Olivia's thoughts fell immediately upon her partner. In the past, she had seen him literally enraged due to happenings at work. Criminals who walked free, leads that went nowhere, lives lost or corrupted forever. However, she knew that everything else took a backseat in comparison to his children.

He's going to literally kill me when he finds out, she thought as she paid the bill. *Both he and Kathy.*

Instead of walking back to her apartment, Olivia decided that she should go to Elliot's to judge his mood. If he was feeling more upbeat, she would hint to her conversation with Kathleen. If he was already in a bad mood, she would just bring up their current cases. She mentally considered the trains she would take to get Woodside and then checked her wallet to see if she had enough cash to get her from the 52nd Street stop to Elliot's apartment on 50th, but decided she would just save the money and walk at the last moment. However, as she came upon the stop at West 8th, she just continued walking.

The air was cold and her face was stiff against the January wind. Her body was tense throughout and her head suddenly hurt at the realization of what had happened that morning occurred to her.

Throughout the entirety of her partnership with Elliot, never had she willingly deceived him, especially in regards to his children. There had been personal instances

that she wanted few people outside of Maya to know about, but she had never lied to him and though she had yet to do so, she knew it was coming.

Her insides squirmed at the thought of Elliot's rage at finding out she had lied to him and she wanted to cry. It seemed so simple and yet, it was so serious at the same time. She and Elliot still walked a rocky road as partners and this was just the type of thing that would make them worse than where they were earlier.

After a while of thinking and walking, Olivia found herself on 1st Avenue, just below 7th Street. She looked around for a moment, shocked that she had walked to the Lower East Side without even noticing. She considered whether she would retrace her steps and get on the train at Astor Place or continue South and get on at East 2nd. She decided since the stations were equidistant from her, Astor Place would be best because it would be a shorter ride to Queens, and as she turned to walk back toward the train station, she heard someone yelling.

"Help!" a man's voice yelled. "Someone please! I think he's hurt!"

The voice came from the direction of Avenue A and Olivia turned and ran instinctively toward the sound.

A number of people had gathered around an alley halfway toward Avenue A and she flashed her badge as she tried pushing her way through to the front of the crowd.

"Scuse me!" she said. "N-Y-P-D. Let me through."

"Oh God!" the same voice said again. "I think he's dead."

Olivia came to a clearing in the alley and saw a man crouched over a large box that sat against a building. As she slowly approached the box, the knot in her stomach that had eased slightly from her breakfast with Kathleen twisted tight as matted brown hair could be seen just at the top of the box. She reached the box and saw the form a young boy, folded into the box with skin so ghostly white that it sent a chill down her spine.

Elliot sighed as he pulled his car close to the menagerie of parked NYPD squad cars that lined East 7th Street. For the third time in two weeks, he was forced to view the body of a boy just his son's age and for the third time in two weeks he was in the same part of the city investigating what he knew was just the beginning of a manhunt.

He walked toward the alley, through the crowd of people that had gathered in the street, and through the police barricades to the crime scene. Once in the alley he saw Melinda making notes over a brown box that sat against one of the buildings. She looked up as he approached and simply shook her head.

"It's the same guy," she said. "I'm sure of it. Same ligature marks, same amount of bruising. Plus, he's gone back to the box."

"Is the box marked with anything special?" Elliot said deadpan. "I mean is it from a store around here?"

"No. It's completely blank, but so was the first one."

He sighed. "How are we on an ID?"

"Still nothing, but he fits the same bill as the others. White male, about twelve or thirteen."

Elliot nodded. "Where's Olivia?"

"She's over there," Melinda said pointing to the other side of the street, "talking to the homeless guy who found him."

Elliot stared at the boy, studying every facet of how he was set in the box and anything on and around the box, before walking in Olivia's direction. She had called him that morning saying that another boy had been found, but she did not have a lot of details that usually came with hearing about the case from an officer at the scene.

Olivia stood with her back slightly curved and hunching toward the shorter man who stood beside her. He was speaking rapidly and appeared looked as if he had not slept indoors in quite some time.

"I just ain't never seen a dead kid before," the man said his eyes wide.

Olivia nodded as she scribbled something on her notepad and upon eyeing Elliot, she told the man to speak to a set of uniformed officers who could get him a cup of coffee.

"Homeless guy was digging through some trashcans in an alley," she began, "and found the victim in a box. He actually flagged me down when he found him."

Elliot squinted at her in the cold sunlight. "What were you doing around here?"

She froze a moment and stared at him before replying. "I was...uh...meeting a friend for breakfast and just started walking. I didn't even realize where I was going until I got all the way over here."

He nodded and stared at her unsure of what she was hiding. They had worked together for far too long for him not to know when she was not being entirely truthful with him. "We know anything about the victim yet?"

"No," she said quickly. "But, as I'm sure Melinda told you it's more than likely that it's the same guy who murdered Connor Whickfield and Jacob Lewendale. I'm also willing to bet he probably played indoor soccer in the city."

Elliot looked back toward the street that was quickly filling with curious passers-by. "You know Drover lives on 14th Loop?"

Olivia stared at him, eyebrows high. "You looked up his address?"

He nodded, but continued. "Last night, after I dropped you off, I went back and started a file on him."

"Why?"

"Just thought it was necessary. We'll be talking to him anyway about what he knew about the other kids."

She stared at him suspiciously. "Why even bring it up now?"

Elliot shrugged. "Just thought it was interesting. This is the third kid we've found in this area and Drover lives just up the way."

"Six blocks away," she corrected.

"Still though..."

"Still though," she said sardonically, "a hundred thousand people live between here and 14th Loop and anyone in the city has access to this alley."

Elliot nodded and changed the subject. "We should look at Missing Persons to see if-

"Munch and Fin are already on it," she interrupted. "I had images of the boy sent to them and they'll be calling me in a bit to let me know if they find a match to him in the system."

"I see," he said walking back to the body.

He was not going to mention that he had gone back to the office the previous night and he had hoped that he could go a few days without Olivia learning that he had started some paperwork on Drover.

Best laid plans of mice and men, he thought to himself as he walked.

Regardless of their previous conversation, Elliot *knew* there was more to Drover than what Connor Wickfield's teammates had said. There was that air about him that went beyond gut feeling and he knew the sooner he started the documentation on Drover, the sooner they would be able to start talking to him. He also wanted to keep Olivia from knowing because he hated the look of pity in her eyes each time the realization of how his life had changed fell upon them. At a time not too long ago, Elliot would have dropped Olivia off at home and raced to his own house to spend the precious little time he could with his family. Now, however, things were different.

The detectives spent another hour at the scene, noting every thing possible about it and getting information about the crime from Melinda. Elliot could hear Olivia calling Jonathan to cancel a long-planned lunch date as their crime scene analyses continued past noon and he made a mental note to call his youngest daughter later that day to tell her about the ballet tickets he got from Olivia.

"Benson," Elliot heard Olivia say into her phone a while later. "Okay, hang on a sec...Schrader? That was 266...okay...wait, who's Vonnex?...Oh, okay...I got it. We'll notify them."

She hung up her phone. "That was Munch. The victim is Ricky Schrader and his parents filed a Missing Persons report on Thursday."

"Lemme guess," Elliot said. "He's from the Upper West Side, too?"

"West 75th."

"Three murders in less than fourteen days...something tells me this guy's just getting started."

"Let's notify the parents and get a positive ID," she said, "then we can compare all three of them."

Elliot nodded and they drove to the West Side in silence, neither of them forgetting their most recent argument on Drover. Olivia only broke the silence once to tell Elliot that Ricky Schrader was in the child welfare system and had been staying with his foster parents, Jack and Eileen Vonnex. Their silence was more of a quiet preceding a greater storm.

Once they contacted the family of the most recent victim, Drover's name would most definitely come up in the conversation and it would most likely launch another argument. If Drover came up for the second time in their investigation, they would be forced to look at him in regards to the first murder and interrogate him altogether. One detective was going to be proved right, the other wrong, and both hated to be the latter.

"Oh my God," Mr. Vonnex said once Elliot delivered the news that Ricky Schrader had been murdered. "He just...he was just..."

Mr. Vonnex sat down on the sofa next to his wife who sat her mouth gaping and tears welling in her eyes.

"I'm so sorry," Olivia said.

"He'd run away," Mrs. Vonnex said quickly. "He usually came back the next morning, but when he didn't come home..."

"Did Ricky run away a lot?" Olivia asked.

Mrs. Vonnex nodded and readied herself to launch into a lengthy story. Olivia had arrived at the Vonnexes expecting to hear that Ricky Schrader was a perfect angel, but the idea that he had previously run away from home had her intrigued.

"We tried everything we could to make sure Ricky felt like he was part of the family, but he just didn't seem to want to," Mrs. Vonnex said. "We knew he'd been bounced back and forth from his mother to other families and we'd hoped he'd think of this as home."

"But he never did?" Olivia asked.

"He kept running away," Mr. Vonnex said. "Back to his mother. She'd allow her boyfriends to beat him, but he still kept going back to her."

"How long would he stay at his mother's?" Elliot said.

Mrs. Vonnex wiped her eyelashes. "Not more than a day. He'd be back by dinner all the time. We'd give him some spending money, you know an allowance, but he never had any money. When we asked him about it, he told us he'd been paying for cabs to go see his mother."

"That's what he *said*," Mr. Vonnex continued. "But, Ricky's been having some problems with smoking and drugs. One of our friends even caught him on the Lower East Side one day doing Lord knows what."

"But, he was doing better," Mrs. Vonnex interrupted. "He's been more interested in school and in soccer." She turned directly to Olivia as if pleading with her. "He's been so hesitant to get active, but we knew he'd be good at soccer. And he is. He really is. He's just been starting to apply himself to it. He's really been getting into it..."

Olivia repressed a sigh. Mrs. Vonnex still referred to her foster son in the present tense and Olivia knew the difficult times awaiting the woman once she came to realize what had truly happened.

"He really is a good boy," Mrs. Vonnex said. "He's just had it so hard and it's difficult for kids his age to adjust to changes like these."

"How long did you have Ricky with you?" Olivia asked.

"Almost three years. His mother...she'd beaten him severely, again and he called the police on her. Thank God for that. Then ACS took him away from her and he came to live with us." She let out a sob. "We just tried so hard...and now he's gone."

Mr. Vonnex put his arm around his wife and allowed her to weep on his shoulder.

"You said Ricky played soccer," Elliot began. "Did he play in the Tri-State Indoor Soccer Association?"

Mr. Vonnex nodded.

"Does the name Jeffrey Drover sound familiar?"

Mr. Vonnex glanced between the detectives and his eyebrows furrowed. "No. I can't say that I've ever heard that name. Why? Do you think he would know what happened to Ricky?"

Elliot and Olivia exchanged looks and Elliot continued. "The manner in which Ricky's been found...we have several cases still open where boys Ricky's age have been found and had been killed the same way. We're just trying to make a connection between them."

Mr. Vonnex shook his head. "I don't remember anyone by that name."

"The team Ricky played on," Olivia said. "Did they have an athletic trainer or a set of assistant coaches?"

"No," he said. "Ricky was just getting into the sport and they wouldn't've had trainers at his level."

Olivia nodded and glanced at Elliot again.

"Do you know where Ricky's mother lives?" Elliot asked. "I know you said someone had found him on the Lower East Side, but did you have any other information."

"No," Mr. Vonnex said. "We're not even certain that she lived down there. We didn't know anything about her, except that she did drugs in front him and beat him when he tried to get her off the stuff."

"At least," Mrs. Vonnex said, tears now covering her face in shining glaze, "at least, she can't hurt him anymore."

Fin Tutuola sat staring at the flat-panel monitor that stood on his desk, wondering how best to word the information he had received that day. The latest case that had come to him involved an Ethiopian woman who was admitted to a hospital having been raped and beaten. She had insisted that she was not hurt, but Fin had managed to get her to say that someone in her family had hurt her. He was about to get her to name her attacker when her immense family appeared at her side and informed Fin that she just had a bad fall. The woman later changed her story and insisted that she simply fell, however while her mouth said that she was not raped, Fin knew from past experience and the expression in her eyes that someone who most likely stood by her bedside, had hurt her and would probably do so again.

A small investigation would ensue in hopes of getting the victim to talk, but they would eventually end up closing the case having no complaining witness for whom they would appeal justice. While it happened far too often, Fin still did not know how best to notate the case to say that, yet again, the victim recanted her statement and the detectives would be moving on to more pressing cases.

He set his hands on the keyboard to type as he saw John Munch doing the same. Munch had made a last ditch effort with the victim again that day, but he had been refused entrance to the premises. He was angered with the entire case from beginning to end, though he was not sure what bothered him more: the fact that no justice would be received for the victim or the fact that it was the victim's family who was preventing the rapist from being apprehended.

"Detectives," Melinda said entering the squad room and halting the fast-moving fingers of Munch and Fin.

"What's up, Doc?" Munch said.

"I've been looking for Elliot and Olivia, but I think they're with the latest victim's family because neither one of them is answering their phone."

Munch looked at the small clock on his desk, never quite trusting the clock in his computer task bar, and frowned. "They've been over there for a couple hours now. The parents are probably going on about how much of an angel this one was too."

"That's kinda cold," Fin said.

"The parents *always* say that their kids are angels and then we come to find out that their kids are murdering their peers because they didn't fit in or having wild sex

parties at thirteen or...beating their siblings to a pulp for no good reason. If these kids were as angelic as their parents said they were, we wouldn't have a job, would we?"

Fin shook his head. "Don't mind him," he said to Melinda. "He's just venting about our latest case. What've you got?"

She nodded. "More information on this string of murders. When I was doing the autopsy on Jacob Lewendale, I found some fingerprints that weren't in the system."

"I thought you said you had *new* information," Munch interjected.

"But, I noticed," she continued as if he had not spoken, "that they were smaller than a full grown man's hand. More like the size of a preteen kid."

"The boy's?" Fin said.

Melinda shook her head. "That's what I thought at first, but when I ran his prints, they weren't a match. Well, when the second victim was found, I saw smaller fingerprints again. So, just out of curiosity, I cross referenced the prints of the first two victims." She pulled out a piece of paper and showed it to Munch. "Connor Whickfield's prints are all over Jacob Lewendale."

"Connor killed Jacob?" Fin said eyes narrowed at the doctor.

"No," she said. "The bruising that looks like hand prints on Jacob isn't a match for Connor's hands. They're far too big, not to mention that the same exact marks are found on Connor himself. But..." She pulled out another sheet of paper and showed it to Fin. "This newest victim, Ricky Schrader, *his* prints are all over Connor Whickfield."

Silence fell over the detectives and the medical examiner as the magnitude of what she said was appreciated.

The matter understood, Fin broke the silence. "The killer made his newer victims help kill the older ones."

Elliot's drive across the river had been somewhat peaceful, though images of his dream from earlier that day continued to spring back into his mind. His son was still not speaking to him and Kathleen had called him that afternoon to tell him such. He wondered if the tone of her voice when she spoke was frustration from his marital situation or aggravation over him in general. Either way, he did not detect anything off about her as Kathy had suggested.

He pulled into the last empty spot on his street and was in his apartment several minutes later. The day seemed to drag on forever and the general unpleasantness that seemed to follow him throughout the day was exemplified by the fact that Drover had had no contact with Ricky Schrader.

Elliot had been so sure about Drover. He and Olivia had investigated cases with child molesters who looked just like Drover and based on his demeanor those few days ago, he was worth bringing into the squad room to interrogate.

At his desk, he made some notes to remind himself that he and Olivia needed to check up on a few of their other open cases. They had caught the cases for two women over the past week and neither of their rapists had yet been apprehended. Both women had been attacked in alleys, though one on the Lower East Side and the other in Spanish Harlem. There was DNA analysis available for both cases, but matches only appeared for

one of the victims and even that match still gave he and Olivia very little information to proceed.

He was about to get in the shower when the phone rang.

"Stabler," he said into the phone.

"Daddy?" a young female voice said.

"Hey, Lizzie," he said with a smile.

"Elizabeth," Lizzie said sternly.

"Oh," he laughed. "Sorry...*Elizabeth*."

"It's fine, Daddy. Just try to remember."

"Why 'Elizabeth' all of a sudden?" he asked.

"Because, it's my name and besides, Lizzie's like a baby name, you know?"

"Well, you're *my* baby..."

"Oh come on, Daddy," she said her voice drawling. "We're not *really* babies."

"Okay, okay," he said. "Hey! I wanted to tell you. Since you didn't want to go to that game with Dickie and Me the other day, I got some tickets to the Sleeping Beauty ballet."

"Sleeping Beauty?"

"Yeah. You think you'd be interested?"

She was silent for a few moments. "Yeah...that sounds cool. When is the ballet?"

"Middle of February."

"Hmm..."

"What's wrong?" he asked. "You don't want to go?"

"No, I want to go it's just that..."

"What is it?"

"Well, I just have this feeling that...that you're gonna end up canceling on me or something."

Elliot opened his mouth, but he could not speak. He wanted to tell his youngest daughter that he would not cancel on her; that he would be there for her; that he would pick her up for the ballet promptly at seven, but he knew he could not. He had missed more piano recitals and school choir performances than he cared to remember and there was nothing that he could say to Lizzie to reassure her that he would not cancel on her. With this latest string of murders notwithstanding, there were always new victims coming through the SVU, and, the job would come first.

"I'm not going to cancel on you," he lied.

"Really?"

"Seriously," he said. "Through hell or high water, I'll be at the house to pick you up at seven PM."

"Okay, Daddy," she said and Elliot could hear a smile on her voice. "Well, cool. Anyways, I wanted to know if you could talk to Olivia about her piano music."

"Yeah, sure. You want some more?"

"Well, I've got that recital coming up in a few months and I just wanted something cooler to play and I know she said she'd played some cool stuff at her recitals back in the day."

Elliot laughed. "I'll definitely ask her."

"Thanks!" Silence fell over them for a moment before Lizzie began again. "Um...you know," she said softly in the voice she often used when tattling on her siblings. "Kathleen took Dickie to his indoor practice this morning."

"Yeah," Elliot said hiding the annoyance in his voice from his child.

"Did she tell you that this morning at breakfast?"

His eyebrows furrowed in slight confusion. "No. I didn't have breakfast with Kathleen this morning."

"You didn't?" Lizzie said. "Well, she said she was going to breakfast this morning before she dropped off Dickie. I figured it was with you."

"No, she didn't meet with me. Where'd she go?"

"Somewhere near NYU, I think. I'm not sure."

"And, she didn't hint at who it was?"

"Nope. It mighta been that guy Mike she's been dating...I don't know."

"Okay..."

"Anyways, Daddy. I've gotta go. Meaghan's having a sleepover and I need to get going."

"Okay," he said slightly glum. "Well, have a good time Liz-I mean Elizabeth."

She laughed. "I will. Bye, Daddy."

He hung up the phone, but he continued staring at it. He knew Kathleen had been dating a new guy for a while now, it was likely it was him who she met for breakfast this morning, but he still did not like the idea.

Olivia carefully balanced her bag of groceries on her raised knee as she fumbled in her coat pocket for her apartment keys while the January air whipped around her threatening to sway her brown bag off of its unsteady shelf. Her cold, ungloved hands made contact with freezing metal in her pocket and she fished out the key to the front door of her apartment building.

It was nearing ten o'clock at night and Olivia had just caught the man at the market several blocks away from her building prior to his closing for the night. She had not gone shopping in a while and still needed quite a few things, but she had promised Jonathan that she would cook dinner for him Sunday evening in exchange for her canceling their lunch plans that day. She was certain there was nothing currently edible in her fridge and she knew Jonathan would not be amused by a repeat of her last "home-cooked" meal of grilled cheese sandwiches and beer.

Olivia opened the door to her building and opened her mailbox. White and yellow envelopes almost spilled out of the box and she caught them all in her grocery bag. She got onto the elevator, set down her bag, pressed "8" and began to quickly sift through the various envelopes. Among the throngs of offers for pre-approved credit cards and free siding for her home, she saw a card from her Aunt Sylvia, half a dozen utility and credit card bills, and more than ten pieces of mail for her neighbor, Mrs. Agatha Fitzgivens.

The elevator doors opened and she knocked on the door of the third apartment from the elevator.

"Olivia!" the elderly woman said with a smile as she opened the door. "How wonderful to see you!"

"Hi, Mrs. Fitzgivens," Olivia said in a low voice.

She was nowhere near the mood needed to "deal" with her always upbeat and overly happy neighbor. She had spent the majority of her afternoon speaking with the Vonnexes and tiptoeing around Elliot about the fact that Ricky Schrader had not known Drover. She never mentioned the fact, but it hung over them like a grey cloud of tension as they drove through the city. Munch and Fin had also delivered the unfortunate news that their killer had been kidnapping his victims and making them assist with the murder of the others.

She and Elliot also had to dodge a mass of reporters who had begun to gather around the latest crime scene. The detectives were attempting to find witnesses in the area, but the press followed them at nearly every building they attempted to visit and obstructed them as much as the law allowed them to do. Reporters from all walks of life shouted questions at them, demanding answers as if they were truly concerned about the welfare of the victims and their families. In truth, the more fuss they made, the more newspapers and magazines were sold and the higher the ratings for the local new stations.

With everything that was going on that day, she had all but forgotten her discussion with Kathleen that morning, until Elliot received a call from her on their way out of the squad room for the evening. Olivia felt stressed and all she wanted to do was take a bath and allow her troubled mind to stop thinking about the young lives touched by this killer. While she often entertained Mrs. Fitzgivens out of pity and her own loneliness, Olivia knew she could not handle the woman's demeanor at this point in her day. She would prefer not to deal with her at all, but as their mail carrier often set Mrs. Fitzgiven's mail in Olivia's box, Olivia was forced to knock on her door at least once a week.

Mrs. Fitzgivens was constantly asking Olivia if she could come visit or wanted to try her new cookies or pies or whatever she happened to be cooking at that moment. Though she had mentioned having several sons, Olivia had never seen any grandchildren and more often than, not Mrs. Fitzgivens seemed lonelier than Olivia.

"I got some more of your mail," Olivia said handing the stack to her.

"Oh! Why thank you!" Mrs. Fitzgivens said eyes wide and beaming up at Olivia.

At sixty-seven years old, Mrs. Fitzgivens' hair had gone completely white and she always wore it pinned up in a near "beehive" formation as well as large silver rimmed glasses that made her light blue eyes appear twice their actual size. She had the appearance of someone who was once an attractive young woman, but the sun and time had taken a great toll on her skin and the lines on her face were numerous and deep.

"Can you stay a moment?" she asked Olivia.

"No," Olivia said. "Actually, I can't. I've...uh...got my groceries...and, uh...you know, the caseload."

"Oh, but you must meet my youngest boy, Philip. He's here visiting me this weekend."

Olivia began to protest. "No, really. I can't. I'm just swamped..."

Mrs. Fitzgivens slowly took Olivia by the hand and pulled her slightly into the apartment. "Oh, it will just take a second. I wanted you to meet him. Philip is in *computers* and he's doing very well for himself."

Olivia suppressed a roll of her eyes as Mrs. Fitzgivens brought her into view of her son. Philip Fitzgivens stood at nearly six feet five inches, but looked to weigh no

more than one hundred-sixty pounds. His lanky frame seemed overwhelming in the small apartment and he wore glasses that were nearly identical to those of his mother.

"Philip," Mrs. Fitzgivens said. "This is my neighbor, Olivia; the one I've been telling you about."

He extended a long arm toward Olivia and she was pleasantly surprised by the heart-warming smile that appeared on his face.

"Hi there," he said brightly.

"Hi. Look, I'd love to stay and chat, but I've got lots of things to do and...you know, the caseload."

"Oh, okay, that's fine," he said looking slightly disappointed. "I understand. Everybody's got to keep their eye on the job."

"Right," she said. "Well, I should be going. Mrs. Fitzgivens, I'll see you later. Philip, it was a pleasure to meet you."

Olivia walked to the door, but Mrs. Fitzgivens stopped her in the doorway.

"You know," she said, nearly whispering to Olivia, "Philip is my *youngest* boy."

"Is that so?" Olivia said, the sarcasm lost on the old woman.

"Yes, and I've been trying to fix him up with a nice woman with a good head on her shoulders." She beamed up at Olivia and Olivia bit her lip, trying her best not to laugh in her face.

"Well," she said with a smile, "I'll let you know if I meet any."

"Oh, you!" Mrs. Fitzgivens said laughing. "Aren't you just terrible. But, I'm serious. Philip really is a nice boy."

"You do know I've been dating Jonathan Halloway for quite some time now?"

"I know, I know," she said. "But, I just figured that you might like to just have dinner with someone without any pretension or family...issues to bother you."

Olivia nodded her head. "I see...okay, well, let me think about it and I'll get back to you. Bye."

She sighed as she opened the door to her apartment moments later. She listened to the messages on her phone and heard that Mark had called her twice telling her that he got a hold of some free tickets to *Dreamgirls* which he knew she had been wanting to see and was inviting her to come see the film with him.

It's time to move, she thought to herself.

She opted for a quick shower instead of her planned bath and reviewed the notes she had made on Ricky Schrader's case. Ricky looked more like Jacob Lewendale and she wondered morosely if the next victim would look like Connor Whickfield; as if the killer were switching the hair colour of his victims. The case was disturbing from the forefront and learning that the killer made his victims assist in his murders was simply unnerving. Olivia could feel her stomach turn at the thought and she sought refuge from the images by playing her cello.

Her mother had bought the instrument for her when she was just twelve and she took to it immediately, though it was slightly too large for her at the time. Unlike the violin, which her mother had forced upon her, the cello's rich sounds of baritone and bass seemed to melt into Olivia's own spirits and after a few years, she was able to play not only the sonatas of the old masters, but pieces that simply came to her as she moved her handcrafted Pernambuco bow across the instrument's four strings. She had the ability to

fuse jazz with Haydn and take pieces that were Major and bright and turn them Minor to fit her mood at the moment.

When Jonathan arrived at her apartment a while later that night, she was well into playing a piece by Bach and he simply spread himself across her couch with a bemused expression on his face, and listened to her play into the night. She finished the piece and simply continued playing whatever music came to mind as the cool moonlight poured into her apartment. At times of trouble and deep stress, Olivia had always turned to music to help flush away her demons. Between her mother's drinking and the pangs of adolescence, she knew as a child that music was the only way she could keep her sanity. Now, as an adult, sometimes only the vibrato movements of her left hand or the legato techniques of her right could push away the faces of all the Jacob Lewendales she had seen in her career and give her peace for the night.

Chapter Four

Sunday January 14, 2007
Woodside, New York

The Sunday morning sun was bright and cheerful, though it offered no warmth on the pointed face of the Catholic church. Elliot had said goodbye to his priest, parted ways with his family and was driving south on 58th Street with a slightly pleasant feeling tingling in his stomach. He had not felt any sense of peace all week, but mass that morning made him feel especially hopeful for some reason. Perhaps it was the Word moving him. Perhaps it was knowing that he was trying to be a better Catholic than his father. Perhaps it was just having his family all together as if nothing had ever gone wrong.

Seeing Kathy and kids each Sunday both gave Elliot the strength to push forward with his work and stirred his emotions in all the wrong ways. He could not help thinking that his impending divorce from his wife was the worst kind of example he could have for his children. All he truly wanted was for them to live happy lives and be good Catholics. There were times he felt that with his failed marriage he had failed his children.

He turned onto Queens Boulevard as he headed toward his precinct. Once upon a time, he would have taken his family out for brunch and tried to spend as much of his day with them before going back to into the harsh reality of the SVU. Now, however, he had to wait until it was his weekend to take the children, and while relations between him and Kathy were amicable to the point where she allowed the children to spend time with him at different points throughout the week, he still hated having to leave them in the end. Instead of playing Polonius to Lizzie's Ophelia while she wanted to act out Hamlet, acting as goalie for kicking a few soccer balls to Dickie or grinding out the bowels of Trigonometry with Kathleen, Elliot had to simply hug them all and say goodbye until he had them again for the weekend.

Elliot unconsciously shook his head as he drove onto the Queensboro Bridge. If he was honest with himself, even if he wanted to spend every waking second with his children, the job would eventually come in the way. The faces of Jacob Lewendale,

Connor Whickfield and now Ricky Schrader haunted him as he drove and he knew no peace would come until he found their killer. Kathy informed him that Dickie was standing to his principles and refusing to apologize and Elliot was inwardly happy to keep him on punishment.

"Just keep an eye on him," Elliot had said to Kathy.

He decided not to tell her his underlying reasons for sticking to *his* principles. She would come across his name in a newspaper article surrounding the case soon enough and he would simply deal with it then. When she did find out, they would dance the same line they had since he joined the SVU: She would insist that he intentionally kept in her dark about everything; he would remain adamant about police procedure and not wanting to expose her to this world; she would say this was the very reason she had to leave since he refused to open up to her; he would get angry about the argument in general saying that he already told why he wanted to keep quiet.

A while later, he arrived at the squad room and found Olivia and pouring over notes on her desk. The coffee cup on her desk was half drained and she looked as if she had already been there for some time.

"Hey," he said. "How long've you been here?"

Olivia yawned. "Since before eight. I couldn't sleep so figured I might as well get some work done."

"Have you?"

"Not really. There's just nothing to go on."

Elliot nodded and stared at her for a minute. Her eyes had not reached his since he entered the room, but she was not looking at anything in particular.

"Something wrong?" he said.

She visibly tensed. "No, I'm fine." Her eyes remained on the piece of paper before her. "It's just so frustrating..."

Elliot nodded and his eyebrows flew toward his hairline when he remembered the note he had made for himself. "Hey! What kind of piano music do you have that's...uh...cool?"

"Cool?" she said glancing at him for the first time that morning.

"Yeah, Lizzie wants something cool to play at her next recital. Oh, I meant *Elizabeth* wants something cool to play."

She smiled. "Every girl goes through that stage where she doesn't want to go by the 'baby name' anymore."

"Really? What was the nickname that you grew out of?"

"Sorry," she said. "I've already reached my Personal Questions quota for the day this morning."

"Jonathan?"

"Yep, sometimes that man's just full of questions."

"No wonder you couldn't sleep," Elliot said with a smile.

Her cheeks turned a light shade of pink. "Well, I'll see what I can drum up for her."

Silence fell over them as they each remembered the pressing task lying before them.

"So," Elliot said. "I'm thinking we need to talk to Jacob Lewendale's parents again. I want to be able to cross Drover off the list altogether."

Olivia nodded her head. "Sounds good. Just let me finish this and we'll go."

As she typed furiously on her keyboard, Elliot gathered Jacob Lewendale's file from the many stacks on his desk and threw Olivia an occasional glance. While he was not going to press the issue, he knew that something was wrong and he repressed a sigh as he hoped it would not interfere with the job. He could never tell if it was specifically something personal or something regarding a case, but she seemed overly stressed and it was only a matter of time before the situation threw them into a very loud argument.

"Jeffrey Drover?" Mrs. Lewendale said, her eyes still glazed from grief. "No, I don't really think Jacob knew him."

"Wait, Deborah," Mr. Lewendale said. "I remember him."

Elliot perked up immediately. "From where?"

"Jacob's soccer league. He's a younger guy. I think he's either an assistant coach or a trainer or something. But, he's always at the fields helping the boys practice. From what we'd heard from the other parents, he seemed to be a real stand-up guy. Why? Do you think he knows what happened to Jacob?"

"We're not certain if he knows anything," Elliot said. "But, we are just trying to find a connection between Jacob and the other boys."

"The other ones," Mrs. Lewendale said. "They played soccer too? With Jacob?"

"One did," Olivia said. "But, the other didn't."

"Oh," she said, but her mouth remained opened and her eyes wide as if she was wanting them to say something more to allay some of her grief.

There was a brief silence among all those present before Mrs. Lewendale appealed to Elliot. "Are you any closer to finding out who did this to our son?"

"We have some leads and I assure you, the moment you have any information on Jacob, we'll let you know."

She gave both he and Olivia a weak smile, but her eyes held behind them a sadness so deep that Elliot nearly burst into tears himself.

As they left the Lewendale home, Elliot drove them North to view the soccer complex in which all three victims had played their winter sport.

Located at Harlem's edge, Tri-State ISA Complex 6, was a large, spacious building, well-lit and surrounded by a constant stream of people. Elliot unconsciously shook his head wondering how Connor and Jacob could have disappeared from such a crowded place.

"It's a Sunday," he said to Olivia as they were browsing the turf fields inside the complex. "It's hard to believe the boys could've been taken by someone from here and no one noticed anything."

"Well," she said, "at least the media hasn't found out that two of them used to play here or we'd be facing riots here. I'm going to ask the service desk a few questions. I'll be back."

Elliot nodded as she walked away and his eyes scanned across the several games that were in process on the four fields.

He's here, Elliot thought. Somewhere in the building, the killer was watching the young boys and waiting for the opportune moment to seize another victim.

His attention turned to the soccer game nearest to him and he watched for a few minutes, thinking about how many of Dickie's games he had missed and the one he would most likely miss this Wednesday. The advancing team had both boys and girls on their side, all around Dickie and Lizzie's age, and Elliot felt a smile tug at the corners of his mouth as the tallest girl sent the ball flying through the fingertips of the defending goalkeeper.

"All right. Let's go," Olivia said, her voice tired and annoyed.

"They know anything?" he asked.

"Of course not. In fact, the guy up there asked *me* how the hell *he* was supposed to keep track of the thousands of kids who came through here every day. I mean, you'd think I asked him for complex information. 'When was the last time you'd seen these kids? Did they look like they had a parent with them?' They aren't hard questions and if he didn't know he could've just said so."

"He get in your face?"

"I don't want to talk about it," she said and walked out of the complex.

Elliot watched the girl take another victory loop around field and headed toward the building's entrance. He saw a flash of dark hair and skin go by him as he reached the door and he heard a woman's voice yelling behind him.

"Daniel!" she yelled. "Don't push past people and wait for the rest of us."

A small black boy reappeared through the complex doorway with a wide, mischievous grin on his face.

"C'mon on, Ma!" he yelled back, his voice cracking. "I'm late for Tavion's!"

The boy, nearly a foot smaller than Elliot, then gave him a sheepish look and Elliot could only return the smile with one of his own as followed Olivia's footsteps to their car.

Before returning to their squad room, he and Olivia drove to the other side of the island to visit their previous victim, Evelyn Rivers. Olivia insisted that they check on her to make sure Evelyn knew she had advocates on her side, and Elliot grudgingly obliged. The truth of the matter was that they were most likely going to run across Evelyn Rivers several more times as her boyfriend continued to abuse her and eventually her case would be covered by Homicide once Micah Diorel killed her. He wanted to be sympathetic and offer Evelyn support, but he simply could not bring himself to pour out emotion for her when she would not testify against the man whom all four involved knew would kill her in due time.

"Detectives!" Evelyn said brightly as she opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

"We just wanted to check on you," Olivia said. "Just to see how things were going."

"Oh we're fine!" she said smiling.

"Who the hell is that?" the detectives heard from inside the apartment.

"It's the police, Micah," she yelled into the apartment. "But they're just seeing how we're doing."

They heard footsteps coming to the door and Micah Diorel appeared at the doorway with a smug smile in place. His colourless eyes could look directly into Elliot's and his black hair, nearly shoulder length, was gelled back to give a windswept appearance. He looked Elliot up and down and put his arm around Evelyn.

"Hello, Detectives," he said grinning. "It's good to see you all...on much better pretenses."

Elliot felt his right arm tense and relax as he resisted the urge to throw a right hook into Diorel's jaw.

"We just stopped by to see how Evelyn was doing," Olivia said.

"Well," he said giving Evelyn a squeeze, "as you can see, she's doing just fine. Healing nicely from her *fall* on Thursday."

"We'd like to hear it from Evelyn," Elliot said.

"I'm fine," she said brightly. "Really. I'm walking better and Micah's taking real good care of me."

Elliot glared at Diorel. "I'm sure he is."

"Believe me," Diorel said. "I am."

Olivia pulled her card from her coat pocket and handed it Evelyn. "Evelyn, if you ever need anyone to talk to...give me a call. Day or Night."

Diorel gently pulled the card from Evelyn. "We'll be fine."

Elliot and Olivia glared at Diorel and silently, they left the doorway and began walking down the hall of the building.

"Hey!" they heard Diorel yell before they reached the entrance. "I don't want you people coming by here anymore. It just upsets Evelyn."

Elliot squinted at Diorel as if not seeing him properly. "You've got a lot of nerve telling *us* what upsets Evelyn."

"Look! I know Evie! She's fine! She just had a little fa-"

Before Diorel could tell Olivia and him that Evelyn simply hurt herself by falling the previous Thursday, Elliot grabbed Diorel by the shirt collar and slammed against the wall along the corridor.

"Elliot!" Olivia said eyes wide. "Let him go!"

"Police brutality!" Diorel screamed. "I'm suing! I'm going to every newsp-"

"Shut up!" Elliot yelled. "You! You beat up women like it's a hobby! You're lucky I don't knock your goddamn teeth in!"

"Elliot, come on," Olivia said pulling lightly at his arm. There was a part of her that wanted him to actually throttle Diorel, but she could not allow him to ruin his career over someone so low. "Let him go."

Elliot's eyes burned into Diorel's and he slowly released him. He and Olivia then walked out of the building with Diorel shouting explicatives at them as they went back to their car.

"You shouldn't've done that," Olivia said once they were back in the car.

"I know!" he said louder than he had intended. "I just couldn't take that lying sack of crap telling me that Evelyn got hurt falling down some stairs!"

"We know he's a liar, Elliot," she said. "I just wanted to make sure that she was okay and that he saw we were watching."

Elliot shook his head. "He's just going to beat her again and the next time, he'll kill her. He should be rotting in a cell right now, but since she refuses to say that he was the one who hurt her, he's free to walk the streets and kill her and anyone else he comes across."

"Maybe she'll come to her senses," Olivia said softly.

"Yeah, and maybe bacon will hail from the sky tomorrow..."

SVU Squad room
473 West 47th Street
6:08PM

The light on Elliot's desk in the squad room flickered for a moment and he felt a cold chill as he was reminded of the despised bathroom light in his apartment. As the light changed, his eyes glanced forward past Olivia to Captain Cragen on the phone in his office. Cragen's eyebrows were furrowed and his forehead was wrinkled as face displayed a strong frown. Elliot knew Cragen was most likely speaking to his boss, Deputy Inspector Richard Felton, and he knew Cragen would be coming to speak to both he and Olivia next. Deputy Inspector Felton only contacted Cragen directly when public outrage of crimes in the city was quickly approaching an event horizon.

From what he had seen throughout the morning newspapers, the media was calling Manhattan's SVU squad everything from incompetent to corrupt. Three boys were dead and they still had no answers. Usually this amount of public outrage would roll together after several months of inaction, but with two boys found within days of one another, the media seemed to be fueling parental fears with slightly more fervor. However, when Elliot was honest with himself, he knew that if he was on the outside of the situation, he would be just as fearful and angry.

His eyes fell upon Dickie's face in the picture of his four children and Elliot felt drained. He and Olivia had been on the case for nearly two weeks and still, they were no further along than they were when they first started.

The movement of Cragen's head nodding into the phone caught his eye and he was certain the storm was just about to hit them. He mentally braced himself knowing that the moment Cragen was off the phone he and Olivia would be forced to set every other case on their plate to the back of the pile and spend every waking moment tracking the killer of Jacob Lewendale, Connor Whickfield and Ricky Schrader.

Opposite him, Olivia was reviewing the autopsy reports completed on the latest victim. Like the others, there was no DNA present, no hairs and nothing that would lead them to a suspect. He was exhausted and could see the same lines of fatigue appearing in Olivia's face as the afternoon turned to evening.

"Well," Cragen said approaching their desks, "I just had my own ass fed to me by the deputy inspector. Tell me we've got something more on these three murders."

Elliot shook his head. "We could, but we'd be lying. Cap, we've talked to everyone involved. No one knows anything. The only thing close to a lead we've had was this Drover guy, but neither the first or the third victims have had any real contact with him."

"And, the forensics has turned up nothing," Olivia said. "There's no DNA, no hairs and the only fingerprints are from the newest victims."

"How 'bout Ricky Schrader?" Cragen asked.

Olivia sighed. "Melinda's latest report doesn't show any fingerprints at all. Even anything from another boy."

"I guess it's too much to hope that this guy's been scared off by the media..." Cragen put his hands in his pockets. "What about the kid who saw Jacob Lewendale talking to someone in a black truck?"

"Marcus Valentino?" Elliot said. "We already talked to him. All he saw was the truck."

"Well, that was more than a week ago," Cragen said. "Talk to him again. Maybe his story's changed or maybe he remembers something else since the media exposure."

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another, but Cragen caught the exchange. "Look! These Whickfields are more connected than you would think and I've got everyone down from the commissioner to retired cops calling me every second wanting to know how the case going. Go see what this kid has to say!"

He turned and headed back to his office and Olivia looked at Elliot with raised eyebrows. Cragen had few reasons to actually yell at them and they knew if he seemed this edgy, there was a fair amount of pressure bearing down on him from all sides. Even though the case specifically belonged to Elliot and Olivia, Munch and Fin would soon be called in to assist as the case became the absolute priority of the SVU.

Elliot followed Olivia to the elevators and a while later they were in an apartment at West 90th and Riverside Drive speaking, once again, to Marcus Valentino.

"I already told you what I saw that night," Marcus said his voice cracking on the last word. "How come you guys are here again?"

"Well," Elliot said. "We just want to make sure we understood everything you said. Now, why don't you tell us about that guy and the black truck again."

Marcus glanced between Elliot and Olivia and then down at his shoes before answering. "Well...it wasn't a truck."

"It's not a truck?" Olivia repeated her eyebrows nearing her hairline. "Well, if it's not a truck, what was the guy driving?"

"I don't know," he said, brown eyes wide. "It was like...er...truck-ish, sort of."

He looked expectantly at Elliot as if his answer was definite and concrete.

"Truckish?" Elliot said. "You want to elaborate on that?"

"It was like...not a truck...actually it was more like an SUV."

Elliot felt his entire body tense as he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, glossy piece of paper. "The guy in the SUV...did he look like this?"

Marcus took the photo from Elliot and stared at for a moment. "Yeah, he did. I mean it was dark, but he kinda' looked like that."

Olivia bent slightly at the waist to see the photo Elliot had handed the boy. He refused to meet her eyes when she straightened back up, but he felt warmer from the anger growing in Olivia.

He had given Marcus a copy of Jeffrey Drover's license photo, yet he had neglected to tell Olivia that he even obtained the image. Elliot steadied himself on his feet as Marcus continued to describe the man in the car that night.

"Yeah," Marcus said. "His hair was kind of scruffier and stuff, but it was dark like that and he had, like, the same face and stuff, too."

"Had you ever seen him before?" Elliot asked.

Marcus nodded. "I've seen him around the complex a whole bunch of times. He watches a lot of our games."

"Did Jacob seem like he knew who he was talking to that night?"

"Yeah, I think so. He wasn't looking like he was talking to some random dude or anything. Yeah, I pretty sure he knew him."

"Did you see him get in the car?"

"I had to leave, so I didn't stick around." Marcus looked down at his shoes again.
"Do you think that's the guy who did something to Jacob?"

As the argument in the squad room heated up, the voices bounced off the walls and echoed through the now mostly empty halls of the SVU.

"That's two of three Olivia! We need to bring in him!"

"Two of three based on what? The kid who couldn't tell the difference between truck and an SUV!"

The detectives had been yelling at one another since they left the Valentino home, over an hour ago. Olivia threw the first jibes the moment they reached the car, saying that Elliot would have better luck dragging Drover into the squad room if he dropped leaflets with his image from a plane over the city, to which Elliot responded with the fact that Olivia had been dragging her feet on Drover from day one only because she wanted to prove him wrong. They were each standing in front of their desks facing one another, Elliot's skin turning red throughout the argument and Olivia's turning bright white over the strain. The argument had gone on non-stop and even though the squad room had emptied, as evening turned to night, leaving the two of them and one other diligent worker in the area, neither detective had noticed.

"He made positive ID!" Elliot yelled. "It's enough to bring him in."

"You could've showed him a picture of Ronald McDonald and he would've identified him as the guy! What is wrong with you!"

"I am trying to track down this guy *before* he kills another kid!"

"By violating every procedure you've ever learned?" she yelled. "You completely tainted the witness! Even if he truly saw Drover that night, how the hell can Casey use him on the stand if he ID'd him from his license photo? You didn't even bother to throw together a six-person line-up!"

"It gave us what we need to get him in here and question him! That ID is enough to bring him and figure out what he knows. I didn't have time to put a line-up together. I knew we were talking to the kid today and I wanted something to jog his memory!"

"But not like this!"

"Then how, Olivia? How! At least now we know we can't stop looking at him. We have a suspect! We have *something* to go on now, which brings us one step closer to stopping these murders!"

"You know this is absolutely ridiculous!" Olivia picked up her coat. "You're willing to bring this guy in, rip his life apart, all on a whim and a gut feeling!"

"It's more than that, and you know it," he said softly.

"Is it? I mean honestly, there's no reason for this vendetta against Drover, Elliot. None at all."

"If he's murdering thirteen-year-old kids-"

"Why now?" she said, their argument finally dying down to softer tones. "We've dealt with child molesters who went after kids the same age as Dickie and Lizzie before. Why now all of sudden?"

Elliot sighed. "I'm not there to watch them...to keep them in line...to protect them."

"Elliot, they are good kids, and you and Kathy raised them well. They're not going to do anything irresponsible."

"Irresponsible?" he said. "Dickie's thirteen and he's sneaking out of the house to hang out with his friends. The latest victim...Ricky Schrader, snuck out of his house like it was nothing, and now we're investigating his murder. Look, Liv. I know you think you understand how I'm feeling with this case, but you don't. This is different..."

"It's okay to step down from the case, especially if it's hitting this close to home."

Elliot shook his head. "No, I can handle this."

"Well, obviously it's affecting you because you can't think this case through carefully. You're so focused on Drover that you may miss the real killer altogether."

"And, if it's Drover?"

She shrugged and stared at her desk. "If it's him, I'll eat my words and I'll distract the Cap while you help Drover have a little *accident*."

Elliot smiled at her, thankful for her support and the supposed end of the argument. The silence that came over them afterward was overwhelming since their voices had been echoing for such a long time.

"C'mon," he said after a minute. "Let's go it's late."

She nodded and put on her coat.

"You wanna grab a drink with me?" he asked, but she shook her head.

"Can't. I promised Jonathan I'd cook dinner for him and since it's already nine, I'm willing to bet I owe him for even more at this point."

He let out a laugh. "You're cooking dinner?"

"If spaghetti and frozen meatballs is dinner, yes."

He followed her out of the building and before they parted ways, she rubbed his arm. "It'll be okay, Elliot. We'll find the guy. Regardless if it's Drover or not."

Elliot nodded at her and got in his car, intending to drive to Queens and get some rest before diving back into their current most pressing case, however, instead of heading back across the river, he drove to a small restaurant on West End Avenue. Once there, he simply walked into the building and took a seat at the end farthest from the door. As a regular to the restaurant, Elliot knew the owner well and could simply grab a seat wherever he wanted without having to wait.

The dimly lit booth he chose was warm and familiar. He had come to the restaurant dozens of times with Kathy, the kids, his brothers and even Olivia, and each time he visited, he made sure to get a seat somewhere around the same booth. Cream-coloured menus sat upright against the wall of the booth on the table, and Elliot did not mind the slight sticky feel of them when he picked one up to examine the menu. He had tried nearly everything on the menu and although he continued staring at it, he had made up his mind the moment he stepped through the doors.

A short waitress with a big smile appeared just a moment after he had set down his menu and took his order of a medium rare steak, mashed garlic potatoes, steamed

mixed vegetables and a Rolling Rock. She informed him that she would be back with his order in a little while, but he knew it would be much sooner.

The owner, Michael Debbs, had gone to high school with Elliot and even though money was tight at the time, Elliot and his brothers had fronted Debbs a portion of the funds needed to help get the restaurant off the ground. In gratitude from the loan, Debbs made sure that Elliot was well served anytime he visited the restaurant.

Debbs had made good on the loan within a year and to celebrate, Elliot and his brother, Bryce, five years older, took their sister, Colleen, two years older than Elliot, out for the restaurant's grand opening. Elliot and Bryce had intended on going to the restaurant opening regardless, but took Colleen with them when it seemed certain that she did not want the slightest adulation for having beaten breast cancer that same year. It seemed a small consolation, but it was the most either brother could do for their sister who wanted to sweep the entire experience out of mind.

Twelve minutes later, the girl returned with his meal and Elliot heartily dug into the perfect steak, savoring each taste of it. He had not wanted to be alone, but sometimes it was unavoidable. He hated every evening he had to make dinner by himself and for himself, especially on Sunday nights. Once upon a time, Sunday evenings were the one time throughout the week his entire family would get together and make dinner as one. The family of six would spend the evening laughing, talking and catching up on each other's lives. Even when Maureen went away to school, she would try to make it back home every once in a while, always on Sunday evenings. Normally, he was in charge of the salad, but he was getting good at making the simpler things. Now, however, Sundays were a blur of loneliness and frozen dinners.

He had asked Olivia to come out with him in a last ditch effort to avoid spending another Sunday alone, even though he knew she would probably be busy. The small restaurant seemed out of the way from the rest of the world and Elliot knew he could more or less be alone without feeling such.

An image of Olivia trying to make dinner for her boyfriend floated to his mind and he dove into the potatoes with a bemused expression. He had seen a fair amount of men come in and out of Olivia's life and as they had been partnered for so long, he could tell just after meeting one how long he was going to last. Jonathan Halloway, it seemed, would probably be around for a bit; longer than the others at least. Elliot had only spoken to him twice and neither occurrence was enjoyable, but after nearly two years, he had learned to tolerate hearing about the man.

Eighteen months earlier, Elliot found himself both unnerved and relieved by the slightest suggestion that Olivia might have become an in-law. Both Bryce and his younger, unmarried brother, Nolan, had helped Elliot move out of his house and into his apartment along with Olivia and Elliot could not help but notice that the exchanges between Olivia and Nolan were a bit much for his tastes. He spent the better part of the day ensuring that they were not alone together for very long, unsure if he was trying to protect his brother or his partner.

All in all, Elliot felt comforted to see Nolan react to Olivia. Nolan, who at the time had just turned forty, had been a bachelor for far too long in Elliot's mind and without seeing a woman in Nolan's life as a high school teacher in Staten Island, he and Bryce shared long talks over whether or not they would have to "deal" with a non-straight relative. However, when Nolan had asked for Olivia's phone number at the end

of his move, it was with great relief, pride and slight regret that he informed his brother that Olivia was already dating someone.

Elliot sat in the dimly lit booth, took a swig of his Rolling Rock and casually scanned the room. The restaurant was small with a bar towards its middle, but on Sunday evenings especially, it was a nice, smoke-free place to have dinner.

He was about to return to his steak, when his eyes caught a somewhat familiar face at the bar. Dressed as if about to approach a trendy club scene, Olivia's friend, Maya Shah, stood at the bar talking on her cell phone, a Corona with a lime stuck in its neck in front of her. The eyebrows over her dark eyes were furrowed into an annoyed expression and she continuously moved a lock of long, black hair behind her ear, loosely disguising her frustration.

"Well, fine," he heard her say into phone. "You do whatever you feel like you need to, but I *did* come all the way up here just for *you*...yeah, well, I don't think I should be penalized just because you have kids...yeah, that's fine, I just want you to know, that's a real shitty thing to do someone...whatever, I'll just talk to you later."

She snapped her phone closed and tossed it into the small Louis Vuitton bag that hung from her shoulder. Maya sighed and took a long drink of her beer and glanced around the room. She spotted Elliot in his corner and he nodded at her in acknowledgement. She smiled at him and quickly strode to his table.

"Evening, Detective," she said. "Mind if I sit?"

"Have a seat," he said, a piece of steak in his cheek.

Maya sat across from him, but neither spoke for a full minute. Elliot had met Maya years earlier when he had first been partnered with Olivia, but he rarely had a chance to talk to her outside of Olivia's presence.

"So," Maya said brightly. "What're you doing here eating alone?"

Elliot shrugged. "I know the owners and they grill a good steak. Plus, I didn't really feel like trying to cook tonight."

"I completely understand," she said. "I never cook if I can help it."

"Never? Doesn't that get a little tedious?"

"In the greatest city in the world? Never!"

Elliot laughed, but silence fell upon them again.

"I talked to Livia yesterday," Maya continued. "She's seeming kind of...I don't know...maybe a little happier than before."

Elliot could tell that Maya was lying simply to make conversation and he did not blame her. He did not like pure silence either and Olivia was the only thing either of them had in common.

"Mm...", he replied, his mouth full of vegetables. "Might be that guy she's dating."

Maya eyes seemed to light up at the mention of Jonathan. "Yeah, Jonathan. He's great. Wish I'd of caught him."

"I don't think he likes me," Elliot said matter-of-factly.

"Really? I didn't Jonathan *disliked* anybody."

"'Bout a month ago, I had to drop off something for Liv. She wasn't there, but he was."

He paused briefly, recalling the encounter.

“Oh, so *you’re* Liv’s partner,” the dark-haired man had said, crossing his arms, but smirking slightly.

“Yeah,” Elliot had said. “Just...uh...give her this and have her call me if she has any questions about what I wrote.”

“I think I can manage that,” Jonathan said smugly.

“Yes...well,” Elliot had said, not sure what else to make of the guy. “Take care, then.”

“Hey, hang on sec,” Jonathan had said. “So, um...tell me. What’s it like to work with Olivia?”

“‘What’s it like?’” Elliot shrugged. “It’s fine...perfect. We get along great.”

Jonathan shook his head. “I see.”

“You see what?”

Jonathan raised his eyebrows as his mouth stretched into the same smug smirk. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

Elliot grew irritated. “Do you have some kind of problem with me or something?”

“No, no problem,” Jonathan had said. “Well...actually, I uh...have about three questions for you.”

“Okay...,” Elliot had said suspiciously.

“First of all, are you sleeping with Olivia?”

Elliot felt his eye twitch and he stood silent for a moment, wondering whether to deck the guy or just turn and walk back toward the elevator.

“No. I’m pretty sure you’re handling that.”

“‘Kay. Just checking...Have you ever slept with my girlfriend?”

“Again. No.”

“Well, all right,” Jonathan had said, the smirk turning into a wide grin. “So, let me ask: have you ever hurt her in any way?”

Elliot felt his expression soften. He was certain in their eight years together, he had said or done something that hurt Olivia. While he did not like to so much as raise his voice in her direction, he knew Olivia carried emotional scars from their partnership.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he had said.

“Well, then you know what? I think we’ll be all right. I’ll make sure Liv gets this and I hope you have yourself a good day.” With those words, Jonathan closed Olivia’s door in Elliot’s face.

Elliot shook his head. “Jackass,” he said under his breath as he headed for the elevator.

“He got a little...snippy with me,” Elliot continued breaking his own reverie.

“Really?” Maya said eyes wide. “Jonathan?”

“Took one look at me and we just gave each other a bad vibe, I guess.”

“Wow. He seems like such a sociable guy.”

“That’s what Liv tells me.”

“Hmmm,” Maya said taking a drink, “Although... You know he *is* a Halloway. And sometimes he can lay that smugness down pretty thick on people.”

Elliot nodded. *That's for damn' sure*, he thought to himself.

Silence hovered over them once more.

“So, what’re *you* doing here?” Elliot asked to break the silence again. “A *happenin’* gal like you. Shouldn’t you be out at some fabulous restaurant, dining with the rich and famous?”

“Yeah, I should,” she said, eyes gleaming with a flippant toss of her hair. “But, instead I’d thought I’d meet a friend for a few drinks, and of course, he blew me off.”

“Why’d he do that?”

“So,” she sighed, “he could spend a nice, Sunday evening with his kids.”

“Can you blame him?”

“Of course, I can. If he was gonna spend the night with his family he should’ve told me. *Before* I took the cab ride over here.”

Elliot shrugged. “Father’s are like that.”

Maya rolled her eyes. “Whatever. He knew what was up the second he woke up this morning. He can’t just confess eternal love and the possibility of marriage one night and blow me off the next minute.”

“*You* want to get married?”

“Hell no!” she said, taking another sip of her beer. “But, that doesn’t mean he can jerk me around. I’m a person too, you know.”

“That’s what Liv tells me,” Elliot repeated.

Maya smiled. “Livia thinks I should break up with him.”

“Are you?”

“Probably not, but I know I should. She’s always been the smart one. Always giving me the good advice that I always regret not taking.”

Elliot finished his potatoes and took a long drink of the Rolling Rock. “How long have you known one another?”

“More years than I can really remember,” she said slowly.

“Ten? Twelve?”

“A little more...”

“Fifteen? Twenty?”

She raised her eyebrows and shifted her gaze to the side table with a smile on her face.

“Can’t be more than twenty,” Elliot said. “You’re both not that old.”

“We’re the same age, actually. Same sign too. Born four days apart.”

“How ‘bout that,” he said, smiling.

Maya returned the smile. “Yep. Practically soul sisters.”

He nodded and tried to keep the conversation going.

“So, Maya. What is it that you do? I mean I’ve never heard Liv say, ‘when Maya gets time off work’ or something. Do you work somewhere or are you living off your folks’ money like I first assumed?”

She gave him a sly smile. “Technically speaking, I’m a criminal attorney.”

“Really? *You’re* a lawyer?”

“Look,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I went to law school, passed the bar and even set up a little office on the East Side. The thing is, my parents hate me and they always

will for as long as they're alive. I might as well give them a *valid* reason for hating me by being a leech on their bank account."

"I suppose that sounds fair enough."

Elliot could not help but smirk at Maya as she finished the rest of her Corona. Though Maya was Indian, her facial features had some of the shape of Olivia's and combined with nearly the same colouring, Elliot could almost see a far less stressed and less mature version of Olivia beaming out from Maya's eyes.

An unavoidable silence seemed to creep back between them again, when Justin Timberlake's "SexyBack" rang from her purse.

He started to laugh. "You know, my youngest daughter has that ringtone on her phone."

"Well, the teenie boppers always have the best stuff," Maya said, winking and looking at her caller ID. Her eyes grew wide as she looked at the phone. "Know what? I have to go."

"Emergency at home?"

"Guess you could say that."

"Your shoe collection on fire or something?" Elliot asked still grinning.

Maya threw back her head and laughed. "No, *that* would be an absolute disaster. My sister's just losing her goddamn mind...again."

"And she's calling you for advice? I thought Olivia was *your* advice pool."

"Oh, she is, but Priyani is calling for someone to bitch at and I know this is going to take a while. Have a good night."

"See you later," he said as Maya slipped out of the booth and began speaking rapid Hindi into her phone.

His steak finished and his only beer nearly emptied, Elliot sat alone staring at the seat Maya had just occupied. The loneliness had settled in quickly and he wondered if he would drive around the city for a while to clear his mind or simply go home and get some sleep.

Elliot took a few bills out of his wallet, laid them on the table, gave Debbs, who was behind the bar, a quick wave to add the meal to Elliot's tab, and headed out the door. As he got to his car he decided to go for Option Three: to head back to the precinct to find something more concrete on Drover. Perhaps if he worked quickly, he would find something before Olivia noticed and read him the riot act again.

Monday January 15, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York
4:09AM

Through a haze of sleep and her own hair covering her face, Olivia could hear her cell phone ripping through the night's silence from her end table. She dislodged herself from Jonathan's grasp and the mass of sheets and blankets that covered the bed and reached for the phone. She could hear Jonathan groan from his side of the bed as she moved.

Twenty minutes later, Olivia was dressed, in Jonathan's car because she desired not to deal with cabs that early in the morning, and was passing through the light at University Place and 10th Avenue, all the while wondering why crimes could only be discovered at this time of night.

Why couldn't they do this in the middle of the day and give me one night of sleep? she had said to herself.

She had received a call from officers informing her that a murdered young boy had been found behind a building and since she was “catching” cases that night, it was her turn to first investigate. Earlier that night, she told Jonathan that it was strong possibility that she would be called out of bed, but he wanted to have dinner regardless. She wanted to nudge him in the chest when he groaned once the phone rang, but she suppressed the urge. Jonathan had been told what her situation was the moment they started dating and she felt he had no reason to be annoyed.

West 10th Avenue turned into East 10th and Olivia continued forward with a slight grimace on her face. The officer had said that a black boy had been found and that they were working on an identification on the victim, and she was not ready to take on another child molestation so close to the most poignant one. The current string of murders was she and Elliot's prime focus and any other case would have to wait until it was solved. Though she had yet to even meet the parents of the victim, she knew she would have to lie to them, telling them that their case was at the top of her list, while she knew the murders of Jacob Lewendale, Connor Whickfield and Ricky Schrader took complete priority.

She pictured the face of the grieving mother as she crossed 3rd Avenue and suddenly felt nauseated. A wave of exhaustion passed over her and a part of her wanted to just let Elliot get to the scene first to handle everything and go back to sleep, but she knew she had never been accused of dereliction of duty previously and there was no need start now. She also knew that no cop in the SVU kept his or her job by passing the more unpleasant duties onto other detectives.

The radio in the car had been playing the oldies Olivia had listened to as a small child and when Don McLean began singing about a time long, long ago, she turned up the volume. A memory of she and Maya screaming the song at the top of their lungs with a group of other friends as teenagers came to mind and she briefly let the task at hand slip from her thoughts.

A familiar flash of purple light created from the red and blue alternating squad car lights appeared as Olivia approached Avenue C. Moments later, she was ducking under yellow crime scene tape and was viewing the body of a black boy who did not look much older than ten or eleven. His close-cut, black hair had bits of white fuzz in it that Olivia could not identify and his eyes were vacant with a blue glaze over them. While his large eyes were reminiscent of the other boys, his age was seemed a few years outside of the modus operandi of their current murderer.

Just as she began to feel slight relief that the previous killer had not jumped races, Melinda asked her to view the body from where she stood.

“See this?” she said pointing to the boy's neck. “It was harder to tell immediately, but those are the same marks found on the past three murders.”

Olivia felt her eyebrows furrow at Melinda. “It's same guy?”

"Has to be," she said. "From the way the body's been positioned here and the shapes of a belt or something like it around the neck. He's nude and he's been sodomized to the same point as the others. It's exactly like the past murders."

Olivia shook her head. "But, pedophiles are very particular. All the past victims have been white and somewhere closer to thirteen. He can't be older than eleven."

"I don't know what to tell you," she said shrugging. "I'll know with an absolute certainty once I get him on the table, but this looks like the same guy."

Olivia closed her eyes and sighed.

"But," Melinda continued, "unlike the others, this boy's only been dead for a few hours. Even with the cold, I can tell he was strangled somewhere between two to four hours ago."

Olivia heard Elliot calling her name and she waved him toward where she and Melinda stood. He strode over quickly and she could see that he looked extremely tired. She also had to hide her surprise and worry that he had arrived to the scene far sooner than she would have thought. A quick calculation over the time it would take to get from Woodside to Alphabet City ran through her head and she made a note ask Elliot if he had slept in the "crib" at the 1-6.

When he got to the body, Elliot bent down to look at his neck. He stood quickly and he seemed to grow pale in the artificial police lights. Olivia wanted to ask him what was wrong besides the obvious, but Melinda spoke before she could.

"I'll let you two know if I find anything that looks like it's a different guy," and she began to pack up her examiner's kit.

Twenty minutes later, Olivia and Elliot were heading back to their respective cars to go back to the precinct, but Olivia grew concerned as she could still see the same sickly expression on Elliot. Even when they left the boy's body, the colour did not return to his face and she knew something was definitely wrong.

"Elliot," she said softly as they reached his car. "Is something going on?"

He stared at the Taurus and remained silent.

"Did you sleep at the crib tonight?"

He still said nothing.

"I mean," she continued. "You haven't said more than two words to me since you saw the body-"

"I saw him," Elliot said, blurting out the words. "The victim. The boy...I saw him."

"You saw him?" she said eyes wide. "Where? When?"

"Yesterday at the ISA complex." His eyes remained on the car. "He ran right by me. I even heard his mother calling for him."

Olivia stood for a moment silently staring at him. "Do you remember his name, because we're still looking for an-"

"Daniel," he said. "I didn't catch the last name."

She nodded her head. "Well, we can use that to narrow down our search for him."

Elliot lightly hit his fist against the hood of the car. "That kid was walking, talking, breathing...*smiling* at me yesterday, Liv...and now...I mean I could've reached out and touched him."

She stared at him as he refused to return her gaze, wishing so much that she could give some words of encouragement, but none came. She had had the same occurrence

with other victims, where they were just a minute too late to save one here and a moment shy of catching a criminal there. It was a rare and unfortunate coincidence, and she felt for him knowing that only time would ease the pain he was feeling.

An hour later, they were back at the precinct reviewing new Missing Persons cases involving a black boy named Daniel.

"Found him," Munch said from his desk. "Daniel Richardson. Lived on West 63rd, near the park."

"When was it filed?" Elliot asked.

Olivia's eyes were directly on Elliot, knowing a major reaction was about to erupt.

Munch sighed. "About an hour before he was found. He was supposed to visit a friend's house just down the street and he never made it there."

Elliot slammed his hands on his desk and both she and Fin across from her jumped at the sound.

"He was there!" Elliot yelled. "He was *right* there! We probably saw him and he picked this kid out right in front of us. He's mocking us!"

"Elliot," Munch said calmly. "We don't even know if it's the same guy or not."

"Warner all but said so this morning," Olivia said.

"But, we still don't know for sure," Munch said. "This could be a copy cat. I mean this case is getting more exposure by the day. Who knows who's been getting some sick ideas?"

"This is the guy," Elliot said, teeth clenched. "There's no way it's not."

"But he's black," Munch said standing. "All the other vics have been white. He's not going to switch up all of sudden."

"It's the *same* guy," Elliot said. "He was at the complex while Liv and I were there and now he's taunting us."

"We don't know that he's taunting us, Elliot," Olivia said softly trying to calm him.

Elliot shook his head at her and started to retort, but she interrupted. "Let's just go notify the parents. Maybe they'll know a little more about what happened to him last night."

He stared at her for what seemed like an eternity before taking his coat from his chair back and walking toward the elevators. Olivia grabbed the victim's information from Munch, gave him a look that read, "I'm sorry about Elliot," and followed her partner to the elevators.

The Richardsons, Langdon and Daphne, were dressed in Kenneth Cole and Chanel, respectively when they answered the door, and were both more or less unresponsive upon receiving the news that their son, Daniel, had been found. Mr. Richardson demanded to see his son in person the moment he told him that he had been murdered, and Olivia and Elliot found themselves standing just behind the parents as Melinda was about to reveal the boy's face from under a white sheet.

Olivia mentally held her breath, waiting for the storm that was about to hit. As if a symbol had been struck, the sound of Mrs. Richardson's scream bounced and resounded around the walls of the waiting room as Melinda revealed Daniel Richardson's lifeless face from beneath the sheet. Olivia saw Melinda quickly cover him as Mrs. Richardson

fell to her knees in front of the window, arms reaching out as if wanting to hold her child one last time.

Stepping forward automatically, Olivia took Mrs. Richardson's hand in one of her own and allowed the grieving mother to squeeze her hand numb. She looked up at Elliot who stood next to a stoic Mr. Richardson, but said nothing as Mrs. Richardson continued to scream for her son.

SVU Squad room

4:17PM

The large, clear Plexiglas board which had held the photos of countless criminals and victims, stood in the middle of the SVU squad room adorning the pictures Jacob Lewendale, Connor Whickfield, Ricky Schrader and now, Daniel Richardson. Cragen stood in front of the board with a frown on his face while his four detectives stood behind him with equally grim expressions.

The media had caught wind of Daniel Richardson's murder and the reporters were nearly leveling the precinct in hopes to get a statement. He knew one would need to be issued soon, but as he stared at the innocent faces on the board, he realized no answer he could give would appease the impending mobs.

Langdon Richardson was one of the more affluent realtors in the city and Daphne sat on the boards of several of New York's most notable charities. The death of their youngest son hit the media far sooner than anyone could have imagined, and Cragen's phones began ringing several minutes after Olivia and Elliot had notified the parents.

"We've got a real problem here," he said toward the board but intended for the detectives behind him. "I mean besides the obvious." He sighed. "Dr. Warner's sure it's the same guy?"

"Hand delivered the results herself," Elliot said. "It's the same guy."

Cragen shook his head. "This just doesn't make any sense."

"It's sick," Fin said.

"It's always sick," Munch said, putting his hands in his pockets. "The Richardsons are notable people, but this isn't the first time we've seen this and it won't be the last either."

"It's sick," Fin continued, "because this guy killed a black kid...today."

Silence fell over the group for a moment before Olivia spoke. "It's Martin Luther King Day."

"Yeah, that *is* sick," Munch said. "Killing a black kid in honor of a leader. What kind of sick bastard gets his kicks by changing his MO on Martin Luther King Day?"

"The same one who gets his jollies by raping and murdering adolescent boys," Elliot said. "This guy couldn't have picked Daniel out at random. He knew exactly what he was doing."

"How so?" Cragen said.

"Daniel Richardson just turned twelve years old on the ninth and he's small for his age, but the parents told Liv and me that Daniel played soccer with older kids. He should've been in a U-12 league, but they greased some wheels so that he could play up."

“Why?” Munch said. “So, he could get beat up on the soccer field?”

Elliot shook his head. “So that he’d be competitive by the time he got to high school. But, he held his own even though he played with kids a few years older.”

“But, why is that even significant?” Fin said. “I mean, so he played soccer with older kids. Why would this guy target *him*?”

“Because he probably didn’t realize that Daniel was younger until he got a hold of him,” Elliot said. “That might explain why the quick turnaround this time.”

“But, Daniel looks young,” Cragen said. “Anyone could see it. If this guy’s a pedophile, he would’ve seen this and kept on trucking since his age group is thirteen.”

Another wave of silence fell over the group and again Olivia broke it.

“What if he’s not actually a pedophile?” she asked. Met with inquisitive stares, she continued. “What if he’s just a freak who’s out to kill these kids just because they’re there? Maybe there’s something about them that they have that he wants or never had in the first place.”

“But everything about this guy screams pedophile, though,” Fin said.

“That doesn’t mean he has to be one,” she said. “And, if he’s not then there’s no reason why he wouldn’t go after a boy outside his apparent age range and race.”

“Which means,” Elliot said, “he picked out Daniel just because he was around that complex. Daniel played on a team with twelve and thirteen year old kids and this guy would’ve seen him with them. He’s picking out his victims from that site.”

“Wait a minute,” Munch said. “I thought Ricky Schrader didn’t play in the same league as these other kids. He wouldn’t have had a reason to be at that site.”

“But there’s not bars at the gates or anything,” Elliot said. “He could’ve followed Ricky anywhere, especially since his foster parents said he ran away a lot. I’m telling you this guy is stalking the kids from that complex.”

“So, now we have to make a decision,” Cragen said. “Do we close down the site or do we let it stay open?”

Two distinct answers were heard from each of the four detectives simultaneously and the captain simply stared at those before him.

“We need to keep it open,” Fin said. “If we close it down, the killer’s gonna know we’re onto him and we’ll never find ‘im.”

“I agree,” Elliot said. “We should place some Unis and some Plain Clothes around the whole complex looking for the guy.”

“But,” Olivia said, “we may not find him, even with officers at every door. We still not sure how he tracked down Ricky Schrader-”

“Which is why we need people at the complex,” Elliot interrupted.

“But,” she continued, “we’ve already established that this guy might not be a pedophile at all. If he’s moved on to other spots in the city there’s no telling where he might be and when he’ll go back to that complex.”

Olivia glared at Elliot, trying hard not to show her aggravation that Elliot was, again, not backing her opinion on this case. In her eyes, the longer the complex stayed open, the more likely it was that another boy was going to be taken from the site and found murdered elsewhere in the city.

She stared at him, hoping to sway him with the look in her eye, but Elliot stood firm.

“Shutting down that complex does nothing except excite hysteria. We’ll be up to our armpits in angry parents the moment the press gets wind that this guy’s targeting that site.”

Munch took a step between them. “How’s it going to look if we leave the place open and another kid disappears?”

“How’s it gonna look if we never find this guy?” Fin said. “It’s like Elliot said: as soon as we close the place, he’s gonna bolt.”

“All right, look,” Cragen said before Olivia could respond again. “Why don’t we just leave it open for the time being. We’ll place both Unis and Plain Clothes all around the site and see what we can dig up. What about that trainer, Drover? What else do we know about his involvement?”

Olivia spoke up before Elliot could open his mouth. “We’re still not sure if he’s involved at all.”

“The witness who saw Jacob Lewendale talking to a guy in a truck that night, did identify him,” Elliot said.

She threw him a dirty look. “But it was just through a license photo and that ID was sketchy at best.”

“Sketchy how?” Cragen asked.

“The kid didn’t know how to describe the difference between a truck and an SUV and he identified Drover because that’s the picture we showed him. I still don’t think he’s involved.”

“Fine,” Cragen said with a tone that proved the subject was closed at the moment. “I want you four doing rounds at the soccer complex tonight. Benson, Stabler: you two will start the first round. Munch, Fin: you’ll get the next.”

Tri-State ISA Complex 6
439 West 108th St
9:04PM

The soccer ball smacked against the wooden walls of the indoor soccer field and a teenager, with a mop of blond curls chased after it, three other boys following close behind him.

The complex was about to close for the night and Olivia felt like she could sleep for the next hundred hours. She and Elliot had been watching the site for several hours, hoping to see someone who looked out of place. Unfortunately, everything Olivia saw only made her biological clock tick louder than ever. Fathers holding younger children, all the while cheering for their older ones out on the fields; Mothers pushing toddlers in strollers; children of all ages, everywhere. With the sighting of each family, Olivia felt every day of her thirty-seven years weighing on her.

She glanced at Elliot who was scanning the faces of the dwindling crowd around the oblong field. She knew that he was desperately searching for Drover’s face among the spectators and a part of her wished that Drover would be there too, but she knew he would not. While Drover did not strike her as the most well adjusted person, running

through Manhattan streets at night alone and all, nothing about him seemed like he would be capable of committing this string of murders.

She sighed as the referee on the field in front of them called time on the game. Elliot had said hello to several sets of parents they had seen around the complex, all of whom he had known from attending all his own children's soccer games. She could see that he desperately wanted to tell each of the parents to keep a closer watch on their children around the complex, as she wanted to do the same, but they had both been told to keep quiet about the situation to keep from stirring a panic.

The respective teams were in lines shaking hands, congratulating one another on a "good game", and Olivia felt Elliot shift beside her.

"We calling it a night?" she asked.

He nodded. "I figure another hour as they close up, but yeah." He stared out at the fake grass field and tall, bright lights. "You know, I saw your friend, Maya, yesterday while I was having dinner."

"Really?" Olivia said, feeling her eyebrows rise. "Where was this?"

"A restaurant on West End," he said.

"You had dinner together?"

He shook his head. "No, I just happened to look up and she was there. We just talked for a while. She's a real character, that one."

"Yeah, that sounds like Maya. So, what'd you talk about?"

"Why?" he said, grinning slightly. "You jealous?"

She rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess I don't have to ask because the only thing you've got in common is me."

"We only talked about you for a little bit," he said. "She's cute. She reminds me of you."

"Maya! How?" she said a little louder than she had intended.

Elliot shrugged. "Don't know. She just seems like a version of you before the weight of the world started to rest on your shoulders."

Olivia stared at him for a bit, thinking to herself. Maya was most definitely a character; one who had mentioned on more than one occasion that Elliot seemed like the perfect catch for any woman. The very idea of she and Elliot conversing alone had her more than worried for reasons she could not quite understand.

"What?" Elliot asked when he noticed her staring at him.

"Nothing," she said. "Just...be careful with Maya."

"Careful, how?"

"Well...she cheats...often. I wouldn't want to see you or anybody I cared about involved with that side of her."

Elliot let out a laugh. "Liv, I'm not *even* thinking about that. I just thought it was interesting that you two would be so alike and so different at the same time."

Olivia nodded and smirked, but an uncomfortable silence fell upon them nonetheless. The situation with Kathleen notwithstanding, she and Elliot had few secrets between them, but Olivia told Maya nearly *everything*. While she trusted Maya wholeheartedly, she could not help but wonder exactly what was said between her and Elliot.

"How long've you known one another, anyway?" he added.

She shrugged. "Forever. Hey, it looks like it's just us and a few other Plain Clothes officers in here. When are Munch and Fin coming tomorrow?"

"They open at noon, so I suspect a little before then."

"You see anyone out of the ordinary?"

"No," he sighed. "But, that doesn't mean he's not coming back."

"Exactly," she said.

"C'mon, Liv. Don't start that again."

"Start what? I'm just saying...we don't know who we're looking for and for all we know, he's probably tracked down a different--"

"Olivia, if we close down the site, we'll never find him."

"I'm just not sure I'm willing to sacrifice another victim in the hopes that we may track him down here."

"Well, what other ideas have you got?" he said nearly yelling. "The only prints we have are from the other victims, we only have DNA from one victim, it doesn't match anything in the system and we haven't got any suspects to even run it against! We've got nothing! If we close down the complex, we lose our only chance at finding this guy."

She stood silent, unsure what to say. The entire situation annoyed her endlessly. The issue at hand, Jeffrey Drover, was not being expressed, and she could see Elliot was venting his frustration over not finding him.

"Fine," she said, heading for the complex exit.

The truth of the matter was that she was tired; not only physically, but in every way possible. She was tired of dealing with the stress of the case, tired of feeling her life slipping away from her one day at a time and she sick of the groove, in which she and Elliot found themselves. One moment, everything appeared like it was getting better, fitting back into place, and a minute later, they were arguing again.

Weeks ago, they had been arguing almost non-stop over the Sennet case and they seemed to have patched up all the sour feelings following her departure from the department months earlier. Yet, there they were, still arguing over things that seemed trite when one considered all that they had endured together. They simply could not get back to where they were and they seemed to drift apart farther the longer they went without a suspect.

A *valid* suspect, she thought to herself as she hailed a cab.

The thought of sharing a silent ride home with Elliot was almost too much for her. Drover was still at the heart of the problem and Olivia knew that if they did not find another suspect soon, Elliot would explode at the thought that they had Drover just within their grasp and he managed to slip away from them.

A half hour later, Olivia was in her apartment and checking the messages on her home phone. She had three: one from Maya telling her that Elliot had the "cutest dimples" when he was eating, one from Jonathan saying he was having "one of those days" and would not be coming by her place that night and one from her friend Jillian just asking how she was doing.

Olivia dialed *8 on her phone and was speaking to Jillian Harfort a moment later.

"Well, Jordan was excited all day," Jillian said.

"Was he?" Olivia said.

“He just heaved that basketball up there and after it went in, you couldn’t do anything to wipe that smile off his face. I mean he’d never made a three-pointer in his life and he even did a little dance afterward. Oh, Liv. You should’ve seen it. It was adorable.”

Olivia smiled into the phone as Jillian rattled on about her son, Jordan’s, basketball game. The same age as Olivia, Jillian Blakendorf, now Harfort, attended Sienna College while Olivia was there and they had been friends for close to twenty years. Her appearance, with straight, blonde hair cut just below the ear and large, soft blue eyes, often times betrayed her demeanor. She could seem acquiescent and malleable and, as she had once revealed to Olivia, would sometimes keep a vacant expression on her face to give people a false sense of security. While Jillian’s main choice of topic usually surrounded her husband or her children, she had a fierce soul that many found ruthless. Jillian could sound like a “soccer mom” one moment and like the cutthroat litigator she was at heart the next.

Jillian and Maya attended law school together and while Maya set up a very small practice with her own degree, Jillian married and decided her efforts were better served by raising a family. Though she wanted to have the American Dream, at no point had Jillian lost the cold-blooded nature she perfected in law school.

Any time someone close to her was threatened, a side of Jillian seen by few people would erupt and her true forceful nature was revealed. Although she could be cold at times, Jillian had been by Olivia’s side through good times and bad and of the few friends with whom she still kept in touch, Jillian was the most dependable.

“So,” Jillian said. “Jordan and Jeremy are wondering when they’ll get to see their Aunt Liv.”

“I know,” Olivia said. “I’ve been so busy with the caseload. Jonathan and I barely even have time to see one another.”

“You need a vacation.”

“Tell me about.”

“No, seriously,” Jillian said sternly. “You need to take a break before you just fall down out of exhaustion.”

“Of course, I do, Jill, but when? The second I think I can take some time for myself, a case falls on my lap that I can’t just leave for someone else.”

“But, you have to take time for you.”

“Well, it’s not happening anytime soon, so I’m not going to worry about it,” Olivia said sitting on her couch to rewrite the notes she had made that day concerning Daniel Richardson.

Jillian was silent on the phone for a moment. “You’re working this thing I’ve heard about the boys in the city, aren’t you?”

“Jill...”

“No, I know you can’t tell me about it, but I can tell. That’s probably why you’re calling back now when I called you around six. Although, I honestly can’t remember the last time you were actually home in the evening.”

“Neither can I.”

“But...” Olivia could hear Jillian hesitate. “I’m worried Olivia. I mean I know all this is happening in the city, which makes me *so* glad we’re in Connecticut, but it’s just that no one’s saying anything about it, which just makes us parents worry more.”

“Jill, there’s nothing to say. Trust me. If we had a guy in custody, you’d know about it.”

“I’m also worried about you too. I know how you take these kinds of cases and I know that your partner’s probably not being all that pleasant with this either.”

Olivia was unable to stifle her sigh into the phone. While Maya had met Elliot a few times since she lived in the city, Jillian had not, but it did not stop her from forming her own negative opinion of him. Olivia blamed herself for the problem because the only times she ended up telling Jillian about Elliot was when they were arguing about something. She usually saved the stories of the delightful times with her partner for Maya and it was not until a few months ago that she noticed the discrepancy.

She had told Jillian that Elliot was talking to his estranged wife and that they seemed to still be on good terms, but Jillian seemed to think that Elliot did not deserve to have his wife return to him. Since then, Olivia had made a clear effort to highlight the positive parts of her relationship with her partner.

“He’s got kids this same age,” Olivia said.

“I see,” Jillian said with a tone that suggested that she did not care how old Dickie and Lizzie were. “Well, I know *my* boys haven’t seen you in ages. You wouldn’t believe how tall Jordan’s getting. It’s almost like someone’s stretching him out at night. When’s the soonest you think you could get out here? Or we could even come to you.”

Olivia glanced toward the calendar that lied flat on her desk and across the room. “Probably not until...February,” she lied. “Late February. March even.”

She could barely keep plans with Jonathan who lived twenty minutes away from her, but Olivia still did not want to discount her friend all together. In truth, she did want to see Jillian’s children, as she was their godmother, but she also did not want to set plans she would not be able to keep. She had seen Elliot do the same too often not to know that there would repercussions at some point if she could not keep her promises.

“Well, how about you pencil us in for around the 16th of February, unless you and Jonathan are doing something *special* that weekend for Valentine’s.”

Olivia scoffed. “Yeah, well if we manage to have dinner that night, it’ll be a miracle.”

“I still think it’s a miracle Sarah and I picked a guy that actually worked. You cost me fifty bucks.”

She smiled into the phone, knowing how much Jillian loved to rub in the fact that she had set her up with Jonathan. “You set me up with someone you thought wouldn’t work out *and* bet on it?”

“Yep, but I figured you deserved a nice dinner with a good looking guy since you seemed to be giving up for a while there. I guess the money was worth it, but it’s really the principle of the thing.”

They talked until Jillian had to leave when Jeremy, aged five, woke up because he had an “accident,” and the moment she set down her phone, it began ringing again.

She closed her eyes and sighed before she answered it. “Benson.”

“Uh...hi, Olivia? It’s Kathleen.”

“Hi,” Olivia said, her tone raising several pitches. “What’s up?”

“Um...I wanted to know if...uh...I-er...um, we could make...um...an appointment for the doctor. You know...about what we talked about on Saturday?”

Olivia paused for a moment as she put together what Kathleen was trying to say. "Yeah. That...that's fine. What day is best for you?"

"Um...how 'bout Friday? Can we do it, like at night or something?"

Another uncomfortable pause was heard over the phone. Olivia knew Kathleen wanted to make a doctor's appointment for later Friday evening so that she could simply tell her parents that she was "out" and would be able to avoid telling them anything altogether.

"Well, it'd be kind of hard to get a doctor's appointment with my doctor on a Friday evening, but..." She racked her brain for a moment, thinking about what she would do if she were in Kathleen's position. "If we went to the free clinic, they'd be open later and we could get your prescription right there."

"Yeah!" Kathleen said, nearly shouting. "That's great. Do you want *me* to call or...?"

Olivia unintentionally rolled her eyes before answering. "Well, I can...I can call tomorrow and make the appointment for you. I'll just say it's for my daughter or something." She heard Kathleen let out a little giggle. "So, would six be okay?"

"Perfect!"

"You're sure you don't want your mom to come. Because I know if you were my daughter..."

"Olivia," she interrupted. "If I were *your* daughter, I know I'd be able to just straight talk to you about this. I don't want to tell her. Not yet, at least. And I *really* don't want my dad to know."

"Okay," Olivia said nodding into the phone. "I understand. Well, I'll...make that appointment for this Friday at six. I'll just pick you up from your house or something."

"Well..." Kathleen began and Olivia flinched. Their conversation was becoming more deceptive with every passing moment. "How 'bout I just meet you at Schreider's again and then we'll go from there?"

Olivia sighed. "That...that'll work. So, Schreider's, this Friday at six. I'll make the appointment for six-thirty so we'll have some time."

"Great! Thanks so much, Olivia!"

"No problem," she said and then hung up the phone.

She put her hand to her stomach, suddenly feeling both queasy and a burning sensation from deep within her abdomen. She ran a hand through her hair and groaned. Having nearly forgotten about the predicament with Kathleen, Olivia felt the strain of stress pressing on her from all sides.

She heard a buzz from her intercom and she considered just leaving whoever it was outside in the cold.

"Who is it?" she asked a minute later into the intercom.

"Repo Man!"

"Jonathan," she said in a low voice. "I'm really tired and I thought you said you were busy?"

"I was, now I'm not and my first thought was on you."

"Yeah and I'm sure you were thinking with your head instead of your dumbstick."

"Whatever, whatever," he said through the intercom. "Seriously, Liv. It's fifteen degrees out here."

She sighed. "Come on up."

Ten minutes later, she was lying on her couch wrapped in Jonathan's arms.
"How was your day or should I just change the subject?"
"New topic," Olivia said softly.
She felt him laugh. "That bad eh?"
"New topic," she repeated.
"The job or something else *and* the job?"
"The latter and I thought we were onto a new topic?"
"Well," Jonathan continued. "I can probably guess what's wrong with the job, but what else is wrong?"
"New topic," she mumbled again into his shirt.
"Seriously, Liv," he said nudging her in his arms. "What's wrong?"
She sighed. "Elliot."
Jonathan tensed beneath her. "Why him? What's he done?"
"Nothing. It's his daughter."
"Which one? Doesn't he have, like, five kids?"
"Four and it's his second one, Kathleen. She wants birth control and she's too afraid to ask either of her parents about it."
"And, how does that concern you?"
"Well, I'll give you one guess as to who she's come to for help."
"Still don't see how it's your problem."
Olivia maneuvered herself out of his arms. "Well, aren't you being a complete jerk about this?"
He sighed. "Liv. If you get stressed out because of the job, that's understandable. But to get all worked up over your partner's kid, Liv, that's ridiculous."
"I've known her since she was ten years old."
"So. That doesn't make her your responsibility. It's your *partner's* kid. If she's having problems, he should be the one to deal with it. And, I'm pretty sure she's got a mother too. I don't see why *you* should be stressed out over *their* problem."
She moved away from him on the couch and glared at him. "You can't see why I'd want to help out Elliot's daughter? Are you serious?"
"Olivia," he said rolling his eyes. "She's not your kid."
"And neither are the ones I help every day."
"But, those kids are different. They've got real problems. You shouldn't be penalized because your partner can't control his kids."
"Kathleen doesn't want to go to her parents and neither would any girl her age in her situation. Elliot is perfectly capable of taking care of his kids."
A smug smile spread across Jonathan's face. "Well, *obviously* he's not since his kids can't go to him with their problems and he's let his marriage fall apart."
The nausea that had subsided when she fell into Jonathan's arms earlier returned and she quickly stood.
"You know what?" she said. "I've just realized, I've got a *lot* of work to do seeing as how I've got rapists and pedophiles and killers to track down. Maybe you should go home and I'll call you a little later."
"You're serious?"
"Oh, I'm *real* serious."

Jonathan sat on the couch for a minute, mouth agape before he finally stood to look down at her from his six-foot two frame.

"Fine," he said. "I'll call you later. When you're a little less busy or whatever."

"Yeah, I think that's a good idea."

"Well," he said as he stood at the door, the expression on his face still registering shock that she would throw him out in the middle of the night. "I...well, I guess I really *will* just call you later."

"Good night," she said in a sing-song voice, closing the door behind him.

Olivia returned to her notes on Daniel Richardson, shaking her head all the while. Things between her and Elliot might have been bad, but she could not sit idly by and allow someone to bad mouth her partner the way Jonathan had.

Her stomach rumbled and she leaned her head back against the coach. Perhaps, if she had the strength to rummage through her medicine cabinet, she might find a Tums or a bottle of Pepto-Bismol to settle the pains in her stomach.

Unknown Time and Place

Screaming.

He had always loved it; that scream. It was not the final one; far from it. It was the scream she made, they all made, in that moment she knew death was imminent. The scream that said all hope had faded and fear had completely overtaken her.

She screamed and he smiled, reveling in the sound as it echoed through dark halls and wet walls. This one had bored him for much too long and now was the time to put her away with all the others.

His hands sparkled in the miniscule light to which only he was accustomed as he ran both of them up her chest and toward her throat. He was still inside of her and he paused briefly considering if he should wait until he reached climax or continue onward.

He slid his hands forward. There was no need to wait. Climax would come with her last breath.

He could feel her blood pulsing through her veins against the skin on his rough hands and he spread his fingers about the soft orifice of her neck. The muscles in her throat clenched sensing the impending pressure while he pushed his palms forward against her windpipe. Her entire body tensed around him and beads of sweat appeared on his brow in anticipation for the release.

His mind felt electric as the small muscles in his hand applied slow pressure against her windpipe. More and more. Harder and harder. The stronger the pressure, the softer her scream and he continued to press his hands upon her.

With a final exertion of pressure to her throat, the windpipe gave way at last and he felt it break within his grasp. Her arms flailed wildly about him, struggling harder against him and slapping at anything within reach as his drops of sweat splashed onto her face.

Pale skin turned red and brown eyes bulged from their sockets, but he continued to hold her without a movement or hurried breath. The seconds ticked away and her eyes darted around as her brain began its last efforts to save itself from an untimely end.

And then...

His eyes locked onto hers looking for that which he loved more than any scream. The second her brain ceased to function and her soul vaped out from her eyes and dissipated into the cold air about them. The bright flecks of gold and green that once livened her face melted into a sea of dark brown and her arms slowly fell to her sides. He could feel her body relaxing all around him and watched as the last vestiges of life floated out of her. To know that he had ended a human life; to know that never again would this soul walk the earth, engage with him and scream for him. He felt simply exhilarated.

With all oxygen depleted from her lungs and the cells of her body deprived of the electrical impulses needed to function, her heartbeat slowly came to a stop and he bucked forward finally achieving climax.

Her body was still warm and he kissed her graciously on the lips, relishing the taste of her last warmth. He climbed off and sighed. In the end, she had been quite fun. Perhaps if she had put up the same type of vigor in the past, he may not have grown so very bored with her.

But, that was in the past and he would now have to simply tuck her away with all the others. He would put her away; where he placed all the others with whom he had grown bored. The odor of all the past ones was more than foul, but there was no reason to move them elsewhere. Moving them from outside of his grasp would only involve outsiders; those who would not, could not, understand the way things were and the way things had to be.

He was not worried. He still had the others and there were always more to be found. He could replace her and any of those who bored him. And he would replace the new ones too, should the time come.

Chapter Five

Tuesday January 16, 2007
SVU Squad room

The doors to the fifth floor elevator opened and Elliot stepped into the corridor that led to the SVU squad room. In one hand, he held a four-cup cup holder in which stood two tall coffees; one black with two sugars, the other black with three, and in the other hand, he held a small, white bag that carried three blueberry muffins.

Aside from calling her, Elliot had no way of knowing whether or not Olivia would be at the precinct, as it was a little after six-thirty in morning, but he took a chance regardless and hoped to make up for their argument the previous night with "I'm sorry" muffins and coffee.

As he entered the squad room, he found Olivia at her desk, focused on her computer monitor, alone except for the three other officers sitting at other desks throughout the room.

"Morning," he said softly, as he got to their desks.

"Hey," she said brightly looking up at him.

"Brought you some coffee and a muffin," he said handing her the bag.

She smiled. "How'd you know I'd even be here this early?"

"It's me, Olivia," he said taking his coffee from the cup holder. "I just knew."

Olivia shook her head, but smiled just the same.

"So, what *are* you doing in so early?" he asked.

"Oh, I thought you knew me," she teased. "It's *you*, remember? You just knew."

Elliot shrugged and popped a piece of the large muffin into his mouth with a smile.

"Well," she continued, "seeing as how I couldn't get any sleep last night, I figured I'd get here a little early to catch up on the paperwork from the other cases last week and look more into this latest one."

"Why can't you sleep?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Just stressed I guess. Anyway, I've been going through as many records as I could, so don't get settled just yet."

"What'd you find?"

"I tracked down Ricky Schrader's birth mother. She lives in Redhook on Wolcott and I think we should talk to her since Ricky had been sneaking out to see her before he died. She might know more about it, especially since he's kind of the odd one out from the four of them."

Elliot nodded and put his arms back through his coat as Olivia gathered her own. "You think she'll be up?"

"Well, by the time we get all the way out to Brooklyn...hopefully she'll be either in or coherent. Though, reading through some of these files, there's a good chance she won't be. I've got the keys. Bring the muffins."

He smiled at her, muffin bag in hand, as they both got onto the elevators.

Olivia sighed as they reached the mouth of the Brooklyn Battery Tunnel. She had been born and raised in Manhattan and she had grown up with the notion that New York, outside of Manhattan was not worth visiting, even if only for a day. Everything she ever needed rested on the island and she had many memories of her and Maya proclaiming "We don't do borough" any time it was suggested that they cross a bridge or go too far north of Manhattan.

"I hate Brooklyn," she announced to Elliot halfway through the tunnel's traffic.

"That's just 'cause you were raised in Manhattan," he said. "There's nothing wrong with Brooklyn."

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it. I just hate it; all the boroughs. Especially the area where we're going."

"You come out to Queens."

"True, but Queens is not Brooklyn and at least there's some trees. Redhook is not my idea of a nice drive out of Manhattan."

"I bet if you had your choice, you probably wouldn't even leave Manhattan," Elliot said.

"I'll leave New York, but not for a borough. I want either countryside or beaches, not bad streets and Section-8 housing."

Elliot smiled and shook his head. Every once in a while, bits of Olivia's upbringing would spill out of her and he could only smile in response. An only child

raised by an English professor, Olivia's childhood differed greatly from Elliot's with his three other siblings all raised on their father's NYPD salary. The differences rarely came out and usually coincided when their cases brought them out of Manhattan.

A while later, they reached the dilapidated building where one Veronica Schrader lived and Olivia felt her eyebrows furrow unintentionally as she looked for a place to park. As they walked into the building, Elliot could feel Olivia tense behind him.

They knocked on the door marked "7E" and the scene before them looked like a Hollywood cliché. The woman who answered the door was wearing worn and frayed silk pajamas printed with large flowers and her poorly dyed red hair looked as though it had not been properly combed, brushed or even washed in several days. The lines in her face and the glaze over her eyes gave the appearance of someone who had not slept in a year.

"Yes," she said in a low, gruff voice.

"Morning," Elliot said pulling his badge from his coat pocket. "I'm Detective Stabler and this is Detective Benson. May we speak with a Veronica Schrader?"

The woman stared between both of them for a moment before replying. "Yeah, that's me. What do the cops want? I don't have nothing on me."

"Has anyone contacted you about your son Ricky?" Olivia asked.

Veronica squinted at Olivia. "Who ACS? They haven't told me nothing since I tried to get Ricky back years ago."

Olivia and Elliot exchanged glances. There was a possibility that she had no idea that her son had been killed.

"Mrs. Schrader," Olivia began. "May we come in?"

She stared at each of them again for a long time before stepping back and letting them into her apartment. The small apartment was stuffy and the empty boxes and bags of fast food and take-out dishes littered nearly every surface and added to the pungent odor of cigarette smoke and garbage that floated throughout the place.

Veronica closed the door behind them and took a cigarette from a box at the end of her coffee table.

"So," she said. "What'chu need from me? 'Cause Ricky don't stay here no more. Not since they took 'im from me."

"Mrs. Schrader," Olivia said. "Ricky was found by Tompkins Square Park. I'm so sorry, but he's been killed."

Elliot and Olivia waited for the normal storm of sorrow or fury from Veronica, but none came. She lit her cigarette with a near empty Bic lighter and sat down on the dirty beige couch that took up much of the living room.

"When did *this* happen?"

"He was found Saturday," Olivia said, "but it looks like he might have been killed last Thursday."

Veronica took a long drag on her cigarette. "So, you're saying someone killed my Ricky close to a week ago and I'm just now finding out?"

"We *are* sorry," Olivia said. "We were under the impression that ACS had contacted you about him."

Veronica flicked her pinky finger and let the cigarette ashes fall directly to the floor. She was perfectly calm and was not showing the slightest reservations about the news. "Well, two years ago some lady from ACS asked me if I wanted to try and get him back. 'Course I was high at the time and I didn't know what I was sayin' so when I said

no, she made me sign some forms and that was that. They said that I didn't have to... uh... *'be notified'* of anything goin' on with Ricky. So, *no*, no one told me that my Ricky was dead, though it's nice of you to show up...days later."

An uncomfortable silence floated through the room and Olivia opened her mouth to apologize again, but thought against it. Veronica was clearly in a right state, though she had an odd way of showing it, and apologizing again for not notifying her sooner would not help the situation.

"So," Veronica continued, "are you gonna tell me what happened or what?"

"It looks like someone strangled him," Elliot said. "And, it looks like he was raped."

Veronica nodded and took another drag on the cigarette. "Somebody raped 'im... Well, that's just great. You people take 'im from me because I hit 'im a couple o' times and now he's dead. That's a great goddamn' system you've got there."

"Mrs. Schrader," Olivia began.

"Just Veronica," she said. "Nobody ever calls me 'Misses.' Just Veronica."

"Veronica," Olivia said. "We spoke with the Vonnexes, Ricky's foster parents. They said that he would sometimes runaway to come see you. Is that true?"

She nodded and stared at the floor. "Yeah, he'd come by to see me. The first few times, he'd show up crying about them people."

"About the Vonnexes?" Olivia said.

"Yeah, those crazy people ACS placed 'im with. Ricky said they wanted 'im to play a bunch sports and trying to make 'im be Superboy or something. They coulda asked me. I'da told them, Ricky don't like all that stuff. No wonder he kept running away."

"When was the last time you saw Ricky?" Elliot asked.

Veronica stared at Elliot a long time, as if thinking had become very difficult. "Last...Wednesday, I think. Yeah, 'cause I remember he brung me flowers and we watched American Idol together."

"Do you remember what time he left?"

"Sometime after the show was done, I guess."

"Did he say he was going anywhere afterward?"

"How the hell should I know?" Veronica said, her voice growing louder. "I didn't even know how the hell he got all the way over here. Those people ACS had 'im placed lived with lived all the way across the damn city."

"Did he take a bus or a cab?"

She shrugged. "Guess so...yeah, actually he did because the time before last he called the number for a cab company to come pick 'im up."

"Did you ever think to tell the Vonnexes?" Olivia asked.

"Why the hell should I? He's *my* kid. They lived on the Upper West Side and probably had all the money in the world. They coulda had any kid in the world and they had to have mine."

"You beat your son," Elliot said.

Veronica stood up and crossed the room one step to stand directly in front of Elliot. "I hit Ricky, *one* time and they took 'im away from me. Just *one* time and then they took 'im away, saying I was an unfit mother. Tell me you never hit your kids once."

"Not to the point where the *government* would step in and take them from me."

“Screw you!” she said and turned to sit back on her couch. “You two can leave now!”

“We’re investigating your son’s case,” Olivia said, almost pleading with Veronica. “We just want to know if you knew anyone who might have wanted to hurt Ricky or paid him any special attention.”

“Ricky was ten when they took ‘im from me,” she said. “What the hell would somebody want with a kid that young?”

“Do you have any enemies or anyone who might’ve hurt Ricky to get back at you?”

Veronica scowled at Olivia. “You mean, do I owe any of my drug dealers any money? And the answer’s no. I stopped doing that stuff and I was all paid up before I quit.”

“Well, how about old neighbors or boyfriends?” Olivia continued not phased by the accusation. “What about Ricky’s father? Is he in the picture at all?”

“Ricky’s father?” she said with a laugh. “He ain’t been in the picture since he entered it. No idea where the hell he is.”

“Boyfriends then?”

“Haven’t had a lot of time for boyfriends lately,” she said sardonically. “You know, since I’m payin’ my way through law school and stuff.”

“Do you even care that your son’s dead?” Elliot said, having had his fill with the woman before him.

Veronica shook her head. “I care. But, what am I s’posed to do about it? Huh? Ricky was alive and happy when he was with me, then you people take ‘im away and give ‘im to this happy family on the West Side and now he’s dead. He was miserable for years and now he’s dead. That’s what I call *irony*.”

“Look,” Olivia said, pleading again. “If you can think of anyone. Anyone at all who paid Ricky a lot of attention, it could help us track down the person who killed him.”

She took a long drag of her cigarette and nodded again. “I guess... Only guy I can remember was an old boyfriend who used to hang around before Ricky got taken away from me. He used to take Ricky out to like, ball games and parks and fatherly junk like that.”

“What happened?” Olivia asked.

“Well, he wasn’t Ricky’s father, was he? He shouldn’ta been doing all that. ‘Sides, he kept making Ricky think that I was the bad guy, when he knew I was trying to get clean. Guess all that don’t even matter now.”

“This boyfriend,” Olivia said, reaching for the pad and pen in her pocket. “What was his name?”

“Wha?” Veronica said eyes wide and eyebrows high. “That was like a hundred years ago!”

“Any name you can think of would be helpful. We just want to talk to him.”

She stood for a moment, littering her cigarette ashes onto the floor again. “Yeah, okay...um...Uh, something quick like Jordan or something. Jordan...uh...Jordasche... no, I think it was something more like...uh...Draven...Driven...Drover? Drover! Yeah, that was it. Jeffy Drover.”

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another and Olivia could see Elliot’s eye twitch slightly.

“Yeah,” Veronica continued. “That sack a crap! He told Ricky once to flush all my stuff, the bastard. And, when I ended up hitting Ricky because he stole and I’d told ‘im stealing was wrong and we were better than that, Ricky called the police on me. I’d known Jeffy woulda put ‘im up that. God...that was three years ago. I never even gotta chance to tell Ricky I was sorry.”

Olivia had no option but to smirk at the pure elation on Elliot’s face as they raced back to the 1-6. He looked liked a little boy who had been told Christmas was coming early that year from the news that they finally had what they needed to bring in Jeffrey Drover.

The loose affiliation of the other victims would have given them grounds to speak to Drover, but the fact that Ricky Schrader was completely out of the mix of the other victims kept the from doing so. However, with confirmation that Drover had not only a connection to the victim, but had interacted with him on a personal basis, the detectives had more than enough evidence to finally bring Drover to the precinct and probe him on the murders.

Within thirty minutes, Elliot and Olivia were walking into the precinct ready to spread the news that they needed to speak to Drover, however the moment they stepped off the elevators, Fin stopped them, shaking his head.

“There’s been another one,” Fin said. “Avenue A and East 11th.”

“Same guy?” Olivia said.

Fin nodded. “Warner and Munch are down there now. It’s the same as the others.”

“We need to talk to Drover,” Elliot said. “We just talked to Ricky Schrader’s mother and she used to date him years ago. She said Drover used to act like a father figure for Ricky.”

“You two go,” Olivia said. “I’ll look up Drover and we’ll bring him in today.”

Elliot gave her a nod and he and Fin headed back out to the street.

As they approached the scene at Avenue A, more press was present than with any of the other cases. Complete with news station vans and whole camera crews, the area outside the crime scene looked like a complete circus.

They made their way through reporters shouting dozens of questions at them and through the police barricades to find Melinda and the crime scene unit surrounding a green dumpster in the alley behind a row of apartments. Just beside the dumpster, stood a large brown box, out of which Elliot could make out tufts of brown hair crowning the box’s opening.

“Same guy,” Melinda said when she saw Fin and Elliot. “And it looks like he’s gone back to his roots.”

“He’s gone back to both the box and white kids,” Munch said.

“ID?” Elliot said. “Age?”

“Nothing so far on the ID,” Munch said, “but he looks about twelve or thirteen.”

Elliot shook his head.

“There’s something else,” Melinda said. “This boy’s been dead for probably a day. He might’ve even been killed close to the same time as Daniel Richardson.”

“You’re *sure* it’s the same guy?” Fin said.

"I won't know for sure until I have a close look at him, but everything's the same as the others, right down to the ligature marks on the neck."

"This is crazy," Munch said. "This makes four kids in five days! There has to be a copycat."

"Evidence points to the same guy," Fin said.

"But Jacob Lewendale was found a good five days before Connor Whickfield. If this is the same guy, he's getting too adventurous and he's wasting no time."

"And he likes this area," Fin said looking around at the buildings before him.

"Weren't both Jacob and Connor found in Tompkins Square Park?"

"Yeah," Elliot said.

Fin shook his head. "Ricky Schrader was found four blocks north of here at 7th, Daniel Richardson was found at 9th and Avenue C, and here we are now. Every kid has been found with close to a mile radius of each other."

"He knows this area," Elliot said, nodding to himself. "He knows it really well."

"Do we know who found the body yet?" Fin asked.

"Garbage man," Munch said. "He was about to pick up the dumpster when he saw the box... We need to get Huang in on this. Why the hell would he go back to the box?"

"Maybe trying to throw us off track," Fin said. "He put two kids in the park and then starts putting them in alleys leading up to the park. He's spreading it out to keep people from noticing him going to the same place."

"But the box," Munch said. "It doesn't make any sense. Pedophiles are strict and meticulous. If putting the kids in the box was what got him off, they'd all've been in boxes, but they weren't. If he'd moved past the box fetish, then why go back to it now?"

"Maybe it's like Liv said," Elliot said as he pulled his ringing phone from his pocket and bringing it up to his ear. "What's if he's not a really a pedophile at all? Stabler."

"Elliot," Olivia said from the other end. "I found Drover's workplace. He works for this accounting firm, Rohlman-Hayworth. They're on the fifth floor of the building at 3rd and St. Marks."

"Right," Elliot said. "Meet me there in an hour."

"That Olivia?" Munch said.

"Yeah, she found where Drover works. It's actually just a few blocks from here."

"We're back on this Drover again?" Munch asked with raised eyebrows.

"Some of us never left him," Elliot said as he turned to face the crowds of shouting people and news cameras.

An hour later, Munch and Fin were working on an ID for the latest victim after the three of them had spoken to some of the neighbors around the alley. Elliot sat in his car and after a few moments, Olivia came into his view on 3rd Avenue where St. Marks Place, Stuyvesant Street and 3rd Avenue all seemed to come together.

He had only been waiting for a few a minutes when he saw her and he practically jumped out of the car, anxious to get into the building. All he could think about was how close Drover was to the entire situation. He lived *and* worked just a few blocks away from the mile radius in which all the boys had been found. They were finally making headway in a case that seemed to be going nowhere.

With several flashes of their NYPD badges later, Elliot and Olivia stood in the office of Viktor Hammond, Drover's manager.

"Jeff's not in," the small-framed Mr. Hammond said. "I suggested he take some time off and he took it."

"Why did you have to suggest it?" Olivia asked.

"If you saw him Friday, you would've too," Mr. Hammond said resting backwards against his desk. "He was a wreck after finding that boy, and honestly, I don't know a sane person who wouldn't have been. I told him to take the week off. Relax and get his thoughts together. Maybe talk to a therapist. I'm not sure when the family's going to have the funeral, but I wanted to make sure he went so he could pay his respects."

"Do you have any idea where he might be now?" Elliot said, his eyes squinting in frustration.

Mr. Hammond shrugged. "Maybe home? I have no idea."

"Did he leave a number where he could be reached?" Elliot asked.

"No, when I told him to take some time on Friday, he protested for a bit and then he just left. I told him to come back Monday the twenty-second, but knowing Jeff he'll probably be back in tomorrow or Thursday. If you need to talk to him, I would start at his apartment. He lives on...hold on just a moment. I can have my secretary look him up."

"That's okay," Olivia said. "We know where he lives. Thank you for your time."

They began to leave the office when Mr. Hammond stopped them with another question.

"Just out of curiosity," he began. "Why do you need to speak with him?"

"We just have a few more questions for him as we continue our investigation," Elliot said and he followed Olivia out of the door.

They left Elliot's car on St. Marks Place and took Olivia's, as she was double-parked, to the 14th Street Loop, where Drover lived.

"He lives and works down here, Liv," Elliot said as they were entering the building, having called the superintendent moments earlier. "I bet he's been out here for years. He probably knows every alley on the Lower East Side like his own apartment."

Olivia merely nodded as they knocked on the super's door.

"I called up there," the super said, once they were inside his apartment. "I don't think he's home, but I don't see him enough to know what times he comes and goes. We've got a lot of tenants."

"Can you let us into his place?" Elliot asked, but Olivia put up her hand slightly to keep the super from responding.

"We don't have probable cause," she whispered to Elliot. "And, we don't have a warrant. If we find anything incriminating, we won't be able to use it."

"We could see his place if the super just *happened* to be checking in on him and we just happened to be there."

Olivia gave him a look that immediately read "Stop," but he continued, sardonically.

"I mean, technically, the man's missing since no one's seen or heard from him in three or four days. He could've had a heart attack and could be lying half dead up there."

She pulled Elliot toward the super's apartment door and stepped very close to him. "He didn't murder those boys here, Elliot. That kind of thing takes space and privacy."

Elliot sighed. "What if he's got a kid somewhere, right now?"

“We don’t have probable cause and he’s not here. There’s no use in trampling his Fourth Amendment rights in the hopes of getting something that might be incriminating in his apartment. Not if some judge is just going to turn around and throw out whatever we might find. We’ll find him. We’ll bring him down to the house, we’ll get a warrant and we’ll get him if he did this.”

He stared at her for a long time before nodding and turning to the super. “Thanks. We’ll get back to you if we need you.”

The flurry of movement about the SVU squad room did not stop when Olivia and Elliot stepped off the elevator after leaving Drover’s residence.

“We got an ID on the latest victim,” Cragen said in their direction once they came into view. “Munch and Fin are notifying the parents now.”

“Who was he?” Elliot said.

“Manny Scheibley, thirteen-years-old,” Cragen sighed. “He lived on the West Side and I’m willing to bet money he played soccer at that complex on 108th. I take it you couldn’t find Drover?”

“He hasn’t been to work in a few days and his super doesn’t know if he’s been home or not,” Olivia said.

“He’s gone for now,” Elliot said. “I hope like hell he hasn’t run.”

“How sure are you that he’s involved?”

Elliot glanced at Olivia, but she spoke up first. “He’s the link between each of the victims. They all played soccer at the same place and Drover’s had close contact with two of the victims. It’s not concrete, but there’s a good chance he knows something.”

“All right,” Cragen said. “We’ll keep a look out for him, but I don’t want us to stop looking for any other links between these kids.”

As Elliot and Olivia both nodded, a tall, dark-haired woman stepped off the elevator bringing behind her a little girl, who looked no more than six, dressed all in pink.

“Excuse me,” the woman said, approaching the detectives and their captain. “I’m looking for Detective Stabler.”

“That’s me,” Elliot said. “What can I do for you?”

She pulled his card out of the black purse that hung from her shoulder. “You came by my apartment earlier today. I guess the police found a little boy behind our building and you were knocking on doors. My son was home and he got your card.”

Elliot squinted at her for a moment, before recognizing the features of her face in a twenty-something he had spoken to prior to visiting Drover’s job.

“My name’s Helena Sims and this is my daughter, Carly. When I got home, Brent, my son, told me you’d been by and that’s when Carly said she saw something, I figured you ought to hear.”

A moment later, Elliot, Olivia, Mrs. Sims and Carly sat in one of the more comfortable discussion rooms.

“Tell them what you saw,” Mrs. Sims said to Carly.

Elliot and Olivia watched intently as the little girl bounced in her seat and looked about the room with large, brown eyes.

“Um, today,” Carly said still looking all around the room as she spoke. “I saw a man puttin’ a box by the dumpster.”

“When did you see him?” Elliot asked.

"In the morning when I woke up. I was playing with Jessica on the window and I saw him outside."

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another and Mrs. Sims interjected. "Jessica's this bunny doll thing she plays with all the time."

"Do you remember the man?" Olivia said softly.

Carly nodded her head and straight, brown hair fell over her eyes. "Yup."

"Can you tell us what he looked like?" Elliot asked.

"Um...I think so," Carly said, brightly. "He had...um...well, I don't know..."

"Well, what did his hair look like?" Olivia asked.

"Uh...I think it was like mine, but it was dark outside, so I couldn't see real good."

"Could you see what his skin looked like?" Olivia asked.

Carly nodded her head again. "It was kinda like mine, too."

"Carly," Elliot said. "Do you think if you saw him again, you'd be able to tell us what he looked like?"

"I think so."

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"No. He was a stranger."

"Did you see anything else he was doing?" Olivia said.

"He was just puttin' the box by the dumpster. Then, he got in his car and drove away."

"Do you remember what the car looked like?" Olivia asked.

Carly nodded her head. "Uh-huh. It was black and it was big."

"Do you think if we should you some pictures of cars you could pick out which one it was?"

"Yup. I think so."

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another and then at Mrs. Sims who was wringing her hands. They stood to leave and she followed them.

"You don't think she saw what was in that box, do you?" she asked, eyes showing morbid concern.

"We'll have her talk to a psychologist we have with the unit," Elliot said. "But, we'd like her to work with a specialist first. We want to see if she can pinpoint the car and give us a sketch."

"Is this going to stress her out? I mean, she's just a little girl."

"If she gets tired, we can stop at any time," Olivia said. "But, we need to act fast. The quicker we can get a statement from her, the better our case will be."

"But, what if the guy..." Mrs. Sims said still looking worried. "I mean, she's just a little girl and I don't know. What if this guy saw her and he comes after us or something?"

"We'll get him," Elliot said reassuring her. "Any information she gives will just help us get him that much faster."

Mrs. Sims nodded, reached out her hand, which Carly readily grabbed and followed Olivia out of the room.

An hour later, Carly had worked with the sketch artist to give a vague description of the man she saw, and even after a break for Chicken McNuggets and apple juice, she

was only able to narrow down the description of the car to a black SUV; whether it was an Expedition or a Range Rover was still under discrepancy.

"Thank you so much," Elliot said, as Mrs. Sims and Carly were preparing to leave. "We'll call you if we have any questions."

The pair left and Olivia sighed looking at the sketch. "This doesn't look anything like Drover."

Elliot glanced over her shoulder at the sketch. "Looks enough like him to bring him in."

"Elliot, you and I saw him and spoke to him. This isn't going to hold up in court."

"All I know is, it gives us grounds to bring his ass in here. All we need to do now is find him."

"How'd the little girl do?" Cragen asked.

"Not so good," Olivia said. "The sketch she gave is pretty vague and we still don't know much more about the car."

"But," Elliot said, "this is the third time we've heard about this black car, truck, SUV, whatever somehow connected to the victims and the crime scene."

"Well, we'll sit some uniforms in front of his place for a bit," Cragen said. "He's gotta come home at some point."

"You realize this is a really weak case," Olivia said to Elliot once Cragen had gone back to answer a phone call in his office.

"What?" Elliot said. "Are you a DA now?"

"I'm serious," she said. "Even if we can get Drover in here, we couldn't make charges stick with what we've got."

"You're assuming that his prints won't match, his DNA is crap and he won't crack. He's good for it and he'll crack. We just need to get him in here."

Olivia opened her mouth to respond, but was silenced by her cell phone ringing from her coat pocket.

"Benson," she said into the phone.

"Uh...yeah, hi," an unsteady voice said from the other side of the phone. "Um... Detective Benson...I'm not sure if you remember me or not. You gave me your card a few days ago. Anyways, my name's Jeffrey Drover...well, Jeff."

"Yes, I do remember you, Jeff," Olivia said, waving and snapping her fingers to get Elliot's attention. "What can I do for you?"

"Oh, well, I just got home and checked my messages and I saw that my boss called. Apparently, you were looking for me and had some questions for me...I assume about Connor."

"Yes," Olivia said. "We do have a couple questions for you. Can you come down to our precinct or would like for us to come get you?"

"Oh, well...uh," Drover said. "I can just go over there. It shouldn't be a problem. I don't know where it is, though. Could you, uh, give me the address?"

Olivia gave Drover the address and Elliot clapped his hands together once she got off the phone.

"Got him!" Elliot said. "He's coming here. Couldn't be anymore perfect than that."

Olivia nodded, but simply stared at her computer monitor.

"What?" Elliot said, noticing her expression. "What's wrong?"

"I don't like it," Olivia said.

"What's not to like? I thought we'd have to issue a city-wide manhunt to track him down and he's coming here, *willingly*."

"Well, I mean, honestly, how many killers would willingly come up here if they were actually guilty? How many child molesters can you think of would call the police to see if *we* had questions?"

Elliot shrugged. "Maybe he thinks he's got us beat. Maybe he wants to try to rub our faces in it. Most of these guys are confident bastards."

She shook her head. "You didn't hear him, Elliot. There was no confidence in his voice at all. He sounds like a guy who just found the body of a kid he used to coach. He still doesn't strike me as a child molester."

"Well," Elliot said. "Maybe it's like you said earlier. Maybe he's not a pedophile at all. Maybe he's just a freak who's got Mommy issues or something."

"I still don't know."

"Trust me, Liv. He's good for it."

SVU Squad room
6:23PM

Jeffrey Drover sat in the dimly lit interrogation room, wearing dark, denim jeans and a North Face fleece pullover. His foot tapped nervously and he continuously glanced about the room expecting someone to enter the door behind him.

Through the large two-way mirror that ran across the interrogation room, Elliot and Olivia had watched Drover move about the room for close to two hours. Olivia had ushered him into the room and had told him that they would be in to talk to him in "just a minute." Since then, Drover had stood up, sat down at the table in the room, looked out the room's one small, grimy window, sat back down, paced around the room and had taken to tapping his feet while seated. There was no real reason in keeping him waiting; it was just an unwritten rule to see how much the suspect in question would squirm while waiting for detectives.

"How long's he been waiting?" Cragen said inside in the small room just behind the two-way mirror.

" 'Bout two hours," Elliot said.

Cragen nodded. "Let him stay another half hour. Then, go in there."

Olivia gave Cragen and Elliot a slight smirk and walked into the room.

"Hey, look," Drover said, the moment the door opened. "How long's this gonna take? You know I've got things to do. I thought you said you just had a couple of questions for me."

"We do," Olivia said calmly. "I just need to wait for my partner because we have to ask you together."

"There's no way *you* can just do it," Drover said. "I mean, I trust you. I know you're not gonna twist my words or anything."

"It'll be just a minute more," Olivia said and she walked out of the room, giving him a wink on her way.

Close to three hours after he entered the precinct, Elliot and Olivia walked into the interrogation room together to question Drover. Elliot sat down at the table across from Drover, spread out several manila folders and papers on the table and began sifting through them. Olivia took the seat in the corner of the room just behind Drover.

"Look," Drover said after a moment of Elliot's sifting. "You've kept me here three hours. What's going on?"

"We're just going to have a little chat here," Elliot said, a smug, little smile pulling at the corners of his mouth.

"Little chat?" Drover said, eyes wide. He glanced back at Olivia. "What's he talking about?"

"We just need a little info from you," Elliot continued.

"Look, I don't even know what I'm doing here."

Elliot just nodded. "Now, we hear that you used to date a Veronica Schrader. Is that correct?"

Drover squinted at Elliot, confused for a moment. "Um, yeah. Veronica. But that was years ago though. And besides, she was a crackhead who deserved to have her kid take away. But, what does she have to do with this? Did she say I did something to her, 'cause I haven't seen her in at least a year."

"What about her son?" Elliot said. "Ricky. When was the last time you saw him?"

Drover's expression softened and he stared at the table. "About a year, too. I hoped that maybe with a male influence around he could turn out okay after all."

"A male influence?"

"Yeah, I mean it was just him and Veronica and she was a junkie."

"Why'd you date her if she was a junkie?"

"Well, I didn't know what was wrong with her at first."

"But, you liked Ricky?"

"Yeah...I mean he's a great kid. I took him places, you know. Baseball games, hockey games. I even landed some Knicks tickets once. He really loved it. But...you know, I was just trying to do whatever I could to get him out of that house."

"Out of that house, so you could hurt him?" Elliot said flatly.

Drover's eyes grow wide. "What? I didn't hurt Ricky! I could never hurt him!"

"But you wanted him away from his mother?"

"Have you met Veronica? I when I first started dating her, she seemed fine, but then she starts shooting up right in front of her kid. He was just ten years old. No kid needs to see that."

"And you were trying to do the honorable thing by getting him away from his mother?"

"Like I said, Ricky's a good kid. I just made sure that he knew getting high wasn't the purpose of life."

"And what is?" Elliot said.

"I don't know," Drover said with a shrug. "When I'd take him to games or the park to kick a few balls to him, I'd tell him that doing all the things his mother did wasn't good for him. That if he ever wanted to get anywhere in life, he'd have to stay away from drugs and stuff."

"And stay away from his mother?"

“Look, why do you keep putting words in my mouth?” Drover yelled. “I didn’t do anything to pull Ricky from his mother. I was trying to help her get cleaned up, but she just wouldn’t, so I could only tell Ricky what to do.”

“Tell him what to do when you molested him.”

“No! I would never do that! I never hurt Ricky! What kind of sick freak do you take me for?”

“Oh, you don’t want me to answer that,” Elliot said, his voice deep and menacing, almost urging Drover to make an errant move on the other side of the table. “We all know just what kind of sick freak you are. We know exactly what you did to Ricky Schrader. How you raped and strangled him.”

“What? Ricky’s dead?”

“You didn’t know?” Olivia asked through furrowed eyebrows.

“No?” Drover said staring at her bewildered.

“How could you not know?” Elliot said fiercely. “It was on every news station. Every newspaper!”

“I’ve been out of it...b-because of Connor. I didn’t know that Ricky was dead. What happened to him?”

“You oughta’ know, Drover,” Elliot said. “We found him right where you left him.”

“Huh? What, are you kidding me? What the hell is all this about?”

Olivia tossed the stack of photos she was holding in front of Drover so that they slid and spread apart perfectly in front of him.

“Wha...what is this?” Drover said, his face displaying disgust.

“It’s what you did, Jeff,” Olivia said. “It’s what you did to those boys.”

“What? This...this is some kind of sick joke. I didn’t kill anyone.”

Elliot leaned over the desk, pulled out a photo from Connor Whickfield’s crime scene and held it up for Drover to see.

“You did this to a thirteen-year-old boy.”

Drover shook his head. “I could...I could never hurt Connor,” he whispered. “I... he was one of my kids. I could never...I looked after him and all the other boys on the teams I coached and trained.”

“And that’s what we don’t like, Drover,” Elliot said leaning closer to him. “You have all those boys at your fingertips. You like them, don’t you? You like coaching them first as ten-year-olds because you gain their trust early on and when they’re at that perfect age...it’s like shooting fish in a barrel.”

Drover made a gagging sound and covered his mouth. “You...You’re sick man!” Tears began to shine in his eyes. “This is crazy! I didn’t kill anybody! I didn’t hurt anybody! I coach kids so...so maybe they have somebody else to look up to besides football players and rap stars.”

“And you like that they look up to you,” Elliot said softly. “All of them.”

Drover nodded and a single tear fell over the brim of his eye and made the quick path down the side of his face.

“You like to include everyone, too,” Elliot continued.

“It’s not just the rich kids who should get the opportunities,” Drover said, nodding again. “Everybody should have the chance to succeed. Everyone should get *some* kind of role model.”

“You’re a real equal opportunity kind of guy.”

“Yeah,” Drover said, not quite trusting Elliot’s tone. “I guess so.”

“So,” Elliot said, pulling another photo out of the array. “Is that why you strangled Daniel Richardson on Martin Luther King Day? Every boy has the equal opportunity to be raped by you?”

“No!” Drover screamed and pounded his hands on the table. “I didn’t...I didn’t... I couldn’t rape a kid. *Anyone!* I...I didn’t do it...”

“We have someone who can place you at our latest crime scene.”

“No.” Drover began to tremble. “This is crazy. I didn’t do anything. This has got to be some kind of mix up. I mean...you must have the wrong guy.”

“That’s the best excuse you can come with?” Elliot said with a laugh. “That we have the wrong guy?”

“But you do! You have the wrong guy!”

“A guy who just happened to find one of the victims *and* the one guy who used to take one of the victims on Saturday little outings while he was bouncing his mother on the side. The *one* guy who connects every single one of the five victims we’ve seen, and I bet if we do a little digging, we might find some deep connections with this last victims too.”

“No,” Drover said through a gasp of tears.

“Sure, we would. I bet you’ve had your eye on each and every one of them. And then you waited. Waited until they were the perfect age for you and *then* you took them.”

“No,” Drover said again, his voice cracking.

“You took them, and when they fought back, you strangled them. With your own goddamn belt.”

“LOOK!” he yelled, slamming his hands on the table. “Fingerprint me, drug test me, DNA me, put me in a line-up, whatever! I’ll take a polygraph test even. I’m *telling* you. I didn’t do anything!”

Silence fell upon the room, altered only by Drover’s ragged breathing as he glanced, in a panic, back and forth between Olivia and Elliot.

Olivia stood to leave the room and Elliot gathered up all the photos on the table and followed her.

“I’m not sure he’s the guy,” a voice said once they exited the interrogation room.

“Come on, Doc,” Elliot said. “You’re kidding. He’s already said he knew two of the kids and liked them.”

Dr. George Huang stood a little straighter in the small, darkened room before responding. An agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and a psychologist assigned to work with Manhattan’s Special Victims Unit, the Chinese man had seen his fair share of pedophiles, murderers and run-of-the-mill criminal masterminds. The detectives called on his expertise when cases ran outside of the general rapist and child molester operatives.

“He’s giving up this information a little too readily,” George said in a calm, soft voice. “Even if he was putting on a show, this is not the version of himself he’d want to show. He’d want to show himself as the gallant hero; the great lover of children.”

“Isn’t that what he’s doing?” Elliot said. “By bursting into tears at the sight of those photos?”

"I think that's just a natural reaction," George said. "Especially if he was actually close to those kids."

"Or, he's just well-rehearsed."

"Sorry, but he's not setting off any alarms. Not as a murderer molester, anyway. He definitely needs therapy to help him cope with what he probably saw that night, but he doesn't give off anything resembling a killer."

"He knows we're onto him," Elliot said. "He's just saying and doing anything he can think of to make us turn down the heat."

"Let's get him in a line-up first," Cragen said, leaving the room. "Contact Helena Sims. If Carly Sims can make the ID, we can cuff him, process him and run his prints and DNA against what we've got on the past victims."

"Okay, Carly," Olivia said, taking the little girl by the hand. "See this big mirror right here in front of us?"

"Yup."

"You can't see anything, but your reflection in it, can you?"

"Uh-huh."

"So, if you can't see anything through it, then no one who stands in this room can see anything through it either. Okay?"

Carly squeezed Olivia's hand in reply and nodded.

Olivia walked her back to the other side of the glass where Elliot, Cragen and Carly's mother stood against the back wall. She lifted Carly and stood her on a small crate so she could see outside the window.

"So, this is the same mirror we just saw. We can see out, but no one in there can see us."

Carly nodded again and put her hand against the glass.

"So," Olivia said, while Carly stared out the window. "What's going to happen, is five men are going to walk out of that door over there, and all I need you to do is tell me if you've seen any of them before and where you've seen them."

"That's it?" Carly said, brown eyes gleaming up at Olivia.

"That's it," she said smiling. "It's really easy and I know you'll do fine."

"Okay," Carly said, returning Olivia's smile with one of her own.

Olivia turned to the uniformed officer who stood at the doorway. "Send them in."

One by one, dark-haired men filed into the room, stood stony-faced and each holding a number.

"Carly," Olivia said. "Have you seen any of these men before?"

Carly stared at each of the face. "Um...I don't know."

"Look at each one carefully, Carly. Is there anyone you think you might've seen before?"

"They all look alike. I can't tell them apart."

"It's okay, just try and see if there's anyone who looks familiar to you. Anyone who looks like the person you saw dropping the box by the dumpster."

"It was dark outside then."

"Just try real hard, okay?"

Carly nodded.

“Do you see anyone you’ve seen before?” Olivia asked again.

“Um...I think so.”

“Okay, sweetie. Can you tell me what number he’s holding?”

Carly squinted at each of the men behind the glass again. “Number...Three? Is that right?”

“Are you sure it was Number Three?”

Carly looked nervously back at her mother and then back at the men behind the mirror. “Um...I think so. Yes...yeah, I’m pretty sure he is Number Three. Well...maybe Number...no-no...it was Number Three.”

She stared back at Olivia. “Did I do it right?”

Olivia glanced at her captain and Elliot with raised eyebrows, but smiled at Carly. “You did great, Carly.”

Carly smiled brightly, jumped off the crate and into the open arms of her mother.

Cragen sighed the moment they left and District Attorney Casey Novak entered the room a moment later.

Casey’s youthful face beheld wise, experienced blue eyes against pale skin and long, strawberry blonde hair. At close to ten o’clock at night, she was still dressed in the suit and heels that were the near uniform of district attorneys, but she showed no signs of fatigue. Disappointment registered on her face as Mrs. Sims and Carly left the room and she wished, not for the first time, that she worked simple homicides instead of cases that continuously dealt with rapists and children.

“Well,” Cragen said. “Drover already consented for us to run his DNA.”

“But, this doesn’t help any,” Casey said. “And the second his attorney learns that the ID was wrong-”

“He’s not asking for a lawyer,” Elliot said. “He’s not even in the system yet. I say we push him a little longer. We tell him that the witness picked him out and see what he has to say.”

“He hasn’t given up anything yet, though,” Olivia said. “You reduced him to tears and he still hasn’t said anything except that he didn’t do it.”

“He still thinks he’s got us beat.”

“And I’m beginning to think he’s not the guy.”

Elliot scoffed. “You’re kidding. Because the little girl couldn’t make the ID? You heard her. She said it was dark. It doesn’t mean Drover’s not the guy.”

“But combined with what Huang says about him, Elliot...” Cragen’s voice trailed off in the end.

Elliot glared back and forth between Olivia, Cragen and Casey. “He’s the guy.”

He brushed past Casey and headed back toward the interrogation room, where Drover had been brought after the line-up.

“He’s really got it in for this guy, hasn’t he?” Casey said.

Olivia shrugged. “The thing is, it’s like every time we try to take a step closer to Drover, the more it looks like he’s clean.”

“Well, let me know if he bites,” Casey said and walked out of the small room.

Cragen and Olivia stared at one another for a moment, each taking stock of the situation. Munch and Fin had returned from the Scheibley residence hours earlier with the information that Manny had indeed played soccer in the same league as three of the other

four victims and his brother mentioned seeing Manny speaking to someone in a black SUV prior to his disappearance. The link between the soccer complex and Drover was well defined, but unless they had hard evidence placing him not just with the victims, but also as their killer, they would not have a case.

Elliot stepped into Drover's interrogation room and simply stood in the corner of the room.

Drover stared at him expectantly. "Well?"

Elliot only continued to stare at him, silently weighing the options of lying to Drover to get him to confess. He had done it previously, as he and Olivia gave stunning performances in front of suspects to get them to freely confess their crimes. At times, their actions put them under fire with Casey when defense attorneys claimed that their antics pulled unwilling confessions out of suspects, but in the end, the slight twisting of the truth was always justified.

"So, you're not going to tell me anything?" Drover asked.

"We've got a real problem here, Drover," Elliot said smugly, still leaning against the wall.

"What?" Drover said, eyes wide.

"Our witness just picked you out of a line-up."

"How? I didn't do anything?"

"Our witness saw you dumping the body of Manny Scheibley this morning. Manny Scheibley...Does that name ring a bell?"

Drover's breathing became ragged. "This is not happening. This is *not* happening!"

"Well, the name should ring a bell since he was just another kid who happened to play in the same league that you coach for. In fact, his team played against the team you train just last week."

"I can't believe this. I can't believe this...I didn't do anything. Maybe...well, there aren't that many soccer leagues in the city, right?"

"Okay?" Elliot said raising an eyebrow.

"So...so maybe this guy just chose the one that I coach or something. But, I swear to God, I didn't do anything. I wouldn't."

"Right, 'cause you loved them all, didn't you?"

"What? I...I don't know. They were kids, and I cared about the ones I coached like anybody cares for their kids. I was the one they came to when they couldn't go to their parents. They trust me."

"And you used this trust so that you could molest them later."

"No! I never did that! I never touched anyone! I never killed anyone!"

"Our witness says otherwise. Our witness says that you dropped off the box carrying Manny Scheibley's lifeless body into that alley and then drove off...*Drover.*"

Drover stood and backed away from Elliot all the way to other side of the room. "This has got to be a dream or something. I can't believe it." He crouched down to the floor. "This is...this...this is not happening. This is not happening."

Elliot, still against the wall, glared at Drover's crouched and crying body for a moment more before leaving the room completely disgusted.

"Now what?" Olivia said once Elliot entered the side room.

"He'll crack eventually," Elliot said.

“El, you reduced to him to crying in near fetal position. He’s already cracked.”

“I still say it’s a show.”

“And I say,” Cragen interrupted, “we let him sit there until we get the results on his prints and his DNA. Unless...Doc, you want to take a crack at him?”

George sighed. “I could, but I’m not sure how far I could get with him. Especially while he’s this distressed.”

“Well, maybe we’ve been going at him the wrong way. Maybe you could get him to open up a little more. At least keep him *coherent* long enough to see if he had any relation to any of the other boys.” He glared at Elliot, who quickly walked out of the room and headed toward his desk.

George nodded at Cragen and walked into the interrogation room, where Drover still sat. He had stopped crying, but his breathing was still deep and haggard.

“Jeffrey,” George said. “My name is Dr. George Huang. I’d like to talk to you if that’s all right.”

Drover scoffed, but picked himself off the floor and returned to the chair at the desk.

“Are you here to tell me *how* I did something I know I didn’t do, *Doctor*?”

“I just want to talk,” George said.

“Sure, you and that other cop. You say you just want to have a little conversation, but what you really mean is that you want to accuse me of doing something I didn’t do.”

“I’m actually not a detective, I’m a-”

“A doctor,” Drover interrupted. “Yeah, I got it. A psychiatrist, right?”

“Yes.”

“So, you’re here to get in my head and figure out why I did what you say I did. Well, you might as well leave too, because like I told that cop who was just in here: I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You keep saying that, but are you sure you understand what you’re saying you didn’t do?”

“You people think I raped and killed kids I know!”

“I thought you didn’t know all of them?”

Drover sighed. “I don’t. I didn’t. But, I still didn’t do anything to ones I did know. I was just trying to be a role model to kids like Ricky. It’s like anytime a guy tries to do the right thing, you all jump to some stupid conclusions. I know you all deal with the worst scum of society everyday and that’s why you’ve all come to expect the worst from people. But, I’m *telling* you, I never hurt anyone. I’m not capable of hurting someone, especially some kids I used to coach.”

“Are you aware that you deny *hurting* anyone?”

“That’s because I haven’t.”

“Have you done anything that maybe didn’t specifically hurt anyone, but might be construed differently by someone outside of the situation?”

Drover shook his head. “Look. I’m going to tell you again. You and anyone else who might be hiding behind that mirror! I’ll tell you all night if I have to. I did not hurt those kids. I never touched them and I never even looked at them funny! That...that detective showed me pictures of boys...dead little kids and he said that I did it. There’s just no way. And, I don’t know where you found this eyewitness who picked me out of the line-up, but they could’ve seen me anywhere. Especially if this guy’s picking out kids

from my league. I didn't do anything. I swear. I swear on my father's life. I didn't do anything to anybody."

George sat silent, studying Drover's reactions and Drover continued. "I'm telling you, I didn't do anything. This...this is just some kind of mix up. Some kind of bad dream. And, I think...yeah, I think it's time to leave now."

Drover stood and George stood with him.

"Well, you're not under arrest, but I'd like to advise you against leaving just now."

"What, are you a lawyer now, too?"

"No, but there *is* substantial evidence building against you, and your leaving just now won't look very good."

"Well, you know what?" Drover said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I don't care how it looks. I've been here for hours now, while that cop comes in here, showing me pictures and saying that I did something I know I didn't do. I've been more than cooperative. I've stood in your stupid line-up to clear my name and everything and now, I'm tired. I've got work in the morning and I have to at least try to get some sleep before I have to face the day."

Drover stepped passed George and toward door, but Olivia headed him off as he exited the room.

"You said you were willing to take a DNA test to rule you out as a suspect. Are you really leaving now?"

Drover laughed at her. "Your guy just said that somebody ID'd me. Why should I believe that you'll stop coming after me if I give you DNA?"

"Well," Olivia said softly. "DNA evidence is far more reliable than an eyewitness. If you're not a match to the DNA we already have on file, then you don't have anything to worry about."

He rolled his eyes at her and shook his head. "I didn't do anything and that other detective said somebody saw me. Somebody pointed me out. What's to stop one of your people from doctoring up my DNA, so it looks like I'm your guy?"

Olivia stood silent for a moment, beginning to pity the man before her. His dark hair was standing on end in places from his hands nervously running through it and the whites of his grey eyes were pink from his previous tears. She stared up at him, weighing the pros and cons of what she was about to say and just how big of a fallout the consequence would have.

"Look...Jeff," she said, taking a step toward him. "I *want* to believe you. I *want* to believe that you're telling the truth when you say you didn't do anything. And the thing is...you might have misunderstood what Detective Stabler said about the eyewitness."

"Meaning what?" Drover said. "You mean he lied? Oh, that's just great. No one picked me out?"

"Either way," Olivia continued, "the best thing you can do for yourself is letting us take your DNA. If you're telling the truth, you won't match anything and you won't have anything to worry about."

Drover stared at her for a full minute before sighing and nodding his head.

"Okay," he whispered. "Okay. Where do I have to go? What do I have to do?"

The hour was closing in on two in the morning and Olivia yawned as she typed at her computer. She glanced across her desk at Elliot, whose brown stubble that had appeared on his face, gave him the additional look of general ruggedness and fatigue that his eyes could not portray. He had been going through several files of their other open cases and the fact that they had been waiting for Melinda's results on Drover for close to four hours gave him the appearance of increased frustration.

Cragen had instructed the both of them to go home, as they could get Drover's results in the morning, and even though they had both agreed to do so, both remained well into the midnight hours.

"Elliot, go home," Olivia said as she continued to write her own documentation on what had occurred with Drover that night.

"You go home," he said, playfully. "You've been here longer than me."

She smiled. "Touché. But, you're the one who actually told the Cap that you were heading out the door."

"You said so too."

"No, I just nodded."

"Nodded that you were out the door, too."

"I just nodded. That nod could've been about anything. It was a while ago. It could've been about something on my screen or maybe some voice in my head. I can't remember."

He laughed, but then sighed and tossed the stack of papers in his hand on his desk.

"She's rushing it," Olivia said, returning to her own notes.

"We shouldn't've let him go," Elliot said running his hands over his head.

"We had nothing on him," she said. "We couldn't keep him."

"We had enough to bring him in."

"But, not enough to arrest him, so we had to let him go."

"I know, I know, but if we find another kid, when we had him right here..."

"Well, he wouldn't pull anything tonight knowing that we're looking at him. And, if Warner calls telling us he's a match, I'll be right behind you on our way to cuffing his ass."

Elliot smirked and nodded and allowed his eyes to close halfway for a moment as he sighed again. Olivia caught another glance at her partner and could not help but notice how his long eyelashes highlighted his clear, blue eyes. Her eyes followed the lines of his jawbone and down his neck to his chest, where pectoral muscles could just be made out, before she caught herself. She felt a girlish flutter in her stomach and immediately returned her attention on her notes, forgetting momentarily what she had wanted to write.

She mentally scolded herself for allowing that to happen as she had managed to keep those thoughts at bay for quite some time. However, as things happened, the moment she let down her guard, the urge to stare longingly at her partner would rear its ugly head.

Still tense over her indulgence, Olivia jumped when the telephone on her desk rang. Elliot snickered at her, not knowing why she had jumped, and she answered the phone quickly.

"Benson."

“Olivia?” Melinda said from the other end. “It’s Melinda. I figured you’d still be in. Hate to tell you this, but Drover’s not your guy.”

“What?” Olivia moaned. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“Sorry,” she said. “He’s not even close.”

Elliot heard Olivia’s answer and insisted the phone from her. “His prints weren’t even a match? Nothing?”

“Sorry, Elliot. His prints don’t match either. I was hoping I could bring you two some good news this late, but he’s not your man.”

“Damn it,” Elliot said. “Okay...thanks, Melinda. Get some sleep.”

“You too.”

Elliot sighed as he hung up the phone. “I can’t even believe it. Just can’t believe it.”

Olivia saved the file on her computer and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “Well, I guess we start back from the beginning. I think we were onto something with the black SUV and also with the fact that all the boys were found in or around a few blocks of Tompkins Square.”

“That sonovabitch,” Elliot whispered.

“Look,” Olivia said, gathering her things. “This isn’t the end of it. We’ll find the guy responsible. It’s just not Drover.”

“Can’t fucking believe it,” he continued. “How could he not match?”

“*Elliot*. It’s not him. Let it go.”

“I just can’t believe it. He was the connection to all the kids. He was the one. I knew it.”

“It’s not him,” Olivia repeated. “But, we’ll find the guy, okay.”

Elliot gathered up his coat and stared at his desk for a moment, eyebrows furrowed and shaking his head. “I can’t believe it.”

He brushed past Olivia muttering on his way out of the squad room. He did not wait for her by the elevators and Olivia felt very exposed in the office that suddenly seemed quite large and oppressive.

She called for a cab and twenty minutes later she was walking out of the “all-night” corner store down the block from her apartment building. She was hungry having only eaten an apple and drunk countless cups coffee and instead of ordering something, she bought a frozen pizza instead.

On her way out of the store, she literally ran into a man several years younger and a few inches shorter than her, as her mind was completely focused on Elliot and the fact that Drover seemed completely innocent.

The man bounced backwards from her, looking startled and dropped the small camera he had held in his hands.

“Oh, God,” she said, stooping down to pick it. “I’m so sorry. I hope I didn’t break it.”

The man, who looked barely older than twenty appeared to be either frightened that she had run into him or overwhelmed by the possibility that his camera had probably crashed beyond repair. “It-it’s okay. I’m sure it’s fine.”

She handed it to him. “I’m really sorry.”

“Don’t-don’t worry about it,” he said and ran into the store quickly.

She sighed at the sight of him running away from her and wondered vaguely why it seemed that all men, even those who looked like tourists, seemed to do the very same thing to her all the time.

When she entered her apartment, she listened to her messages: one from Maya asking, in jest, if she could make plans now to see a movie with Olivia some time in July, one wrong number yelling for someone named Hal, one hang up and one from Mrs. Fitzgivens asking if Olivia would consider having dinner with her son when she had a free night. Olivia laughed out loud at the thought of spending any free time she might have with the lanky Philip Fitzgivens and heated her oven for the pizza.

A wave of depression came over her as she leaned next to the stove. She felt lonely and wished more than she had in a long while that she had a brother or sister she could talk to in hopes of raising her mood, even at two o'clock in the morning. While Maya's family had been an almost surrogate to Olivia as she was growing up, Maya could not always be called on to relay a day of disappointment and "what-the-hell-was-that?" moments.

These moments had become few and far between since she had started dating Jonathan, but it was no secret as to what began the sudden slump. There were always murderers and child molesters and child-molesting murders as there were always rapists who were trying to create their own race of people and loons who collected penises as a hobby. The job, however difficult, never threw her into a spiral; those nearly always coincided with her and Elliot parting on bad terms.

She knew that Elliot's departure from the squad room that night was augmented by learning that their prime suspect was innocent, but the fact that he simply left the precinct without the thought of giving her a ride home or even a wave "good night" gave her a bad feeling that unsettled her stomach. The night previous, she left him because she was annoyed specifically with him. Tonight, he left her without even thinking about her. Often times, she found it amusing that she craved Elliot's attention more often than that of the man she was dating, but the fact remained that she did.

Olivia pursed her lips as she glanced at the telephone that hung on her wall. She *could* call Jonathan, but considering that he was the one who had acted like a complete ass, he should be the one to call. Their present tiff notwithstanding, Jonathan was normally an upstanding guy; someone she could possibly see herself marrying somewhere in the future. The thought had often crossed her mind, however, that Elliot was exactly the type of man with whom she imagined herself making a family and growing old. Determined, strong and bright, she could talk to him about anything, even though she chose not to do so, and physically, she knew where her mind stood the moment she had met him.

Deep down, she half hated Kathy for even considering leaving Elliot let alone, actually divorcing him and taking his children away from him. A few weeks earlier, Kathy had come to Olivia pleading for her to convince Elliot to sign their divorce papers. She had said she would consider it, but in reality she wanted to slap her.

As the frozen pizza's crust began to rise in her oven, she considered calling Jillian or Sarah, but decided against it. She did not want to add the guilt of waking her friends, their husbands or their children to her descending depression.

Her leg quivered beneath her as she sat and she slowly paced the kitchen to keep it from falling asleep. She racked her brain for a friend, someone, she could talk to at that

moment: Jillian, no, Sarah, no, Jonathan, being an ass, Maya, being a flake, Elliot, too angry to touch. The list continued as she pulled the pizza out of her oven: Adam was probably fighting with his girlfriend, her neighbor down the hall, Sam was up at all hours of the night, but was most likely busy making his “sculptures”...

When did I start losing people? she thought as she moved the small pizza to a ceramic plate. As she considered knocking on Mark’s door to share her pizza, the date with Mrs. Fitzgivens’ son was starting to look like a good offer, especially if he was willing to be awake late at night to listen to her gripes about the world.

Allowing tomatoes, cheese and grease to pass her pallet, she took to flipping through the television channels as she waited for fatigue to finally overtake her. Eventually, they would find the person responsible for murdering these boys, eventually, relations between her and Elliot would be better and eventually, she and Jonathan would make up and she could fall into his arms at night instead of falling into a light depression.

Her pizza only half-touched and hoping that her heavy sigh into her pillows was just her cycle beginning to plague her, Olivia wrapped herself in the large afghan crocheted by Maya’s mother before she went off to college and fell asleep on her couch.

The faded red gloves on Elliot’s hands came into constant contact with the large, worn punching bag. Beaded sweat dripped down his neck and caused his sleeveless shirt to cling to him at the neck cuff. His only thoughts were on Jeffrey Drover.

Drover was the guy. Punch, Punch, Hit. How could his DNA not match? Hit, Punch, Kick. He was the sole connection between all the boys. Slap, Punch, Punch. He’s putting on a show. Punch, Hit, Punch. The bastard’s going to get away with this.

Elliot eased off the punching bag with that last thought. His mind swirled with hundreds of past cases where murderers nearly got away on sheer cunning and he did not put Drover past such. He and Olivia had seen criminals manage to evade immediate capture by inserting vials of other person’s blood into their arms or even allowing their DNA to be taken knowing that medical procedures had changed the cells their bone marrow produced. Drover was just the same as the others; it was just a matter of figuring out what he did.

He used the small towel near his bottle of water to wipe down his face as he looked around the nearly empty room. The only other person in the weight room was a man who was doing bicep curls with forty-pound weights, in the far corner, smirking at himself in the mirror.

Elliot suppressed as sigh as he wished for someone, a bartender, a priest, anyone, on whom he could bounce some of his ideas about Drover. Years ago, when a man like Drover came through his caseload, he would get up in the middle of the night, check on his children, gaze at his wife and most of his troubled thoughts would melt from mind. When things were really bad, he might even accidentally on purpose wake Kathy, who would rub his back and tell him that everything would be okay.

Now, things were different, and all he could do was attempt to pound out the thoughts at an all-night gym. At three in the morning, however, there few people around with whom he could even share complaints, let alone tell him, they would get the person responsible for these murders.

The thought had occurred to him to call Olivia, but he decided against it. He figured she was probably having a great time that night with her rich boyfriend and he did not want to interrupt anything. The issue was, though, she would have been the perfect person he could swap ideas with on Drover, no matter how crazy they sounded.

"It's not fair," he mumbled aloud.

What isn't?, he thought to himself. *Drover or Olivia?*

He shook his head and picked up his boxing gloves. In either circumstance, he hated the thought of Drover walking free and he hated Olivia was dating a total j-

Elliot gasped as he quickly reached for his phone. He said "Liv" into his phone and the autodial rang her number a moment later.

"Hel-lo...?" she answered in a rough, sleepy voice.

"Hey," he said, feeling guilty. She had obviously been in a deep sleep, as she had not even answered her phone with her last name. "I just now realized I was probably going to wake you up."

"S'ok," she yawned and Elliot could hear a voice through the phone.

He tensed to the point that he nearly dropped the phone. He was so quick to call her he had not again considered if Olivia was even alone. "I hope I'm not interrupting anything."

"No," she said and he could hear her rustling blankets over the phone. "That's an infomercial announcing a cure for obesity. I'm actually just wrapped up in my blanket in front of the TV. In fact, if you hadn't called, I probably would've slept here for the rest of the night and woken up tomorrow with deep pillow creases in my face and unable to use my left arm."

Elliot laughed. "What's up?" she continued.

"Oh, I...uh...just wanted to apologize for just ditching you tonight." He left out the fact that he called to make sure she got home all right. They both knew that it was the reason he ended up driving her home most nights, but she still did not like it when he admitted it.

"You're fine," she said. "I know you were just upset about Drover. It's not like I was sitting here worrying you don't like me anymore."

Elliot laughed again. "I know I just wanted you to know that I felt bad about at least."

"It's no problem," she said with a yawn. "We'll find the guy, Elliot."

He shook his head. "I still just can't believe it. What if he's doing something to pull one over on us?"

"You saw him in the interrogation room. He's not criminal mastermind material."

"He was the connection, Liv. I was so sure."

"Hey, I thought he was the one, too. It wasn't just you."

"He looked good for it."

"I thought so...eventually."

"But, you were right about him."

"I wasn't. I was on the bandwagon, too."

"Yeah, but..."

"El," she said. "Stop worrying about it tonight. Drover's not the guy, but we'll get the real one. It'll be okay."

"All right," he said with a sigh and a smirk. "I'll see you in the morning."

“ ‘Kay. Bring those muffins again, ‘cause I know I’ll be dragging come eight o’clock.”

He laughed into the phone. “We’ll see. Get some sleep.”

“Good night.”

Having heard the words he needed to push Jeffrey Drover from his mind for the night, Elliot tossed his gloves into his bag and quickly left the gym before extreme fatigue overtook him.

Chapter Six

Wednesday January 17, 2007
Woodside, New York

A myriad of manila file folders and countless papers and photographs lay in an array on Elliot’s coffee table, appearing as if almost windswept into place. He and Olivia had spent the better part of the day going over every detail in this latest string of murders, yet they had made little progress. Their few witnesses had been re-interviewed, family members spoken to and friends and acquaintances of the victims were quizzed, but no new information had developed on the cases.

The detectives had stood beside their captain that afternoon as he delivered a statement to the media stating that, while there were no new leads or evidence at that time Manhattan’s SVU was working diligently and would find the killer. When the statement had been said, they then took turns answering rapid-fire questions about the case, and the reporters were as ruthless as usual.

Both were tired and frustrated that there was nothing that could be done, that even with fresh victims, their case was growing cold and that a killer was going to get off free. To make matters worse, with the media exposure the case had been receiving, they had had no time to focus on any of their other cases, which had steadily piled over the past week. There were still notes to compare, victims to speak re-interview and suspects to be interrogated, but there was no easing of the flow on either side.

Elliot stood staring into his refrigerator and wondered if he should reach for a Pabst or a simple Bud Light. Remembering he so rarely had adult company in his apartment, he pulled two Pabst bottles from their case opting to save the Bud Light for when he had to watch a murderer or rapist walk free, acquitted by yet another jury.

Olivia sat on Elliot’s couch, shoes at the door and her hair pulled into a loose ponytail, with a series of files spread across her lap. With the media exposure on their most current case came the nickname of the killer, The Boxing Strangler, and the usual flow of calls from concerned citizens and crackpots alike. Every lead was to be followed up in the off chance that one half-drunk caller could lead them to the killer. However, as the afternoon turned to evening, all calls seemed to be a complete waste of time.

The only one that looked slightly promising, an elderly woman complaining about the man downstairs constantly leaving his boxes all throughout the hallways, proved bogus as the man had recently moved into his apartment and was simply lazy about breaking down his boxes and taking them out the trash. They were both completely exhausted by the time they had spoken with man, to the point that they barely noticed

him and simply grunted that they were sorry for having bothered him as they left the apartment.

Unable to stand the idea of listening to the sound of constantly ringing telephones, while trying to play catch up, Elliot and Olivia drove to his apartment after the old woman's false alarm in order to keep their sanity as they reviewed other cases.

Olivia had been going through as many old cases as she could, attempting to find something that would link back to their killer. From her experience, killers like their Boxing Strangler, may go on sprees, but there was always that first murder that would have occurred long before their spree; the one that would lay the foundation to their capture. It was just a matter of trying to find the case that would be laying somewhere thus unsolved.

She sighed and rubbed the bridge of her nose, so tired and aggravated she was ready to rip out her own hair. At this point, she was ready to pin all the murders on Drover just to be able to rest the case, if only for a moment.

Elliot poked her with the cool beer bottle and she took it with a smile. As he settled back onto the couch and took a slice of the pizza that sat at the table's edge, her mind wondered about the coffee table and its impact on his life.

It looked slightly worn, but did not have the tell-tale of features of surviving a household full of children, so she was certain it had not come from his house when he had moved, but it still filled her with quizzical wonder, as did the rest of his furniture. A year and a half had passed since she and his brothers had helped him move into his current apartment, and she remembered it all too well. A bed frame, a couch and several other pieces of furniture, including the coffee table, had been set in a storage site by the river and the four of them spent the entire Saturday making the two trips back and forth from the storage site to his apartment.

She felt the need to do *something* to help him and was relieved that though he had not asked her to keep away, he did not tell her to leave either. She liked just being able to help Elliot, and she knew that if she had not been dating Jonathan at the time, she would have asked for his unmarried, younger brother's number, as she saw in him everything that she liked about Elliot, but in someone completely detached from her job.

Elliot rustled several papers in her direction, breaking her reverie and she took them returning to the task at hand. The papers were part of Connor Whickfield's autopsy report that he had wanted her to look over in case she could catch something he did not. As she stared Connor's face, she wondered if Elliot was comparing him to his son. Half the reason she suspected he wanted to work from his apartment was that, after the day they had had, he simply did not want to be alone. In truth, neither did she and considering that Jonathan had yet to call, text-message or even e-mail her, Olivia figured she would be spending her evening alone as well. Since he had signed his divorce papers, Elliot seemed more irritable, yet forlorn at the same time, and she knew that their case with its murdered children just Dickie's age, weighed harder on Elliot than anything else.

Olivia heard Elliot sigh as his telephone rang across the room.

"Ten bucks says this is Cragen telling us we need to be over there answering phones," he said as he stood.

"Ten bucks and another beer," she replied.

"Stabler," he said into the phone.

“Elliot?” a familiar voice said on the other side on the phone. “It’s me. Look, we need to talk about this thing with Dickie.”

Elliot glanced at Olivia and took the phone to the other side of the room. “Yeah, what’s up?”

“Well, how do you think this is going?” Kathy said. “I just told him he couldn’t go to his soccer game tonight and now he won’t speak to me.”

“Kath, he’s still grounded until he apologizes.”

“This isn’t going to work when he’s as stubborn as you!” she shouted into the phone. “He keeps saying he didn’t do anything wrong. He’s not going to apologize!”

“Kathy, he lied to me and snuck out of the house. You’re telling me you’d let him get away with his.”

“Elliot,” she said sighing. “He’s a thirteen-year-old kid. They do things like that or don’t you remember?”

“If I got caught, I apologized and went about my business. He won’t even do that.”

“He’s been grounded for six days now. Hasn’t he suffered enough? Haven’t I suffered enough having to deal with him stomping around, angry all the time?”

Anger ripped through him at her jibe about how Elliot seemed to be prior to their separation. “Kath, have you been watching the news lately? Kids, just Dickie and Lizzie’s age are being murdered in the streets and you want to let him run around like it’s nothing?”

He heard her sigh. “He’s not out wandering around on 120th, Elliot! He was just going out to see his friends. It was no big deal!”

“These kids are being found all over the city, Kathy! Kids who leave their houses to just go see a friend and then they turn up murdered on the other side of the city.”

“Elliot, I *know*.”

“Do you? I don’t think you get it.”

“And I don’t think *you* get it! You’re penalizing your son because of what you’re seeing on the job. You can’t do that! He just made a mistake.”

“Kathy, I saw one of the victims the night before he was killed! His parents let him go half a block down the street and he was murdered. And they knew exactly where he was going!”

“I know, Elliot. I get it! But, the city’s just as dangerous today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. You can’t take that out on the kids!”

He stood silent for a moment before answering. “Kathy, I don’t know what you need me to say to Dickie to make him understand this, but now, it’s the principle of the thing. He lied to me and snuck out of the house. Period. All I’m asking for is an apology. If he can’t even acknowledge that he did something wrong, then he deserves to spend all his time at home. This current case of mine is completely outside of it. It just makes it all the more important that he realize what he did was wrong. I mean, honestly Kath. If he were at home and you caught him sneaking back in the house at one in the morning, what you would’ve done?”

Elliot was met with silence and wondered if she had simply hung up on him. “He’d still be grounded,” she said a full minute’s silence.

“Thank you. The second he apologizes. Just *apologizes*. I’m not even asking him to write something saying that he was wrong. I just need to see that he gets it. I want him

to understand that it's not just Dad being Dad, but that it's for his safety. The second he says he's sorry, he can go."

"All right," she said, sounding defeated. "I'll give it another week, but if he doesn't apologize by then, I'm dropping it. I mean, I can't take both Dickie acting out *and* Kathleen moping around here and refusing to look at me over dinner, at the same time."

Well, you wouldn't have to do it alone if you hadn't thrown me out of my house and taken my kids away. "What's wrong?"

"How the hell should I know, Elliot? She doesn't even talk to me anymore."

"Well..." Elliot shook his head. "I mean she hasn't said anything at all?"

"Nothing. She's completely shut down. I'm really beginning to get worried."

"Well, it's not the first time. She'll be okay." He heard her sigh again. "Is there anything else?"

"No, that was it...how are *you* doing by the way?"

He shrugged unconsciously. "Soon as we find this guy, I'll be doing a lot better."

"Of course you will," she said. "I faith in you, Elliot."

A part of him wanted to start screaming into the phone at that moment. He wanted to shout and yell that if she really had faith in him, she should have had faith in their marriage. Everything muscle in his body tensed as he restrained himself from going off on her.

"I know, Kath," he said. "Good night."

"Night, Elliot."

"Everything all right?" Olivia asked when he sat back down on his couch.

"Yeah. I owe you a beer. You can shove the ten dollars," he added smiling.

"Oh, I'll get 'em," Olivia said and watched him sigh as he closed his eyes a moment.

"Seriously," she continued. "Is everything okay?"

He shook his head. "Dickie. Kathy's saying that he's still mad that he's grounded."

"He's *still* on punishment for last Thursday?"

"All he has to do is apologize."

"You don't think you're being a little hard on him. I mean, what kind of trouble did you get into when you were his age?"

"What *is* it with all the women in my life tonight? Kathy said the same thing and that's not the point. He snuck out of the house and lied to my face. He needs to apologize. End of story."

"So, what, are you going to ground him until he's eighteen if he doesn't?"

"Damn straight I will. He knows he's wrong. He'll miss his friends soon enough and he'll apologize eventually."

"Hmm...The phrase 'not bloody likely' is coming to mind."

Elliot simply shook his head.

"You're not coming down on him because of what's been going on with this case, are you?"

"No. It's the principle of thing. It'd be the same way whether this Boxing Strangler was out there or not. I can handle this."

She simply stared at him, not wanting their conversation to lead into a repeat of Sunday evening or the previous night, but her concern never wavered.

He sighed again. "Let's...let's just take a break from this. What do you have about the...uh... Kelly Thomlinson rape case?"

Olivia shifted and looked through a few of the files in her bag. "Uh...let's see... Thomlinson...Thomlinson...oh, yeah. The alleyway behind a club."

"Was there even DNA on that one?" he asked, eyes closed and rubbing his temples.

"No. I think we should put her at the bottom of the pile for now. I remember her statement at the hospital and she seemed to be more focused on getting a form that said she spent half the night in the hospital than giving us a description of the guy. Sounds like a college student trying to get out of an exam to me."

"Fine...who else've we got?"

"Eddie Dawson, raped with a bottle in a gay bar..."

"That's the guy who said he wasn't gay, but was there anyways, right?"

"Right. Now, I got a call from him a few days ago. He wanted to know how the case was going, but I haven't had any time to return his call."

Elliot shook his head. "He still needs to tell us why he was there. I remember he wasn't all that open with that information. Plus, he said he saw his attacker, but he didn't want to just give a description. Bottom him, who's next?"

"Marianas Garcia. Walking home from a bodega on East 90th. Two white guys jumped her pulled her in a car and raped her."

"Does Novak want to treat it as hate crime?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think we'd call it that until we brought the suspects in. Now, I remember we had DNA for the both of the men. One was in the system, but he was in a lockup from a Bronx rape when we first started looking at him and that was right before Connor Whickfield was found."

"What about the other guy?"

"We had a suspect..." she said, reviewing her notes. "Name of...McDaniel. He lives a few blocks South of the crime scene. Let's say we put it on the list for tomorrow to go check in on him?"

"Deal," Elliot said, walking back to his refrigerator.

Olivia nodded her head and as she added to her notes, she saw another note she had made earlier that day. The gentleman with the moving boxes around his apartment, had been very reluctant to even speak to them initially, stating that they had no right to impede on his civil rights. It was not the first time that she and Elliot had run into people who practically slept with a copy of the Constitution under their pillows, but she made a mental note to speak to him again. She had not liked the way he looked at her, even through her own haze of fatigue, and she knew he was worth spending a little more time investigating.

"Another Pabst or a Bud Light?" Elliot shouted from his refrigerator.

"Pabst."

"Sure," he said, handing the beer to her. "Drink me out of all the good stuff."

She smiled and threw the bottle cap at him as they settled back into their cases.

Two hours and another two beers a piece later, Olivia felt the slight buzz that had been building in her head starting to cloud her thinking as she reviewed her notes. When

she realized that she had read the same sentence four times in a row without understanding it, she sighed and rested against Elliot's couch.

"Let's call it a night," she mumbled.

"Yeah, that's fine. I'm exhausted myself." He stared at her as she lay half asleep. "You know, it's starting to snow. I don't feel comfortable driving you home with the weather and a couple beers under my belt. Why don't you just stay here tonight? I'll just park it on the couch and drive you home in the morning?"

"I'll just get a cab."

"This late? And, in this snow?"

"I'll be fine. Thanks for the offer though."

A few moments later, Elliot watched Olivia gather herself and her things into a cab and as he headed back to his own apartment, could not get their last conversation out of his head.

What *was* he thinking asking her to stay? Of *course*, the rational thing would have been to call her a cab. Why even suggest asking her to spend the night?

He shook his head as he straightened up his living room. They had had a few drinks each; just enough to remove any initial inhibitions about themselves and lead down a dangerous road. The question had simply rolled out of his mouth before he even had time to think about what was said.

What would he have done if she had agreed? Olivia sleeping in *his* bed? What would he have done if something happened?

He sighed as he remembered the smile Olivia gave him as she stepped into the cab before leaving and he tried to shake the memory. Knowing there was no way he would get to sleep anytime soon, he undressed and decided instead to take a long, cold shower.

The cab driver made the trip to Olivia's apartment slowly and steadily as the snow began to fall on the city, covering most surfaces with its white fluff. The moment she paid the driver, she noticed a tall figure standing in the doorway of her building.

"You know, it's twenty degrees out here," she said to the man in her doorway.

"I know," Jonathan said, shivering slightly. "So, it should seem obvious that I *really* wanted to talk to you."

"Well," she said stepping into the doorway. "If you just wanted to talk, there are these remarkable little inventions known as phones, you know."

"Fine," he said. "I needed to come *see* you then."

She stared at him for a minute. "What makes you think I'm even gonna let you up?"

"Please, Liv," he said, shivering again. "We need to talk..."

She watched him shiver for a moment more before answering. "Well...all right then."

"I have something for you," Jonathan said once they were in the elevator.

He pulled out a long Tiffany Blue box and handed it out to her. Olivia stared at it for a moment, wondering whether or not to even take the gift.

When they first started dating, Jonathan tried showering her with expensive jewelry and things from Tiffany & Co., Saks Fifth Avenue and the like, but she told him to stop. Wealthy or not, she did not want him giving her expensive gifts all the time as it seemed unbecoming of an NYPD detective to walk around with earrings that cost more than half a year's salary. For the most part, Jonathan had obliged, opting to buy her small plastic, bubble gum machine rings and such instead, and she loved those more than the flawless, one carat, Emerald Cut diamond he bought for her on their anniversary.

"I told you about these gifts Jonathan," she said, slowly taking the box from him. "I don't want these expensive things."

"I know, but I wanted you to have this. I had it made especially for you."

"You can't just buy me something from Tiffany's every time you mess up."

"Will you just open it?"

She sighed and pulled the white, satin ribbon from the light, Tiffany Blue box and opened it. Inside, set carefully on the inner satin, sat a necklace made of candy hearts. The largest center heart sat pink with red letters that said "Only Olivia Has My Heart." Her mouth fell open and she closed her eyes. Jonathan looked down at her, blue eyes shining with redress, and took her hand in his. She could not speak and simply shook her head as she thought of the night of their first date.

An hour later, after a grave apology and the promise of better understanding in the future, Olivia felt herself climax as Jonathan rocked beneath her and she slowly settled under her covers with him.

As her breathing slowed back to a steady pace, Jonathan pulled her closer to him. Olivia wanted to simply close her eyes and fall asleep on Jonathan's bare chest, but as her heartbeat slowed, her mind was still raced. At some point in the past hour, she had the great urge to call out a name, but only one could come to mind and it was not Jonathan's.

Jonathan's breathing became slow and steady, signifying that he was asleep and Olivia blushed as she lied next to him. The candy necklace lay on its satin pillow in the blue box on her nightstand and for a moment, it appeared to sparkle in the moonlight. Everything she had ever known or felt about love lied beside her with his arm around her keeping her near as he slept, but her mind still played on one single idea, half blurred by ecstasy and the Pabst that still splashed in her stomach.

What if, she thought, What if I had stayed?

Thursday January 18, 2007

SVU Squad room

11:26AM

"All right," Cragen said, standing in front of his lead detectives on his most poignant case. "Someone give me a run down on what we've got so far."

Fin spoke up first. "Well, we had Drover, but his DNA wasn't a match, so we he's gone."

"What about another link between the boys?" Cragen asked.

"Drover was it," Elliot said. "He's the only one who's had some kind of relationship with each of the kids. Not to mention that he lives and works within a few

miles of all the dumping sites and *found* one of the victims. He was the only link we had.”

“But,” Olivia added, “aside from the DNA *and* the incorrect ID, his actions in the interrogation screamed for an innocent man. He’s out of the loop. There’s got to be another link between these kids.”

Cragen shook his head. “Everything goes back to that the soccer complex. I want two of you to go back there and interview anyone you can think of who might have had some kind of relation to the kids.”

“I’ll go,” Fin said.

“I’m right behind you,” Elliot said, walking toward the elevators.

Glances were exchanged between everyone as Elliot walked to the elevators and Olivia felt slightly unnerved by the change.

“Hey,” Munch said, breaking the uncomfortable silence after Cragen returned to his office. “Liv. I want to go over something with you on that guy with the boxes. What was his name?”

“Something Kreider,” Olivia said, looking through notes on her desk.

“I think we need to look at him again,” Munch continued.

She smiled. “Why? You feel a kindred spirit in another conspiracy nut?”

“No,” he said sternly, but with sarcasm dripping. “Besides he’s not even a conspiracy nut at that age. Merely a wannabe, and he’s not even good at that.”

Olivia laughed and she sat down at her desk to bring up information on the “nut” with the boxes.

When Fin and Elliot returned four hours later, all smiles were gone from Munch and Olivia’s faces.

“What’s up?” Elliot said, the moment he got to his desk.

Olivia sighed. “You first. What’d you turn up at the complex?”

“Refs and kiosk guys talked about a guy they’ve seen around. Tall-*ish*, hazel-*ish* eyes, black-*ish* hair, always watching the games.

“That’s a lot of -ishes,” Olivia said.

“Tell me about it,” Elliot said.

“Sounds kind of like Drover, though,” Munch added. “Doesn’t it?”

“Probably is,” Fin said.

“What’ve you two been doing?” Elliot asked.

“Looking up a little info on an Owen Kreider,” Olivia said. “You remember the guy with the boxes?”

“Yeah, he was moving. So what?”

“So,” she continued. “He’s either extremely lazy or he’s been moving for a long time. Fin and I called his landlord. Kreider moved into that apartment three years ago.”

“So, he’s lazy,” Elliot said. “Besides, that box thing was weak anyway.”

“But, his sealed records aren’t,” Munch said. “He was sent away for something that might’ve been violent. We can’t see the records just yet, but were requesting them.”

Elliot stared between Olivia and Munch from his chair for a moment. “And you two think that that counts as something? Those records could be about anything and everything. Could’ve been robbing liquor stores or flashing old ladies.”

“Have you taken a good look at Owen Kreider?” Olivia said, handing him a photo. “That’s the mug shot from when he was seventeen. Do you notice a mild coincidence?”

“No,” he said, after giving the photo a quick glance.

She took it away and handed it to Fin. “First thing we noticed is that he looks a lot like Drover.”

Fin nodded as he looked at the photo. “Black-ish hair and hazel-ish eyes. Same sad look on his face. How tall is he now?”

“ ‘Bout six-one,” Munch said. “Tall-ish. Like Drover. And he and Drover both work for Rohlman-Hayworth. I bet you Kreider knows Alphabet City pretty good, too.”

“Sounds promising,” Fin said. “Who’s gonna talk to him first?”

“Sounds like a waste of time,” Elliot mumbled. “If similar colouring is the only thing we’ve got on this other guy, we’re gonna have a helluva time bringing him in.”

“We had less than this on Drover, and you were itching to bring him in,” Olivia said.

“This guy didn’t *find* one of the victims while going for a *run* at three o’clock in the morning! We’re wasting our time. This guy’s out there killing kids and we’re nowhere closer to finding him than the day we found Jacob Lewendale!”

He had not meant to shout, but the very idea of this new suspect seemed more than ludicrous to him.

“Elliot,” Olivia said, standing in front of him. “What’s the problem? We talk to Kreider and we figure out if we can rule him out as a suspect or not. What’s the big deal? Please don’t tell me this is still about Drover.”

He shook his head slowly and she answered for him. “It is, isn’t it? You can’t stand the fact that Drover’s really not the guy.”

“There’s no way he can have that kind of link to the victims and not be related to the crimes.”

“DNA cleared him, Elliot,” she said, crossing her arms. “His prints don’t match. It’s not him.”

“We only found DNA on one victim and just the newest victim’s prints on all on the others. DNA might have cleared him on Jacob Lewendale, but my eye’s still on him for the rest.”

Olivia glared at him, shaking her head all the while and Fin spoke before she could lay into him again.

“Look,” he said. “I say we just sit Drover on the back burner for a sec. Elliot’s right. We only have DNA from one victim.”

“But Warner says all the victims were killed by the same one person,” Olivia said.

“And she’s human,” Fin said. “She makes mistakes. Jacob Lewendale was killed days before the others, but these last five were all killed back to back to back.”

“It means he was just warming up with the first one,” Olivia said, nearly shouting. “These boys were all killed by the *same* guy.”

“No,” Elliot said. “It *looks* like all the same guy. There’s still too much with these cases that says it has to be more than one person.”

“Wait,” Munch interrupted, “*now* you want to back my copy cat theory?”

Olivia spoke before Elliot could answer. “No, he just can’t take that fact that he was wrong about Drover, so now he’s got to do something to make it look like it could still be him.”

Elliot stood at her last statement. “Don’t tell me what I’m thinking. I’m *telling* you. Drover’s involved! He’s banging the single moms of the kids he coaching and all the while he’s checking out the kids. Just because his DNA didn’t match Jacob Lewendale doesn’t mean he’s not involved with the others!”

“Elliot,” Fin said softly tapping him on the shoulder.

“What!” he screamed as he turned around.

Fin nodded toward the elevators and Elliot turned to see Kathleen standing in the corner of the squad room.

He crossed the room in four steps and allowed his temper to come down to a simmer as he approached his daughter, who stood arms folded and glaring at him.

“Hey,” he said softly. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you serious?” she hissed.

“What? What’d I do?”

“You’re still grounding Dickie!”

Elliot pulled Kathleen toward the wall of the squad room. “Kathleen, I really don’t have time to discuss this right now. Let’s talk about this later.”

“The *hell* we will. I wanna talk about it now! You’re being completely unfair about everything.”

“Look! I told you already! This doesn’t even concern you. Go home and I’ll talk to Dickie about this later.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to you. Ever! And, I don’t blame him.”

Elliot rolled his eyes. “I can’t believe I’m even entertaining this conversation right now. Kathleen, I’m up to my ass with work and you’re coming here about this insignificant stuff? Go home and I’ll talk to all of you about it later!”

“It’s not insignificant to me and it’s not to Dickie either!”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“You don’t have time for anything! You just don’t care!”

He sighed and spoke to her in a soft, deep voice. “I care, Kathleen. I care that you felt it necessary to come all the way over here just for your brother. I get it. I understand, but you kids know better than to lie to your mother and me, and you all know that you can’t sneak out of the house without getting into trouble.”

“It’s been a week. For one time, Dad? That’s not even fair.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Elliot said. “Since Dickie’s sending you to go fight his battles, you go back to him and ask *him* why he’s making everybody’s life miserable just because he won’t apologize.”

“You’re being completely unfair.”

“I think it’s perfectly reasonable. He apologizes for sneaking out, he’s free. He knows it. But, go. Tell him that. Repeat it for him so that he gets it and we don’t have to go through this again.”

Kathleen simply shook her head and began to walk away from him.

“Hey,” he said. “What’s going on with you and your mother?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Mom says you’re quiet all the time. What gives?”

She sighed and was about to open her mouth when Olivia came around the corner. "Elliot? Cragen wants us."

He glanced at Olivia and then back at Kathleen. Concern trickled through him as he saw the change in his daughter's face. She had turned very pale in a matter of seconds and she would not look him in the eye.

"One sec, Liv," he said as stared at Kathleen.

Kathleen's eyes quickly went back and forth from her father and Olivia. "No. I- It's fine, Dad. I'm fine and I've gotta go."

"You're sure?"

"It's fine," she said quickly and turned to jump onto the elevator that had just opened.

"Everything okay?" Olivia asked. She suddenly felt a tightening in her chest as she hoped that Kathleen had finally come to tell her father what she and Olivia were about to do.

"Dickie sent Kathleen in here to get him out of punishment."

Olivia resisted rolling her eyes. "Well, if that's stressing out the whole family, don't you think it's gone on long enough?"

"Oh, come on," he said. "I told you yesterday. It's the principle of the thing. Nothing's changed."

"Well, if Kathleen's crossing a river to come tell you you're being unfair, isn't-"

"Stop," Elliot said. "I don't need this from you. I know my kids and I know what's up."

He started to walk away and she could not hold her mouth shut. "Oh, please."

Elliot whirled around to face her. "Excuse me?"

"You don't know your kids half as well as you think you do. Otherwise, it wouldn't catch you off guard that Dickie sneaks out of the house or that Kathleen...will come all the way over here just to pick a fight with you."

"Who do you think *you* are?" he said taking a step closer to her. "You don't know my kids! You don't know my family!"

"I know enough about *you* to know that when the job coincides with something going on with your kids, your judgment turns to crap!"

"You're full of shit," he said and turned away from her.

"Oh am I? You're coming down on your son because of this case and you won't let go of Drover because he reminds you of someone in Dickie's life! I'm not wrong here and you know it!"

"Drover's involved!"

"No, he's not! You just want him to be!"

"Benson! Stabler!" Cragen boomed from across the room.

The detectives glared at one another for a moment more before walking in the direction of Cragen's office.

"All right. Let's at least *pretend* to be professionals for a minute," Cragen said minutes later to the four detectives. He glowered at Elliot and Olivia before continuing. "Our priorities just shifted. The daughter of a state representative was visiting the city this week. After drinking all night, Helena Fayden heads back to her hotel where she was jumped, dragged to the stairwell and raped. For now, the focus is off this strangler and onto the girl."

“So, five kids have to wait because Fayden’s dad has money?” Fin said, a strong frown on his face.

“This is coming down to me from on high. Fayden’s already gone to the media and he wants justice...now.”

“So, does everyone,” Fin said.

“I want you at the hotel. Interview the staff and find out who was around that night.”

All four stood and headed for the door.

“Elliot, I need to talk to you. Benson, stay put,” Cragen added as Olivia continued out the door of the office. “Now...what the hell is going on with you two?”

The detectives remained silent, neither wanting to erupt a three-way argument.

“We already had this discussion. What’s this about?”

Olivia pursed her lips as Cragen yelled and glanced at Elliot, hoping that he would speak up before she said something she regretted.

“Captain,” Elliot began to Olivia’s relief. “There’s been some...conflicting opinions on how we should look at our next suspect...”

“Oh, is that it,” Cragen said, sardonically. He took a step towards Elliot. “Look, I know that this case might be hitting a little close to home. If you can’t handle the case-”

“I can *handle* the case,” Elliot interrupted.

“Well, then act like it! I don’t want to see anymore of that crap going on in here again! Got it?”

Both detectives nodded and Elliot stormed out of the room.

“Olivia,” Cragen said, with a softer tone, “you’ve got the Dana Barrington case tomorrow?”

“I’m due in court at ten.”

“Fine,” he said and then sighed. “I don’t know what’s going on with the two of you, but I really need you to get it together.”

“I am...we are.”

“Just keep an eye on him,” he added. “I don’t want him doing anything rash over this Drover thing.”

“I will.”

Olivia stepped off the elevator on her floor and trekked toward her apartment door, weighed down by the stacks of files in her bag and being carried under her arm. All of the documents and images that pertained to Dana Barrington’s rape case were in her possession and she was scheduled to testify at the trial the next day. She knew she was ready for the trial as she had testified at many previous to this one, but she hauled everything home to review just as a comfort to herself.

Dana Barrington was a high school student who had been brought into a hospital after being found bleeding profusely in an alley. She had attempted to perform an abortion on herself with a wire hanger and nearly killed herself in the process. After she was admitted, the detectives learned that she had been raped several months earlier and that she could not tell anyone about what had happened to her. Dana had said that she

was too embarrassed to say anything because she had walked home alone and she knew she should not have.

The rapist, Gregory Lars, had been apprehended by the DNA provided by Dana's baby who was born premature, but healthy, two months later. Lars had been preying on adolescent girls in the city for years, but it was only on with this case that they had the DNA needed to convict him.

On Friday, Olivia was supposed to testify about Lars' behavior when he was finally caught. She had no qualms about testifying in front of Lars, who had actually hit her in the face while she had him against a wall, but her nerves were slightly on edge when it came to facing the victim again. Dana's large brown eyes displayed nothing but innocence and she knew only too perfectly that a child born to a raped victim, especially one as young as Dana, would not be as loved as he could be. She knew that upon seeing Dana in court, she would feel the need to tell her what was coming in her life and what she should tell her son as he grew up, but she knew she could not.

Olivia nearly had her keys finagled into her door when she heard Mrs. Fitzgivens' door open and saw the elderly woman step out into the corridor out of the corner of her eye.

"Olivia!" she said, buoyantly. "You're home so early!"

"Yes," Olivia said, turning the key into her apartment door. "And, I've got loads of stuff to go over...and...you know, I've got court tomorrow so..."

"My Philip's over visiting," Mrs. Fitzgivens said, ignoring Olivia. "Can you come over a minute?"

"Really...I just can't. I've this court appearance tomorrow and..." Olivia stared at the woman's hopeful expression and magnified eyes and sighed. "Yeah...just...give me a second."

"Oh, take all the time you need. In fact, why don't I just send Philip over in a half an hour and you two could go get a bite to eat?"

Olivia simply nodded her head. "Okay."

An hour later, after Olivia had changed clothes and reapplied her makeup, she and Philip Fitzgivens were sitting in a chain restaurant, at 13th Street and 6th Avenue. She munched on her Greek salad as Philip prattled on about his life and his work as a programmer.

Apparently, he was the youngest of four boys, all of whom worked low-paying, blue collar jobs work except for him, he was the apple of his mother's eye, he had just moved back the city after living in Michigan for several years and now worked from his home in East Village.

"Why'd you decide to go to Michigan State?" Olivia asked hoping to avoid an uncomfortable silence.

"Well, I originally wanted to go to their business college, but when I took a few programming courses as electives, I knew which way I wanted to go."

"Oh, really," she said, trying to sound interested.

"Yeah. I mean you wouldn't believe some of the capabilities of these programs nowadays."

"Well, I know a little. I worked in our Computer Crimes for a while."

"Wow. Computer Crimes. Sounds like something I should've looked into, eh?"

"Yeah..."

She allowed the conversation to rail onward for another hour as Philip described events in which he was too shy to participate while at Michigan State, described the inner workings of how a series of ones and zeroes could be used to portray anything in the universe and let it slip that he was thirty-five, then thirty-two, then actually twenty-nine years old.

As her watch hit eight-thirty, she decided she was tired of being pleasant and tired of amusing her neighbor's interests.

"Phil," she began. "Look, you seem like a really nice guy, but..."

"Hey, don't brush me off so quick. I'm not quite as nerdy as I seem. I'm just kind of nervous."

"I don't think you're a nerd," she lied. "But..."

"And, don't think I had to have my mother ask you to dinner for me. I was kind of hesitant when she first told me about *you* because she wants to see me married, but don't let that scare you into brushing me off, either."

"I'm not trying to brush you off. It's just that..."

"It-it's the age thing, right? Trust me, I don't see it as a problem. In fact, I've always been attracted to older-"

"*Don't* finish that sentence," she said, putting up her hand. "It's not just the age difference. The thing is, I'm actually in a relationship right now, and even though he can be an ass at times, I like him. We're good together. And, I wouldn't want to lead you on when I'm dating someone else."

Philip sighed, looking deflated. "Okay. Well...I mean, thanks for just coming out with me, at least."

She smiled and nodded as she took a sip of her iced tea. Somehow, the phrase "you're welcome" simply did not suit the situation.

"M-J," Olivia said into her phone as she left the restaurant twenty minutes later.

Her phone beeped and then rang twice before someone answered on the other end.

"Livia?"

"Maya," Olivia said. "What are you up to?"

"Would you believe it? My Thursday has gone to crap. Right now, I'm just taking off my shoes since Amit has to pull another random shift."

"Well, put 'em back on and come meet for a drink at Riese's."

"Holy hell! Livia's free for a drink? I'll be there in a lick!"

Olivia laughed into the phone and made her way up several blocks to the small bar she and Maya frequented. Twenty minutes after she had been called, Maya appeared through the bar's doors dressed for a trendy outing.

"Aren't we a little overdressed for Riese's?" Olivia asked when Maya found her at the bar.

"Hey, you called *me* and this was what I was already wearing. Amit and I were supposed to be at this new restaurant's opening, but of *course*, the great doctor had to work. Honestly, I don't know why I bother with him. I guess it's because he's probably the man I'll end up with...when I'm ready. So! Why are you suddenly free to meet for a drink?"

"Just a quick one."

"But, still! When was the last time we did this? 2005?"

Olivia smiled. "Or three weeks ago... Anyway, I just needed to tell you, face to

face, how I kept myself from turning down your tenacious little road.”

Maya put her hand to her chest in mock surprise. “My goodness! What ever could you be talking about?”

“You and your idea of keeping one guy on the side at all times. No matter what people say, I’m not ‘*exactly*’ like you and I proved that to myself tonight.”

Maya laughed into her drink, half spilling it onto the table. “You don’t have a guy on the side? Why, did you stop eyeballing your partner when he walks out of a room?”

Olivia gave Maya a hard nudge with her foot. “No. I mean yes. I mean I don’t do that anyway. And, I was talking about this twenty-nine year old kid, I told to find himself another girl since I was already dating someone else.”

“Twenty-nine, eh? Go Livia! At little younger than that and you’d be officially robbing the cradle!”

“Seriously. He was adorable in that nerdy sense, but since I’m in love with my Jonathan, I told him to keep on trucking.”

“Love, huh,” Maya said, wiping up her spilled Rum and Coke. “Got some last night, did you?”

Olivia nudged her with her arm, smiling. “Shut up, you little heifer.”

Maya laughed and she took a long drink from her glass.

“But...about Elliot though...”

“Uh-oh,” Maya said. “What happened?”

“It’s not him. It’s his daughter. She came to me asking for advice on birth control.”

Maya’s eyebrows furrowed. “Well...I guess that kind of makes sense...I mean if she didn’t want to go to her mom or something.”

“She didn’t and she was pretty adamant about it. And of course, she doesn’t want me to mention anything to her father.”

“Would *you* if you were in her position? Hell, when we were eighteen we couldn’t go to our parents with stuff like that. I’m actually not surprised she went to you.”

“I just don’t think I’m doing the right thing, I mean, especially after that thing in Midtown last year. She doesn’t seem mature enough to handle this.”

“Who is? Sex is a big deal whenever it happens. But, at least you’re keeping yourself less stressed in the long run.”

“How so?”

“Well, say you don’t help her out and she gets pregnant. You get to spend the next nine months dealing with your partner’s anxiety over the whole thing *and* everything that happens once she has the kid. You’re helping everybody out in the long run.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself, but every time I talk to her...I just don’t know. I saw her today while she was talking to her father and you should’ve seen the look on her face. She looked like she swallowed her own tongue.”

“Livia, don’t worry so much. Look, Elliot will find out about it, he’ll blow a gasket and then he’ll get over it and be so thankful his kid even thought of coming to you, he’ll probably buy you something. Trust me. It’ll be fine. I mean, I wish we had someone like *you* to go to at that age.”

“You did.”

“No, but I mean you now, not the you of 1984. I needed someone older to talk to. Not the girl sitting next to me with the same bad hair and acid-washed jeans I was

wearing too. Back then it was just the blind leading the blind. But, seriously, Elliot'll be fine with it...eventually.

"If you would've seen him today, you wouldn't say that."

"Something *else* happened?"

"I couldn't keep my mouth shut," Olivia said sighing, "and we ended up blowing up at each other in the middle of the squad room."

"I've been tellin' you since forever, Livia. When in doubt, shut your mouth."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "The thing is our partnership is as frayed as it can get right now. After this thing with Kathleen, I'll probably be looking for a new partner...if he doesn't kill me first."

"You'll be fine. You're partnership is fine. You're both fine. We're all fine!

Everybody's fine!"

Olivia smiled and shook her head. She tried to let Maya's happy-go-lucky aura flow over as she finished her single drink, and when she left the bar a short while later, she felt better than she had in several days.

Once back in her apartment, she reviewed Dana Barrington's case again and also the notes she and Munch had made on Owen Kreider. She made a mental note to question Kreider again the next day. Elliot would most likely be against it, but she knew in order for them to find the killer, she would have to remain objective.

Despite what Maya had said, Olivia could not shake the feeling of pure rage directed at her today. Before Fin stepped in to tell them that Kathleen was standing in the room, Elliot was completely red with anger and every bit of it seemed directed at her.

Why couldn't I just let it go? she thought.

The jab about his children was lower than she had ever gone, and she knew it was out of her own frustration about everything going on in her own life. Their current caseload aside, Elliot just seemed so out of control recently. He was so determined to nail Drover that it seemed like he would do anything, which was what scared her most.

As she flipped through documents at her desk, Olivia could only think about Elliot. Why was he so angry? Was it solely this case or did it have to do with the fact that he finally signed his divorce papers? Why could they not seem to get things back to the way they were? Were they that out of sync? Maybe it had something to do with Kathleen?

Olivia felt her stomach rumble at the thought. Why did Kathleen have to come to her of all people? The question had been posed several times, but she still had trouble with it. Kathleen had an understanding mother and a sister with a good head on shoulders. She had high school counselors and hosts of friends. Why did she have to come to her? Was their encounter at the bar the previous so bonding that Kathleen felt the need to confide in Olivia further?

She set down her files and rubbed her temples, wishing she had told Elliot about the incident she had pushed from mind to avoid inadvertently blurting out during an argument. Regardless of what could have been done, all that lied ahead was potential deceit. Olivia had been unwillingly dragged into Elliot's family life and there seemed to be no way out of it. But, what else could she do? Hold Elliot's hand when he tells her that Kathleen was going to have a kid out of wedlock at eighteen years old?

Remembering that she had barely touched her salad during her "date" that evening, Olivia looked into her refrigerator and surveyed all that remained. There were

eight items in fridge including an empty egg carton that she had absent-mindedly placed back in the fridge, a bag with three slices of bread that were steadily molding over, a half gallon of milk in which floated small, solid chunks of white and an unopened package of salad fixings that was turning into slime in the bag.

She threw all the items into the garbage, which she quickly threw out into the garbage room on her floor, and added those same items to the paper shopping list that was held to the refrigerator with a September 11th memorial magnet. Grabbing the phone on her wall, she speed dialed her favorite Chinese delivery, Mr. Huo's, ordered Singapore noodles with chicken and told herself that no matter what, she was hitting the gym the next evening.

Ten minutes later, Olivia heard a knock at her door. Thinking initially, that it was her order coming faster than usual, she grabbed her wallet and headed toward the door. It was only when she began to turn the handle did the question: *How the hell would the guy have gotten to my door without me buzzing him in?* come to mind.

"Hey!" Mark said the moment she opened the door. He was holding a brown paper bag full of groceries.

She sighed in relief as she had one foot preparing to run for her gun. "Mark. I thought it was someone else. What's up?"

"Nothing really," he said. "I went shopping earlier tonight and I was a complete dolt. I bought, like, two of a couple things here. Just eggs and milk and stuff. You know the essentials, but I realized that there's no way I can use all these before they go bad. Anyway, I know you never have time to go shopping and stuff and I was wondering if you maybe wanted these."

She smiled as she peeked into the bag. "Well, you've got some two percent milk there and I only drink skim, but...I think Mrs. Fitzgivens could probably use all that stuff. I know she's always cooking and needing stuff anyway."

Mark nodded, visibly disappointed. "Okay. I'll give her a knock...tomorrow. I think you and me are the only one's still up this late on our floor."

"Okay," she said, closing the door.

"Hey, wait a sec," Mark said.

"Yeah?"

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said the other day about that...um guy...uh Adam. I don't want you to think I'm like that. I didn't realize you guys were close."

"He's a good friend and a great guy. You should really get to know him."

"You know...I think...I think maybe I will. Where's he live?"

"Two floors above in the same apartment as me. He's closer to your age, so talk to him about basketball and music and old school video games and you're in like flint."

He smiled at her. "Talk to you later, then?"

"Yeah. Good night."

As she closed the door, Olivia smiled to herself. She did not fully believe Mark's change in bigotry, but the thought that he was making an attempt for her sake was comforting. For that moment, at least, she was saving the world one bigot, child molester, rapist and murderer at a time.

“Rat bastard!” Elliot shouted as he drove his padded hand into the bulk of the stiff, punching bag.

He had been there for close to two hours, since he had left the Hyatton Hotel, where Helena Fayden had been raped. They had turned up nothing in the initial investigation and while the next step was requesting a DNA sample from each of the male employees, Elliot still felt frustrated when he Munch, Fin and Olivia had parted ways.

Part of that frustration lied in the fact that he and Olivia did not have their customary “make-up” talk following their argument and he could still feel the tension. She had been out of line stating that he did not know his kids, but she was right on the nose regarding Drover.

After everything that he had found about Drover in the past week, he was so sure that he was involved. They had so much evidence on him, and yet, he was walking free. And, there was also the issue with Kathleen and Dickie. The situation had blown so far out of proportion Elliot could barely remember what had started it in the first place. The combination of the two stresses made hearing his captain tell he should step down from the case almost too much to bear.

Having no other avenue of venting his rage and frustration, Elliot returned to his favorite all-night gym and began to wear down the large bag in the weight room. As he continued to hit the bag, every one of the day’s irritations returned to him in full force.

Who was Olivia trying to kid? Drover was involved! He was just the kind of guy who could pull off some kind of crazed stunt to keep him out of prison. Why could Olivia and Cragen not see that? Why the hell would Cragen want to pull him from the case? Had he not already shown him that he could handle anything through *years* in the unit?

And, what was going on with Kathleen? He did not like the exchange that took place between Olivia and Kathleen. Normally, she at least gave Olivia a “hi” or a nod, but today, she looked like she was about to pass out at the sight of her.

Elliot shook his head as he paused between hits. Olivia knew all his kids pretty well, but she did not spend a lot of time with them without him around as well. What could have happened that would make Kathleen’s demeanor toward Olivia change so drastically?

“She *hiding* something,” Elliot said to himself, as he began again on the bag. “And, she’s *lying* about it.”

When did his kids start thinking it was okay to lie to their father? Why would Dickie think he could get away with sneaking out at night? That could not have been his first time doing it. Why did he have to lie about it initially? Was this something Kathy was pressing on all of them?

Kathy. When was she going to file the paperwork to finalize their divorce? Was he going to feel the exact moment his life officially fell apart? What was he going to do if, no *when* Kathy started dating? What if she decided to get remarried?

Elliot’s knuckles cracked beneath the glove at the last question. The thought of someone else married to his wife, raising his children was agonizing. The whole thing could not have been all of his fault, could it? Olivia seemed to think *everything* he said or did was wrong.

What was with *her* lately? It felt like she was picking a fight with him at every chance she got. What was going on with her? He knew it was not her cycle. He had a

calendar telling him exactly which days to tread softly around her. It had to be something with the wealthy jackass she was dating.

Elliot extended his arms to exert full force in his muscles, pummeling the grey bag. What could she possibly see in that guy? Of all the ones he had seen over the years, he simply could not understand Jonathan. Why would she even waste her time with some rich guy who liked to pretend he made his millions on his own? She was too good for him. There was no way he would last. But, what if he did? What if she married him? The bastard was so wealthy...what if she quit her job? What if she left *him* for good? God, how would he cope?

At the last thought, he simply hung on to the bag. Every body part seemed to ache, but he had so much pent up that he wanted to hit the bag all night.

"Tough day?" a voice said from behind him.

He turned around, still breathing hard, to face a thirty-something hazel-eyed woman. He nodded at her and gave a weak smile.

"Diana," he said, after he had taken a drink of water. "Tough doesn't even begin to describe it."

"That bad?" she said, with a deep sultry laugh.

"It was unbelievable."

Elliot had known Diana Willex as nothing more than an acquaintance for close to three years. She was an aerobics instructor and was a teacher at a school not far from his apartment. Diana liked to come to the gym about the same times as Elliot did and after spotting one another on various bench presses and assisting with spotting and stretching here and there, Elliot had come to know her somewhat well.

She flirted with him from time to time, but he never once reciprocated. The last time he saw her, however, she noted the fact that he no longer wore his wedding ring, and he did nothing to allay her further flirtations.

"Well, I guess I can kind of imagine," Diana said. "Since I notice you only give the bag a workout like that when it looks like something's really bothering you."

He sighed and simply stared at her for a moment, wondering how fast she would run away from him if he spilled everything that was stressing him. As he stared at her, he found himself amazed by her presence; like he was truly seeing her for the first time. Diana looked, oddly, like a perfect mix between his wife, his *ex*-wife, and his partner. While Olivia was nearly his height and Kathy was a few inches shorter, Diana came somewhere in between them. Her eyes were large, like both Kathy and Olivia, but their colour could only be described as the perfect mix between brown and blue. Diana's hair, perfectly straight and just below her shoulder line, was light brown with a hint of highlight to it and her smiling face seemed to melt his heart as did the aforementioned women.

"How much longer have you got?" Elliot asked grabbing some of his things.

Diana shrugged. "I could be done now." She then laughed. "You look like you could use a drink."

"Oh yeah," he said. "A big one."

In all truth, Elliot had only intended to have just a drink with Diana. He only wanted to have a few beers and complain about life in general with someone who was not Kathy, Olivia or one of his brothers. He had simply wanted to talk, and when Elliot rolled over in his bed, he wondered how he had gone so wrong.

He and Diana had gone to Debbs' bar at on West End and, initially, all they did was talk. They discussed everything from how co-workers could seemingly lose their minds at times to life in general. When he began to discuss what it felt like to finally sign the papers that ended his marriage, he felt his eyes burn as they began to well with tears and Diana moved from her side of the booth to Elliot's to rub his arm and tell him that everything would be all right in the end.

He did not believe the words as they came from her mouth, but he nodded his head at her, nonetheless. An hour later, they were in his bedroom, Elliot feeling that if he just had some kind of release he might feel better about everything that was going in his life. Release, any release, might take off some of the pressure he felt pushing on him from all sides. Yet, even when he rolled off of Diana a while earlier that night, no rushing clarity or feeling of ease overcame him. He wanted something, *anything*, but he only felt empty.

Elliot stared at his clock as he listened to Diana's breathing beside him. He watched the clock turn minute by minute until one-thirty, wondering all the while how long he would have to remain cordial and allow Diana to sleep in his bed. Everything about her suddenly seemed dirty and he had the urgent need to go to confession.

He did not do this sort of thing often, as Diana had been only the third since Kathy had served him with divorce papers, but he never felt right before, during or afterward. Having spent the majority of his adult life with Kathy, Elliot hated even the feel of another woman beside him in bed. Something always seemed amiss in his world when new women entered it and when Diana shifted in his bed, his stomach churned out of sheer stress.

After another hour hoping sleep would come, he got up to do some work. He made a mental note to see his priest in the morning while Olivia was in court. She always had that *Elliot, what's wrong?* expression on her face if she learned he had gone to confession and he had hated having to shake that expression throughout his day. In essence, he had not actually done anything wrong. He was a grown man and his marriage had ended. Diana was a nice enough person who had been after him for years and he had done nothing to seduce her to his apartment. It was she, after all, who had done the suggesting; stating that he probably should not spend the night alone. Though he did not, as pulled out some of his current case files, he wished he had.

Even throughout her pressing questions, Elliot could not even begin to tell Diana what he saw everyday. He knew there was simply no way she could understand, and he suddenly thought of Olivia trying to date and avoiding the topic of work should it come up during dinner.

He mused on the thought further. The way things were going in his life, *he* might soon be trying to avoid talking about work while trying to date too.

When the word date jumped to mind, Elliot felt his stomach churn again. He did not want to date and he did not want to face the idea of Kathy doing so either. He barely tolerated any of the women in his life dating: from his wife to his daughters to his sister to his partner. The prospect of Kathy finding someone else was just too much to take.

He scribbled some notes onto Manny Scheibley's file before him and went back to bed. He stared at Diana for a moment before he slid beside her to spend the rest of the twilight hours praying for sleep's solace. Moonlight shone through his blinds, showering Diana's sleeping form in a pale, blue light and though she looked beautiful, he missed his wife more than he had in a long while.

Friday January 19, 2007
New York County Courthouse
11:46AM

Olivia stood in a corridor outside of the courtroom where she had just testified against Gregory Lars looking for Dana Barrington and her family. When it seemed like she had missed them in the bustle of people flowing out of the courtroom at recess, Olivia spotted a sixteen-year-old with brown hair and large brown eyes holding a baby carrier.

"Olivia!" Dana said, the moment her eyes reached Olivia's.

She handed the baby to her mother standing next to her, crossed the corridor in three steps and hugged Olivia.

"Thank you," she said, tears welling in her eyes. "Thank you so much."

"It's no problem. It's what I do."

Casey appeared beside them a moment later, holding her tan Kenneth Cole briefcase and smirking. Olivia dislodged herself from Dana and said goodbye.

"That went extremely well," Casey said. "In fact, I half expect Lars' lawyer to call me begging for a plea."

"I hope he doesn't," Olivia said. "The rat should spend as long as possible behind bars."

"Couldn't agree more. How are you guys looking on that Drover guy for all this?"

Olivia shook her head. "He looks clean so far. Even after the line-up, his DNA wasn't a match."

"Well, let me know as soon as you get anything. We're catching a hell storm at the DA's and I'm sure you are too."

"You wouldn't believe it," Olivia said. "But, we'll call you as soon as we've got a lead on someone."

An hour later, Olivia was at the 1-6 preparing herself with Elliot to re-interview some of Manny Scheibley's friends who had not been as forthcoming with information as some of the others. At Olivia's behest, Elliot created an image line-up for them to look through, but included both Drover and Kreider's photos. Elliot was grateful that he and Olivia had not argued all morning and reluctantly placed Kreider's photo in the line-up just to keep the peace.

The moment she had arrived from the courthouse, Olivia had given him the expected look asking *What's wrong?* but, he refused to mention anything about what had happened the previous night. He had waited as long as he could before waking Diana, and had promised to call her when he dropped her off at her apartment that morning, but he still felt the strong Catholic shame that came with sleeping with a woman who was not his wife, no matter the status of his marriage.

He had gone to confession that morning, had said the Act of Contrition, beginning with the customary *O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee* and was feeling better about the entire ordeal until Olivia arrived. For some reason, seeing her brought back the same perception that he had done something wrong.

"You know..." Manny's soccer mate, Pete, said an hour later while looking at the line-up. "I've actually seen this guy before."

"Which guy?" Elliot asked, eagerly.

Pete pointed the image of Owen Kreider. "Him. I've seen him around the fields."

"What was he doing?" Elliot asked. "Was he just watching the game or was he watching a specific kid?"

"I dunno," Pete said, shrugging. "I just remember him being around a lot. I figured he was somebody's dad or uncle, but...he might've looked like this guy too. I'm not sure. They kinda look alike."

When Pete pointed to Drover's photo as well, Olivia nodded at Elliot.

"Pete, do you remember seeing either one of them anywhere other than the indoor complexes?"

Pete looked upward, as if deeply concentrating. "I don't think so. I just remember them at the fields."

"Thanks Pete," Olivia said. "You've been very helpful."

"No problem," Pete said in a soft voice. "I hope you find the one who did this because me and Manny..."

Elliot patted Pete on the shoulder as his voiced trailed. "We'll find him. Don't worry. As soon as we get him, we'll let you know."

Pete gave them a weak smile and nodded.

"You wanna talk to Kreider now or talk to a few more kids first?" Olivia asked once they were back in their car.

"That's three for three on kids who saw both Kreider and Drover at the fields," Elliot said. "Let's go see this guy."

Two hours later, after slowly pouring through traffic and stopping for a quick bratwurst for "lunch," the detectives arrived at Owen Kreider's building to question him once again. The building, located at Third Street and Avenue D, now seemed ominous to both of them, even though they had just seen it not two days earlier.

"Yes," Kreider said, eyeing them suspiciously as he opened the door. "What do you want?"

Olivia was struck by how familiar Kreider now seemed and wondered why she had not noticed it previously. Kreider had the same clear, grey eyes, black hair and long face seen in Drover. At approximately the same height, anyone could confuse the pair of them at any point in time. She chalked it up to being frustrated and tired seeing as the day they originally questioned him was also the day Cragen made the public announcement about the case. She stepped further into Kreider's view, showing him her badge.

"Owen Kreider? My name's Detective Benson and this is Detective Stabler. May we talk with you a moment?"

Kreider squinted at her. "I just talked to you people. You can't hound me like this. I know my rights."

“Mr. Kreider,” Olivia said. “No one is hounding you. We just have a few questions. Now, you can either cooperate and we can ask you here in the comfort of your home or we can have this conversation down at our precinct. It’s your choice.”

Kreider slowly opened the door and stared at her. Olivia felt slightly unnerved by the fact that she could see herself reflected perfectly in his large eyes. He was dressed in all black and stood slightly hunched with his chin pointing directly to the floor, giving him the expression of shy, little boy.

“Fine,” he said, through his teeth. “Come in.”

Kreider’s apartment was just as disorganized as it was the last time Olivia and Elliot were there, however, sans cardboard boxes.

“Mr. Kreider,” Elliot began. “Do you have any reason to frequent any of the indoor soccer fields in the area?”

“No,” Kreider said. “I don’t play sports.”

“Do you know anyone who might play soccer? A son or daughter or maybe a niece or nephew?”

Kreider paused. “I don’t have kids and I don’t have family.”

“Can you account for your whereabouts this past Monday night?”

“Yeah, I guess I can about as well as any other person.”

“Well...” Olivia said. “Can you?”

He looked up at her again and she could see his pale skin turn rosy at the cheeks. “I was home.”

“All night?”

“Yes,” he said, swallowing. “All night.”

“Did you call anyone or - ”

“No,” he interrupted. “I didn’t call anyone or see anyone. I keep to myself because the people in this building are nuts, as evidenced by the crazy woman above me who has nothing better to do than keep her nose in other people’s business. That doesn’t mean I did anything wrong.”

“No one’s saying you did,” Olivia said.

Kreider opened his mouth to speak again, but Elliot spoke first.

“We noticed you got rid of all those boxes,” Elliot said, looking around the apartment.

“Yeah,” Kreider said, crossing his arms. “Well, since it seems that I could be labeled a killer just for having them around, I decided to get rid of them.”

“Why even keep them?” Olivia said. “You told us you were just moving in when we spoke on Wednesday.”

Kreider’s cheeks turned pink again when his focus returned to Olivia. “You didn’t hear me right.”

Olivia gave Elliot an exaggerated glance with an eyebrow raised. “It was the two of us who spoke to you then and I’m pretty sure we remember what was said.”

“Then, maybe I misspoke. I had some keepsake items in them that I still didn’t know what to do with since I’d moved in. All Mrs. Harvand had to do was tell me the boxes were bugging her and I’d’ve moved them.”

“Why keep *keepsakes* out in the hallway?” she asked.

“Because, in case you haven’t noticed, my place is small. I don’t have room for a lot of things, so I just kept them out in the hall because I didn’t think anybody would *mind*.” Kreider’s voice was beginning raise in intensity.

“Now, there’s no reason to get excited,” Elliot said.

“No, there *is* reason to get excited. I’ve got the cops in here for the second time this week *harassing* me because they’ve got a case they can’t handle. I say there’s plenty of reason to get excited.”

“Well, can you tell us where you were Tuesday morning?”

Again, Kreider blushed before speaking to Olivia and she involuntarily shifted her weight on her feet. “The same place I was Monday night. Home. And, no, I didn’t call anyone or talk to anyone or see anyone.”

Olivia pursed her lips as she glared at him. His tone was beginning to aggravate her and she had half a mind to simply bring him in and leave him in an interrogation room for a few hours just because she could.

“How ‘bout Monday?” she asked.

“Same as Tuesday and that’s the same thing with Sunday and Saturday and last Friday and last Thursday and the Thursday before that and the Thursday before that. I’m always home.”

“Well, you have to go to work some time,” she said.

“I work from home,” Kreider said.

She squinted at him and crossed her arms in front of her. “I thought you worked for Rohlman-Hayworth.”

Kreider paused his constant shifting on his feet and stared at her for a long time before speaking. “Well, aren’t you the clever one... Yes, I *do* work for Rohlman-Hayworth.”

“So, you lied just now...to the police.”

“I didn’t lie.”

“Yeah, Liv,” Elliot said, sarcasm biting in his voice. “He didn’t lie. He willingly participated in a campaign of misinformation.”

“I didn’t lie,” Kreider repeated. “I do some work from home, but yes, I do work for Rohlman-Hayworth.”

“Well,” Olivia said, “then you aren’t always home, are you?”

“No, I guess not.”

“So,” she said. “Let’s try this again. Where were you Tuesday?”

“Look, I’ve already told you that I don’t go anywhere or do anything. I go to work and I come home.”

“You don’t go out with friends or anything?” Elliot said.

“No,” Kreider said. “I thought we’ve already established that people suck.”

“Well, not *all* people suck,” Olivia said. “You must have a girl or someone you like to talk to. Someone you confide in from time to time. I’m sure if we took a look at your phone records we could find a friend or two.”

“I know my goddamn rights!” Kreider shouted. “You people can’t just start looking at my phone records for no good reason.”

“Oh, but we’ve got a good reason, Mr. Kreider,” Olivia said, her voice patronizing. “We’ve got five dead kids found all around this area, two of them in cardboard boxes, not unlike those we found around your apartment this Wednesday past.

And then we've got you. Someone who can't verify where he was for the times when every victim was found. We could take that to the district attorney today and have a warrant to not just look at your phone records, but go through every single thing in this apartment."

Kreider stared at her for a moment, cheeks red and grey eyes shining. "Get out. Now. I know my rights and I know I don't have to talk to you people. Out!"

Olivia nodded and she and Elliot walked out of his apartment very slowly.

"Well," she said, once they were outside. "What do you say we get ask Casey about that warrant?"

"C'mon, Liv," Elliot said. "We had more on Drover at this point and we still couldn't get one for him."

"We could ask."

"I think it's a waste of time."

"So, lemme get this straight," she said, glaring at him from over the car roof. "When *you* start gunning for someone, we pull out all the stops to get them, but when *I've* got something brewing on a suspect, all of a sudden, everything's a waste of time."

"Liv, I'm not saying that."

"No, that's exactly what you're saying. When we first met Drover all we knew about him was that he found one of the bodies and knew the victim. That's all we had and you wanted to drag his ass back to the house that day! Now, we've got Kreider, who, by the way looks *exactly* like Drover, the same Drover who couldn't be ID'd and whose DNA didn't match, and *Kreider* can be associated with every single witness accounting that they'd seen Drover with the victims. He can't account for his whereabouts, he's got a record and is being so uncooperative that we could arrest him today on attitude alone. One day looking at Kreider and we're half way to a warrant, but no! Now, all this is a waste of time!"

"It *is* a waste of time if we know we don't have enough on him! Why burn daylight even asking for a warrant if there's more to this?"

Olivia shook her head. "You know what? You're so full of crap you can't even see straight."

"Olivia! Look at the differences between Drover and Kreider. Yeah, they kinda' look alike, but they don't act at all the same! Drover has connections with kids the same age as the victims. He's got access, nearly 'round the clock and he looks like the kind of guy these kids would relate to and trust. If an athletic kid took one look at Kreider, he'd take off running in the other direction. He's a conspiracy nut and judging by the look of him, he probably spends all his time indoors to avoid having any of *rights* broken by Big Brother. The guy's a freak, but he's got absolutely no connection to these victims. That's why it's a waste of time going for Kreider this early! Drover has the time, the means and know-how to lure these kids in and kill them at his leisure. That's why I jumped at him the moment I saw him and that's why I'm still gunning for him until we can arrest someone else. He has every marking of a pedophile."

"You can call Drover a pedophile all day and all night, Elliot, but that's not going to make his DNA match Jacob Lewendale."

With those words, she got in passenger side of the car, slamming the door shut. Elliot shook his head and wondered if he should simply leave her in the car and take a cab back to the precinct, instead.

As the tumult of movement rarely ceased in the SVU, the image of Elliot and Olivia sitting across from one another perfectly still seemed odd to Fin when he entered to squad room. Neither detective was looking at the other and even from a few feet away, Fin could feel the strain between them.

“What’s with you two?” he asked.

Both nodded in his direction, but neither said anything. Fin shrugged and settled into his own poignant cases. He knew the pair had been having their ups and downs recently and figured they were attempting to remain civil through yet another argument.

He and Munch had spent the majority of the morning going through video cameras with the hotel surveillance trying to pinpoint the location where Helena Fayden said she had been raped. All they had been able to find was one tape that showed a girl who looked very similar to Helena heading into the room of another male guest the night she said she was attacked. The case was quickly appearing to be a wash, but they had to continue forward with it, until they could prove it either way.

Munch had stayed behind to speak to Helena again, but Fin knew he was done with her to moment he saw her. She had been under the “care” of family in a different hotel since the rape, but she had a glaze in her eyes that he had seen far too often during his years in Narcotics. There was more to her story and the thought that he had been pulled to work her case instead of those of innocent, murdered children, made him literally ill, so he left the hotel to “work the case from a different angle.”

“What’d ya’ll find out about Kreider?” he asked, after having his fill of reading Helena Fayden’s account of what had happened.

They glanced up at one another before Olivia answered.

“Kreider’s got just enough crazy running through him to look good for this.”

Fin looked at Elliot who had become engrossed in the file open on his desk. “I take it you still don’t agree, Elliot?”

Elliot sighed and rested his arms at the back of his head. “I’m not saying Kreider’s not involved...I’m just looking at this from hindsight. We don’t want to waste a bunch of time on this just because he’s...off.”

“How off is ‘off’?”

“Oh, he’s more than ‘off’,” Olivia said. “The man’s certifiable. *And*, he’s the spitting image of Drover. I can’t believe we didn’t notice it earlier. We can now look at Kreider for each time a witness mentioned Drover or someone who looked like him.”

“What about his place? How’d it look?”

“Dark and depressing basement apartment,” she said. “But, it’s too small and his neighbors are paying attention too closely for him to do what he does there.”

“We gonna pick him up?” Fin asked.

“We don’t have enough on him,” Elliot said, “and I doubt he’s going to come willingly.”

As he finished the sentence, George walked into the squad room.

“George,” Olivia said. “Thanks for coming. I got a question for you about this newest suspect, Owen Kreider. Now, we’re still struggling to get his sealed records opened, but Elliot and I just spoke with him and he’s giving off all the wrong vibes. What

do you think you can tell us about our killer, 'cause I'm really thinking that Kreider might be our guy."

"Well," George began. "I'd have to agree with what you were originally saying about the killer not actually being a pedophile. I think it's just incidental that he's killing young boys."

"But, he's sodomizing them," Elliot said. "That's gotta count for something."

"It does," George continued, "but not in the way you're thinking. The rape is something he can do to maintain control. He lacks something dire in his life and feels that he control that by dehumanizing those who have what he does not. Though, I wouldn't be surprised if he had been molested at the age too."

"So," Olivia said, "you could say that a guy who sticks to himself might prey upon kids who are active and well-liked?"

George smirked at her. "You're fishing for a quick answer, but it's not that simple. That could be a part of his MO, but I would bring someone in based on that? Not even. There are a lot of loners in this city. What is it about your guy that makes you suspect him?"

"His demeanor mostly. He doesn't come across as being even remotely alarmed that there's a killer loose and he seemed more annoyed that we were even talking to him about it, than anything else."

"Plus," Elliot added with a smirk, "he's probably got a crush on her and she can't stand it."

Olivia narrowed her eyes at him, but George interjected. "What makes you say that?"

"He'd turn the colour of stop sign every time Olivia looked at him."

George nodded his head. "But, that could also fit the pathology of your killer. Something he most likely can't control is his relationship with women. He might've seen something in Olivia that reminded him of what he still can't get."

"C'mon," Elliot said. "He can't get a girl, so he goes after little boys?"

"Exactly, he goes after kids because he can control them."

"I was just joking about the crush thing."

"But, it's the fact that he fits the pathology."

"He's gotta see women at work," Elliot continued. "That can't be all of it."

"It's not," George said. "It's like I said. It's not going to be cut and dry. The killer's very complex."

"We need to at least try to bring him in," Fin said. "We talk to him in here, maybe he'll spill."

Elliot sighed, as if conceding defeat. "He's not going to come quietly. He didn't even want us talking to him and he kept asserting that he knew what his *rights* were. And, if Novak couldn't get us a warrant based on what we had on Drover, I doubt she's going to be able get one for this guy."

"Why not?" Cragen asked. All present turned in his direction, no one aware that he had even joined them.

"Right now, all we've got is a hunch and a description. I say, based on what we just went through with Drover...let's not waste the effort on asking for a warrant until we have something a little more concrete."

Cragen nodded. "Keep looking at both of them for the time being. I don't want either one to simply disappear in the night. And, we're still in the wind on this Fayden rape. All the staff gave DNA and no one's been a match yet."

"Did she say it was someone from hotel staff?" Olivia asked.

"She said the guys were wearing uniforms, but she couldn't sure." Cragen turned to leave, but stopped. "Ask Novak for that warrant anyway. She might be able to finagle something with a judge."

The detectives went back to their desks and George followed Cragen to his office. Elliot picked up the phone and watched as Olivia began to pack away her things.

"What's up?" he asked, the phone still at his ear.

"Yeah," she said, noting that the clock on her desk read six o'clock. "I've just got a doctor's appointment and I really need to get to this one."

He stared at her for a minute. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," she said a little too quickly for even her own tastes. "Everything's fine."

The drive from Schreider's Café had been silent and tense, as Olivia had decided not to turn on the radio. She half hoped that the silence would allow Kathleen time to think and perhaps change her mind about telling her parents what they were about to do. Perhaps about getting the prescription altogether.

Olivia's mind raced as she changed lanes. Only the appearance on Kathleen's face from the previous day could come to mind. When she saw Olivia and her father together, Kathleen looked almost guilty. Either way, she did not look like a mature individual who was ready to handle sex and birth control.

"Thanks for being so cool about this, Olivia," Kathleen said, as she clutched her coat around her.

Olivia glanced in her direction. The heat was blazing in the car, but she could not help but notice Kathleen shiver. "It's no problem." She paused. "Have you thought anymore about telling your father about-"

"No," she said quickly. "I mean, yes. I have thought about, but I'm not. There's just no reason to. I mean...you know Dad. I just know how he'll react and it won't be good. It'll be hard enough to just keep all this from him and Mom."

Tell me about it, Olivia thought. "What about your mom? I'm sure she'd like to know."

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll wanna take them from me, telling me that I'm not ready the whole time."

"Well, I doubt-"

"Can we just *not* talk about them for a bit?"

"Yeah, that's fine," Olivia said, allowing the uncomfortable silence to fall upon them again.

After several blocks of nothing but the sounds of city, Olivia decided to approach the topic from a different angle.

"Well, if you're not going to tell your mom, just make sure you're careful if you have any other medications. I doubt you'll run into any complications, but it's always good to mention it to your doctor."

“But, I don’t want our doctor to know,” Kathleen said.

“At your age, you don’t have to tell your doctor anything in your mother’s presence, so you can tell him what he needs to know.”

“Oh, okay.”

The tension in the car eased slightly and Olivia continued forward to the clinic. Once in the waiting room at the free clinic, Kathleen looked queasy once again. Her foot tapped nervously and instead of trying to change her mind again, Olivia tried to put her at ease.

“You know,” she began, “when I was...well, fifteen, a bunch of us all grouped together to get birth control pills.”

“Really?” Kathleen said.

“Yeah. It was something reminiscent of an after school special. My best friend told me that she and a bunch of other girls were going to get them and that I should too.”

“And you just went along with it?” Kathleen said sardonically.

“Yep. I wanted to fit in with everybody else for once. And Maya, my friend, she was always the cool one, the exotic one, the one that everybody loved, and I was just ‘that girl who was Maya’s friend.’ So, we all went to a free clinic, a lot like this one, to get them. I remember feeling so much older and cooler, but in hindsight, I’m sure we looked really stupid.”

Kathleen laughed. “I knew a bunch of other girls who did that. They were all bragging about it and we were all, like, laughing behind their backs and stuff because they all looked so dumb.”

Olivia shared stories with Kathleen until she was called back to be checked out by a doctor and then to the hospital pharmacist and afterward, she took Kathleen to dinner in Queens. Their conversation turned to Olivia’s “number,” which she refused to divulge, but she made sure to tell Kathleen that having the fewest number of partners was desirable anywhere in the world, not just in her religion. She also mused over the fact that she may never have the same conversation with a daughter of her own and half wished she could talk openly with Elliot’s daughter for the rest of the night.

Eventually, after receiving a big thankful hug, Olivia dropped Kathleen off at a movie theatre to meet some friends and drove back across the river. She wanted to change clothes and spend a little more time sending e-mails and calling as many people as possible to get Kreider’s sealed records opened.

As she was heading towards her front door after changing, the telephone rang.

“Benson,” she answered.

“Hey,” Jillian said on the other end. “I’m glad I caught you.”

“Jill, hey,” Olivia said, moving back to her couch. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to see how you were doing...I saw you on TV the other day. You looked beautiful...circumstances notwithstanding.”

“Well, thanks. I suppose it’s best to at least look good when you have to tell the city you’re having a time catching a killer.”

“How’s everything else going?”

“Not too bad, I guess. I just took Elliot’s daughter to get her first birth control prescription.”

“Why’d *you* have to do it?”

"Jillian, I swear that's the sixty-four thousand dollar question," she said as set her feet on her coffee table. "She came to me about it, like a week ago, and I just didn't want to send her away empty handed."

"So, Daddy's partner had to come to the rescue?" Jillian mumbled, displeasure coating her voice.

"Yeah, well it was either that or let her go it alone."

"Lots of women have had to go it alone, Liv."

"And lots of women have had kids out of wedlock, too."

"Still, she didn't have to stress you out about it. Doesn't she have a mother?"

Olivia sighed. "That's what Jonathan said."

"And, he'd be right. I bet you she was trying to pull something on you, Liv."

"Oh come on, Jill. Why would you say that?"

"Because I have kids and I remember what it was like to be that age. Whenever my boys can't get something through their father, they come running to me instead. They think one hand doesn't know what the other's doing."

"She knows I work with her father."

"But, I'm certain she looked at you and pleaded for you not to tell her dad and you went along with it. I know what she did, too. She looked at you with these big, weepy eyes and said, 'Olivia, please help me.' and she hooked you."

"She didn't hook me. She said she needed someone outside of family to talk to."

Jillian sighed. "Olivia, I find it absolutely fascinating that you can be that smart and so stupid at the same time. She played you."

"She did not."

"She played you."

"Jill, she was genuine."

"She *played* you."

"Was this really the reason you called?"

Jillian laughed. "Just letting you know how kids are. Anyway, how's Jonathan?"

"Wheelin' and dealin' as usual," Olivia said with a sigh.

"Good to hear. Well, I can tell from your sigh, that you're either on your way out with Maya or you're going back to work... I'm gonna guess back to work?"

Olivia remained silent and Jillian laughed again.

"Off to work it is...on a Friday. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye, Jill."

As she headed for the door again, she paused and decided to check her phone messages just in case Jonathan had wanted to meet her. To her surprise, she saw she had a call from Mrs. Fitzgivens' son saying that he had a good time with her the previous night and that they should have dinner again.

"Hello," a young male voice said from the other side of the phone after she dialed Philip's number.

"Yes. May I speak to a Philip Fitzgivens, please?"

"This is," he said.

"Phil. This is Olivia."

"Oh, hey! I guess you got my message."

"Yeah, I did. I...I thought we talked about this, Phil. I'm...I'm dating someone else already."

"But, see, you met him first," Phil said. She could hear him smiling into the phone. "I think that if we spent a little more time together, you might...well...want to...um...switch..."

Olivia sighed, wondering what to say to avoid hurting his feelings. "Phil...I... understand what you're saying, but...Jonathan and I are very happy together."

"Spend-your-life-together-forever happy or he'll-workout-for-the-time-being happy?"

She laughed. "I can't say for sure yet. Possibly the former, but it's still too early to tell."

"I see."

"But...I did enjoy our conversation yesterday and I'd like it if we could just be friends."

"Friends, eh? I 'spose that could work out."

"Okay...Well, Phil, my friend. I'll talk to you later?"

"Yeah, that's cool. Bye, Olivia."

"Bye."

When she finally made it back to the precinct, it was past nine o'clock and many of the other detectives in the squad room had left or were on their way toward the elevators. As she approached her desk, she stopped dead in her tracks in complete surprise.

Olivia had expected Elliot to leave about the same time as Munch and Fin, but he remained, diligent, at his desk.

"Hey," he said once she approached their desk-pair. "I didn't think you'd be back in tonight."

"Yeah, I wanted to...play catch up for tomorrow."

Elliot nodded. "Me too. How'd your doctor's appointment go?"

She froze again. "Fine. Everything's fine."

"Okay," he said staring at her. "Just making sure."

He continued to watch her as she took off her coat and settled herself at her desk.

"Seriously, Liv," he said. "You're sure everything's all right?"

She sighed. "I'd tell you if there was something wrong."

He nodded again and they proceeded to work in silence. Not a word was spoken by either detective throughout the two hours that passed and Olivia felt so tense that she was physically exhausted by the time she left the precinct.

She told Elliot she was heading home, but when he offered to drive her home, she declined. At some point during the car ride home, she knew he was going to probe her again about the "doctor's appointment" and she did not think she could lie to him, especially while held hostage in his car.

When she paid the cab driver, Olivia saw Jonathan pacing back in forth in front of her building.

"Don't you have a home to go to?" Olivia said wryly.

"This *is* home," Jonathan said, smiling.

"You could call, you know. That way you wouldn't have to freeze your ass off out here. You could call and we could meet like civilized people."

"But then that would ruin the surprise. Besides, I love that look on your face when you get out of the cab and you see me standing here for you."

“How long do you stand out here waiting for me each night?” she asked as she opened the door to her building.

He laughed. “Well, I pace in front for a bit, then I go back to my car and warm up. Then, I pace some more until one of your neighbors calls the cops on me. Back to the car and then back out again once they leave.”

She pressed “8” in the elevator once it opened and allow the door to close on the pair of them. “Aw, you’re like a little puppy waiting at the door.”

Jonathan moved her hair back from her neck and kissed her. “Yep,” he said as his arms snaked around her. “And, I’ve been missing you all day.”

She closed her eyes and smiled as he began to kiss a line down her neck. “You’re gonna get me in trouble. This sort of thing this isn’t allowed in the elevators.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we’re at your floor,” he said once the doors opened again.

Still gathered together with Jonathan as one, Olivia slowly made her way down the hall to her apartment, Jonathan’s hands moving all over her with every step. As soon as they were inside her apartment, they both became a flurry of movement against her door and Olivia wondered if they would even make it to her bedroom before their clothing would start to fly.

When Jonathan made to take off his coat, there was a knock at the door.

“Leave it,” Jonathan whispered as he pulled her bag out of her hands.

She nodded and they continued for another minute before hearing a second knock at her door.

“Damn it!” Olivia said and she flung open the door.

“Hey there,” Mark said, standing in the door his hands in his pockets. “Just wanted to make sure you were okay. I heard a commotion and I’d seen some guy just wandering around outside. He looked kind of suspicious.”

She opened her mouth to tell Mark to go away, when Jonathan stepped in front of her.

“Look, little man,” he said. “I’m not ‘some guy.’ My name’s Jonathan. Jonathan Hallowsay and yes, I’m of the New York Hallowsays and yes, I’m dating Olivia. Now, it’s great to meet you and I’d love to chat, but we’re kind of in the middle of something, so let’s do this meet and greet thing some other time okay? Thank you!”

He slammed the door in Mark’s face and Olivia shook her head at him.

“That was mean, Jonathan.”

“Why do you even put up with that anyway?”

“He used to be kind of close to my mother, I guess. But, that still doesn’t allow you to be mean just because.”

“Well,” he said, scooping her up in his long arms. “Let me make it up to you. And, I promise, I’ll even cook you breakfast in the morning.”

Elliot turned on the television in his living room as he set his Scotch on a coaster on his coffee table. He had half a mind to set the tumbler on the bare table, seeing as he was “free” to do what he wanted in his own apartment, but he thought better of it.

The only information that had been gathered on Jeffrey Drover sat in a manila file folder on the other side of the coffee table and Elliot stared at it, thinking all the while.

He kept bringing the file to and from the 1-6, not sure what else he could do with it. There was no real need to keep it, as Owen Kreider was looking more and more like a possible suspect, but Elliot did not want to let go of Drover.

Before Olivia had arrived back at the precinct, Elliot had been searching through every file available to find information on Drover. Everything he saw, however, proved that Drover was a model citizen. There were a few sealed files that bore his name with several others, but Elliot figured that they were probably not incriminating as they would have been made when Drover was just a boy.

Still, Drover remained in his mind. Perfectly average or not, he could have still managed to buck the system and become a killer. The BTK killer was found to be a boy-scout troupe leader and Elliot was simply not willing to put anything past Drover.

He took another sip of his Scotch and his phone blinking on the other side of couch caught his eye. He had messages and he did not want to hear any of them. There was certain to be at least one from Kathy telling him he was being too hard on Dickie as well as one from Kathleen saying the same and probably one from Diana asking when they were going to see one another again.

Elliot shook his head at the thought and quickly ran down a list of gyms in the city that he knew remained open late in the night. Some were “males only” in the homosexual sense and he wondered just how far he would have to go to avoid seeing Diana again.

Not being able to forestall the inevitable any longer, Elliot reached for the phone and checked the messages. To his surprise, the first was from Dickie.

“Dad...It’s me,” Dickie said with a sigh into the phone. “Look...I’m...I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. I’m sorry I snuck outta your house...and I’m...I’m sorry I tried to lie about it. So...so can you please let me go out? *Please*. ‘Cause Jessica’s having a whole bunch of people over for the basketball game and I really, *really* want to go. So...I’m sorry. Seriously. I’m very sorry. So...can you call Mom and tell her it’s okay if I go out? Okay? Thanks...bye Dad.”

Elliot laughed to himself as he saved the message. He would replay it for Dickie someday when his son proclaimed he never apologized for anything. When he heard Diana’s voice come on as the next message, he immediately deleted it remembering that they had a decent weight room at the 1-6. It was usually crowded around the time he liked to go, but he could wait for a treadmill and a bench. He figured it would be nice to workout with other cops every once in a while.

As he hung up the telephone, his thoughts fell on Olivia and her random doctor’s appointment. In all the time that he had known her, Elliot had watched her cancel and reschedule more appointments with doctors, mediators and dates in general than he saw her actually attend. Why she would make an appointment at six o’clock on a Friday and actually keep it when they both still had so much to do was beyond him.

He took another sip of Scotch and sighed, certain that Olivia had to be hiding something. He quickly ran down a list of all things that could be going on with her: pregnancy, cancer...egg harvesting?

Elliot shook his head and wondered how he could know so little about women and raise three daughters. The egg harvesting idea was a wash, but the thought of either pregnancy or cancer troubled him. If Olivia left for maternity leave, he might get stuck

with another temporary partner and he knew that would lead to disaster no matter who it was.

If she had cancer...His stomach burned and he wondered if it was stress or the liquor. Watching his sister, Colleen, go through the ordeal of breast cancer a few years earlier was hard enough and she and Elliot were not very close any more. How could he possibly handle it if Olivia had cancer, too? If she could not beat it? Coping with her temporary departure from the unit half dismantled him. How was he supposed to go on normally if he could not see her again?

He took a deep breath realizing he was getting too ahead of himself. He made a mental note to plug her again about the appointment, even though it might be in vain. Elliot could vaguely remember an incident several years ago when Olivia had called-in sick. Throughout eight years together, neither one of them had ever "called-in sick" for any reason. At one point, Kathy actually tackled him at the door to keep him home when he was sick with what had to be a strong flu virus, but it was the only time he had stayed home.

Outside of the one incident, Olivia had never said that she was too sick to work. He had gone by her apartment to see her, but she refused to let him in her apartment and he did not want to invade her privacy by just letting himself inside her place as he had done with the building's outer door. For the rest of that week, she appeared to be slightly pale and he thought he even saw her crying in the crib a few days later, but when he asked her about it, she denied that anything was wrong. A week afterward, she seemed back to normal and he dropped the issue, but he did not want to drop the present situation if it looked to be a problem, especially if it looked like she was crying again.

He flipped through the television channels, searching for a West Coast basketball game that had not yet ended, but to no avail. He felt oddly proud of Dickie for finally apologizing and wondered which female had had the most impact on his decision to do so: his mother, his sister or his crush, Jessica Barrow. Laughing to himself, Elliot remembered a time when Dickie could not look at Olivia without falling suddenly silent, unable say one word.

Again, his thoughts came on Olivia and onto her departure that night. She seemed so stiff and tense while they were pouring over paperwork that he could not stop worrying that something was severely wrong. While they had argued heavily earlier in the afternoon, in his mind, everything had more or less calmed, but she still did not want the customary drive home.

He made a note to bring her muffins and coffee again and actually apologize for not being anymore open to the idea that Kreider, and not Drover, was their new target. Perhaps the jolt of caffeine and sugar combined with the apology could set them back on track.

Chapter Seven

Saturday January 20, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York

The cell phone that sat on Olivia's nightstand chirped and buzzed from its flat position as the alarm clock next to it read 5:39 AM. She untangled herself from Jonathan's grasp and swatted in the direction of phone for a moment before finally reaching it. She looked into the phone display that read "Elliot" and sighed.

"Benson," she said into the phone.

Ten minutes later, she was dressed and tying her shoes as Jonathan lied lazily in her bed staring at her.

"Must you go?" he said in a soft voice.

She sighed. "Duty calls."

"Does duty always have to call at six in the morning?"

"Oh, come now," she said sardonically. "It's not always at six. Sometimes, it's three or four or sometimes two."

Jonathan laughed, but his smile faded quickly. They stared at one another in silence for a moment, before she walked over to her dresser.

"Here," she said, tossing him the extra set of keys that sat, unused, in her top dresser drawer. "You can have these."

"Keys!" he said, sarcastically. "*Old* keys! How wonderful!"

She rolled her eyes. "I guess, since I'll be keeping you around for a while, you might as well have a set."

"And I suppose the fact that I gave you mine after three months made no never mind to you."

"Hey, I can't go out giving keys to everyone I meet. Who knew you wouldn't be an ass...all the time."

Jonathan smiled wide and held the keys to his chest. "I'll treasure them forever!"

She shook her head, unable to repress the smile was quickly spreading across her face. "Look, you can stay as long as you want. I'm not sure how long I'll be, but just lock up when you leave."

"Why, it'll be the greatest moment of my life when I do!"

She rolled her eyes again and left the apartment to face the biting cold that accompanied the newest crime scene.

Elliot had called her that morning to tell her that yet another boy had been found, making it six murders in all. The young boy had been found in an alley on East Fifth Street and Olivia felt nauseated by returning to Alphabet City again simply for these murders.

She knew as she got into the cab that Kreider was responsible for the murder and she mentally prepared herself to be able to look upon the face of a boy whose murder could have been prevented. If only she had not been so preoccupied with everything else going on in her life, perhaps the victim might still be breathing.

When she arrived at the scene, she ducked passed the news cameras and harsh reporters to view the body. Though, only a half an hour had passed from the time Elliot had called her to the moment she appeared at the crime scene, Elliot had managed to get a name for the victim from Queens, Dominic Hedges, thirteen-years-old, from the missing persons report that had been filed the previous night.

"His parents want to come down here and view the body for themselves," Elliot told her as she stared at the lifeless body of a pale boy with grey eyes and dark hair.

Olivia shook her head. "They don't want to wait until we at least get him to the coroner's?"

"No," he said. "They've been following the case on the news and they said they wanted to know immediately."

"It'll give the media plenty of fuel to light a bigger fire under us."

"Tell me about it."

She sighed. "This...is so wrong. It's Kreider and he's taunting us with a boy who looks like both him and Drover."

"Yeah," Elliot said walking away from the crime scene. "C'mere. I need to show you something."

A moment later, they were standing at the opening of a police van set up several yards away from the body. Inside, an officer had a small television and VCR arranged on the van's floor.

"What's this?" Olivia asked, crossing her arms in front of her.

"Some of the store owners over here have been setting up security cameras since the murders began," Elliot said. "Now, the guy whose shop that has a direct view of the alley said he's selling his tape to the news, so we're sitting on him for the time being, until he decides to change his mind, but the man who owns the store next to him has kids in middle school and gave us all his tapes. Look at this."

He pointed to the small screen as it began to display a fuzzy, grey video. On the video, a long, black SUV rolled through the screen and stopped at the screen's left frame. A figure dressed in jeans in a black jacket could be seen running toward the vehicle's back, opening the hatch and pulling out a large, cardboard box. The figure then dragged the box into the darkened alley and out of view. A minute later, the figure could be seen throwing the box back into the car and then driving out of the frame completely.

Olivia stared at the screen a moment more before speaking. "Do you think we can blow up the image of the guy's face anymore? The whole thing looked blurry."

"It is blurry," Elliot said. "And it's going stay that way because it was a cheap camera, but...we could make out the model of the SUV. It's a later model Ford Expedition."

"Let's run Kreider's info. I wanna know what kind of car he drives."

"Munch is already on it," Elliot said. "And Kreider doesn't own one. But, I'll give you one guess as to who *does* own a car that just happens to be a black Ford Expedition."

"You people have to stop doing this me!" Drover yelled toward Elliot, as he sat in the dim interrogation room once again. "People are starting to talk. They're whispering about me. Me! All because I came here and talked to you people. And, what's this I hear about you showing my picture to some of the parents?"

Elliot leaned back in the chair and shot a glance at Olivia who stood leaning against the far wall. "We'd like to stop looking at you for this, Jeff, but there's just too much evidence trickling all the way back to you."

"What evidence!" he shouted. "This is crazy. No, *this* is harassment! I didn't do a damn thing and here I am again!"

The only sound heard once Drover stopped speaking was his own ragged breathing as he looked back and forth between Elliot in the light and Olivia who stood stoic and shadowed away from him. She was beyond aggravated by the entire ordeal, berating herself for not checking for Drover's car earlier and wondering how many lives could have been saved if they had done it earlier.

Elliot sat in the chair across from Drover with a smug expression on his face as they were so close on Drover, with or without DNA, but Olivia could not allow even the faintest smirk. A part of her felt almost ashamed for putting up even the slightest defense for Drover and actually pitying him when he came under Elliot's hardest fire. He was murderer and she had sympathized with him.

"I didn't do anything wrong!" Drover yelled.

"Where's your car, Jeff?" Olivia said, still leaning.

He squinted in her direction, trying to make out her expression in the darkened part of the room. "I-I...I don't know. I don't know what happened to it."

"You don't know?" she said, a mock surprise coating her voice. "You drive a 2006 Expedition. The thing must have cost you an arm and a leg and you're telling me you have no idea what happened to it?" She scoffed. "If it was *my* car, I'd know exactly how many steps it would take me to get back to my parking space. I'd have my eye on it all the time or at the very least, have some kind of security in place...like cameras or something."

Drover simply shook his head at her, mouth hanging wide.

"And, speaking of cameras," Elliot said, waving some photos in front of Drover to bring back his attention. "Some of the store owners around Alphabet City have been taking some extra precautions seeing as how we've got a serial killer on the loose. Some of them set up video cameras in the area of your latest dump job and one of them caught someone who...well, who looks quite a bit like you actually...moving a body out of a black Expedition that looks *strikingly* similar to yours."

"No," Drover said, still shaking his head. "My car was stolen."

"Stolen?" Olivia said. "Well, isn't that shame?"

"I'm serious! Someone stole my car! You guys are cops! Check the damn police reports! I filed on Thursday! You have to see this from my side. I swear on my life I didn't do anything!"

"So," Elliot said. "Someone who looks like you, driving a car that you own, dumps the body of a boy, who as it turns out, played soccer in the same league where you coach, and dumps him right up the street from where you work. Can you see why we're having a little trouble seeing this from your side?"

"And," Olivia added. "Stolen or not, these murders began *before* Thursday."

"Yeah," Elliot continued. "You've had a couple of weeks now to be dragging kids' bodies around in the car before you even reported it. And, people report their cars stolen all the time, even when they aren't. Besides, you seem like a real smart guy, Jeff. I wouldn't put it past you for filing a false police report to buy yourself some time."

"You know what?" Drover said. "I'm not believing a damn thing *you* say! After that stunt you pulled the last time I was in here...Telling me that someone pointed me out of a line-up! That's bullshit and I'm not taking his anymore! I think it's time to get with a lawyer."

“Oh, you don’t wanna do that,” Elliot said. “You talk to a lawyer, then we *really* think you’ve got something to hide.”

“Screw that! I stood in a line-up, I gave my DNA, and let you take my fingerprints, even! I gave you everything you needed to stop looking at me for this...this horrible thing, and you all are still riding my ass. I’m done! I want my lawyer and I want him now!”

Elliot glanced at Olivia and then back at Drover whose skin had turned completely red as he breathing had increased into a steady pant. She nodded at Elliot and they both walked out of the room.

“Well,” Casey said, once they were both in the side room. “A first year law student could probably poke holes in the case that we have against him right now. We don’t have enough to arrest.”

“What about the video?” Elliot said. “That’s got to be at least enough to hold him for a little while.”

“It’s too blurry,” Munch said, “and we can’t even make out the license plate. Not even enough to tell if it’s a New York plate.”

Elliot shook his head. “If we let him go, he’ll kill another boy.”

“We have his DNA,” Munch said. “Warner’s still working on the kid. If he matches, we’ll have something more to go on.”

“But, if he doesn’t,” Casey said, “we have to let him go until we have something definite. Otherwise his legal aide will have grounds for some kind of harassment claim and that’s the last thing we need right now.”

Elliot walked out of the room in a huff and Casey followed closely behind him.

“We cutting him loose now or are we letting him enjoy our hospitality a little longer?” Munch asked Olivia.

“Let’s just leave him,” Olivia said. “I want to look into that stolen car story while we’ve got him. And maybe Warner will have something about the victim by then, too.”

“Hey!” Drover yelled toward the detectives through the two-way mirror. “Hey! Where’s the other cop. The lady. Olivia! I wanna talk to her!”

Olivia glanced at Munch with raised eyebrows, but quickly strode back into the room.

“I can’t talk to you, Jeff,” she said. “You’ve asked for a lawyer.”

Drover lowered his voice. “C’mon now. You *know* I didn’t do anything.”

“Seriously, there’s absolutely nothing we can say until your legal aide gets here.”

“Screw it then!” Drover shouted. “Let’s just...you and me talk for a second, okay?”

Olivia shook her head. “Not without your lawyer present.”

“Aw c’mon! You don’t believe I did this. I can see it in your eyes.”

“Regardless of what you *think* you see, we don’t have anything to talk about since you’ve asked for a lawyer.”

“And, I bet you all got right on the phones to call me one, didn’t you?”

Olivia sighed and Drover gave a heartless laugh.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He ran his hands over his face and hair. “Look, that other guy has it in for me or something. You seem to be a little more reasonable to me than him, so tell me: What’ve I got to do to fix this?”

Olivia stared at him a long while before answering. "You've got to give me something, Jeff."

"What? What could you possibly need? I've given you everything you need to get off my back!"

Olivia snatched the yellow legal pad and pen that sat at the edge of the desk in the room and slid them toward Drover. "Write out everything you did yesterday. Every single thing. From the time you woke up Friday morning, right up until this conversation."

"What'll that do?" Drover said, raising his voice again. "You've got my damn DNA!"

"Yes, and it could be a long time before we get those results. Besides there's a millions reasons why you wouldn't immediately be a match-

"Including the fact that I didn't do it!"

"...which is why," she continued, as if he had not said anything, "you need to tell me every step you took yesterday and today, so we can rule you out indefinitely."

Drover stared at the legal pad and shook his head. "I still don't see what that'll prove when you have my DNA."

"Look," Olivia said softly as she sat in the rickety chair across from him. "I want to help you, but you have got to give me something. You screaming that you didn't do it isn't going to change any minds here. Half of our victims were found without any DNA on them except for their own. DNA isn't going to rule you out of anything. Just tell me what you did yesterday and I can retrace your steps. If we can rule you out from talking to the same people you spoke to or saw yesterday, then we will."

"And that other detective? What's he gonna do?"

Olivia sighed again. "Just tell me where you went, and I'll see what I can do."

Drover stared silently at her for another moment before reluctantly taking the ballpoint pen in his hand and began scribbling the past day's events on the blue-lined yellow sheets.

Roughly an hour after he began writing, Drover set down his pen and gave a deep sigh. As Olivia stepped into the interrogation room, Drover stared up at her with sad eyes, red with strain from the past few hours at the precinct. Pity overwhelmed her as she took the legal pad from him and she wanted to give him some words of encouragement, but as she opened her mouth, a short dark haired figure appeared in the doorway across the room.

"Jeffrey Drover?" he said. "I'm Alek Warnoff, your public defender. Don't say another word."

"He's already said a lot," Olivia said, folding up Drover's notes.

"I'm sure he did, Detective," Warnoff said, "but I'm sure you're aware that anything he says between the time he asked for a lawyer and the time I got here is fruit from the poisonous tree. Now, I'm certain that since Mr. Drover isn't under arrest he's free to go?"

"He's been free to leave at any time," Olivia said innocently.

"Fine. Mr. Drover, let's go."

Drover rose from the chair and followed Warnoff out of the room. Olivia sighed as she walked back to her desk, a full account of Drover's day in her hands.

"Did he give you a statement?" Cragen asked her once she sat at her desk.

“Of sorts,” she said. “I told him to write down everything he did yesterday.”

Cragen glanced at Elliot who was now paying attention to the pair of them.

“Why? Anything he has to say will be inadmissible in court since he asked for a lawyer.”

“Well, at least it’s a start.”

“Not if what he has to say leads us to the original crime scene and then we can’t fry him on this because of what you’ve got.”

“Even if he does, we can always go the route of inevitable discovery. The point is, he gave this up willingly and there’s nothing about him that shows he’d be confident enough in thinking he’d get off if he pointed me to where he killed those boys.”

“If this turns up nothing, then we’ve wasted valuable time.”

“If it’s nothing, we get to move on and focus on different suspects.” She looked at Elliot for a moment. “And, speaking of other suspects...I think we need to talk to Kreider again.”

“Now?” Elliot said. “No, we need to talk to the Hedges, then track down where Drover was last, *then* go bother Kreider again.”

“We need to talk to Kreider first, while it’s fresh. Dominic Hedges was killed at about two o’clock this morning. We should see signs of that still on Kreider today, *if* we talk to him now.”

“Liv, I’d rather prove Drover one way or another first before going after anyone else, especially since he’s lawyered up now.”

“Right, it’s going to be harder to get him back in here and I’d like to make sure everything we have on him is solid.”

“So, what’s to even argue about? We talk to the parents, then track down Drover, then-”

“No,” she interrupted. “We’ll have something solid on Drover if we can dismiss Kreider up front. If we don’t talk to him now, I think he’s going to run.”

Cragen frowned at the both of them as the row continued and just as it seemed to hit an event horizon, Fin cut into the argument.

“Look,” he said. “Liv and me will go see Kreider while Elliot and John go talk to the parents. That way, no ground’s lost on either one today.”

Olivia and Elliot both remained silent a moment more before beginning to gather their coats. All four detectives walked to the elevator and Munch leaned toward his partner and whispered so that only he could hear.

“Sure,” he said. “Leave *me* with the one who’s fuming most.”

“What’chu talking about?” Fin replied. “ ‘Least Elliot got some of his out already on Drover. Who knows *what’s* gonna come out once me and Liv hit the streets...”

Owen Kreider Residence
Lower East Side
12:26PM

Fin set two hard raps on Kreider’s front door as Olivia stood next to him, just out of sight of the peephole’s view. After a minute of no response, he knocked again.

“Owen Kreider!” Fin said. “It’s the police. Open up!”

They heard rustling at the door before Kreider opened the door. His hair was tousled and he wore what appeared to be pajamas. He looked at Fin, scowled and then rolled his eyes when he saw Olivia in the doorway.

"You've got to be kidding," he said. "I can't believe you brought someone else with you this time."

"Mr. Kreider," Olivia said. "We just have a couple more questions for you."

"I don't have anything to say to you."

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Because if you'd rather wait until we have enough evidence to drag you into our precinct, we can always come back."

Cheeks red, Kreider squinted at her before allowing both she and Fin into the apartment. "Let's just get this over with."

"Place is a damn mess, Kreider," Fin said, stepping into the apartment. "When was the last time you had company?"

Kreider glowered at him. "Is this *really* what you wanna know?"

"Yeah. We do."

"Well, it's been a while, as evidenced by the fact that it's the *maid's* day off."

Fin glanced at Olivia. "Where were you last night around midnight?"

"See, this is why I didn't want to talk to you people!" Kreider shouted.

"What's the problem?" Fin said. "It's a simple question. Where were you?"

"How the hell can I remember!"

"You can't remember what you were doing twelve hours ago?" Olivia said.

"Good God! I was home!"

"See, that wasn't that hard," Fin said. "Mind telling us if you went out at all?"

"No, I didn't go anywhere and I didn't call anyone. Again. Apparently, that's a problem?"

"It is if you're involved," Olivia said.

"I'm not."

"You don't even know what you're supposedly involved in," she continued.

"There are a lot of crimes going on in the city. Who knows *why* we're here..."

"I know how you people operate," he said. "You figure, I'm a quiet guy who lives alone and because I didn't want the cops in my apartment, clearly I had something to do with these murders with those kids. Well, I'm telling you, you're wrong. I never touched those boys."

"No one said you did," Olivia said.

"But you're insinuating it! And I take special offense to this because I know you cops already have another suspect in your sights. You're just coming here to bother me."

"What makes you think we're looking at anybody specific?" Fin said.

"I have my sources. I know a lot about what goes on in this city."

"Well," Olivia said, "why don't you save us all a load of time by coming down to the precinct and let us rule you out with a DNA test?"

"The hell I will!" Kreider shouted, rounding on them. "Like I'm going to voluntarily give you my DNA! So, you can do whatever you want with it? No, goddamn way!"

"We're not gonna do anything with your DNA," Fin said. "Just rule you out as a suspect. I don't see the problem, if you say you ain't involved!"

Kreider shook his head. "I'll be damned if I'm going to willingly give my DNA to the NYPD. If you want my DNA, you can get it when I'm good and dead. You two can leave now."

"You're not gonna let us have a quick look around?" Fin said sardonically.

"You can't be serious?"

"If you're not willing to talk to us," Olivia said, "allowing us to look around now will...reflect well on you."

"I don't need anything to reflect on me because I didn't do anything."

Olivia smirked at him and the pink in his skin spread to his forehead and down his neck. "You wouldn't believe how many times I've heard that phrase today."

"I...I don't want you people rummaging around my place, trying to plant evidence."

"Ain't nobody gonna plant any evidence on you," Fin said. "We're just tryin' to clear you so we get on with our investigation."

"I don't care what you have to do," Kreider said. "Get out, now. Both of you! And, don't come back!"

"That was fun," Fin said a few moments later in the corridor.

"He was actually a little more cooperative than I thought he'd be," Olivia said.

"Yeah, but do you think he did it?"

"He looked like he was just rolling out of bed. Maybe he was up late last night."

"Could be a million reasons he's still asleep at noon on a Saturday. I'd be too, if I could get away with it. Besides, he seemed just annoyed about us more than anything. You think he did it?"

"Still too early to tell. He seems awfully calm about us looking at him, which is a striking comparison to Drover."

"Could be like Elliot said...Maybe Kreider's just a little jumpy and just looks like Drover."

Olivia nodded as they got back into the car, but said nothing as they drove back to the precinct.

"We just have a couple more questions," Munch said as he and Elliot stood in the small living room.

"Why can't you just let us be for a minute?" Mrs. Hedges said, her eyes red and bloodshot. "We just lost our son. Why do we have to do this now?"

"We can come back," Elliot said.

"No," Mr. Hedges said. "We'll do this now. If this guy's out there killing kids, I want you people to get on this now. Before another parent has to go through what we are."

Munch took a deep breath. "Mr. Hedges, can you think of anyone who might have wanted to hurt your son?"

"Of course not," Mrs. Hedges said. "Dominic...was just a boy. Why anyone would want to hurt him is beyond me."

"Have you ever noticed anyone watching Dominic or paying him particular attention during his soccer games?" Elliot asked.

Mr. Hedges shook his head. "No, but I admit we would never even think to look. We watched him play, but everyone else who stood around the fields looked like a parent or relative of the other kids on the team. You wouldn't question it if they just happened to look at your kid."

"There would be no one to notice in particular, anyway," Mrs. Hedges added. "There's always so many people at the different complexes, but after you watch your son play for enough years, you seem to even recognize the faces of the strangers from seeing them from time to time. There's never been anyone out of place."

"Any of these men ever frequent the soccer complexes?" Elliot said holding out a picture array of six dark-haired men.

The Hedges' stared at the array before Mrs. Hedges spoke.

"That man," she said pointing to Drover's face in the array. "I've seen him a few times. I think he's an assistant or maybe a trainer for one of the teams. I can't remember which one...the Sparks maybe?"

Elliot nodded retrieving the array from her. "Have you spoken to him before?"

"Maybe just in passing," Mr. Hedges said. "A 'hello' or something along those lines. Never a real conversation, and I don't think Dominic ever spoke to him."

"You're a contractor, aren't you?" Munch asked.

Mr. Hedges gave him a blank stare for a moment. "Yes...how is that important?"

"Are you at all in debt to anyone?"

The question floated in the room a moment, dripping with its hidden meaning.

"What the hell does that mean?" Mr. Hedges said, taking a step toward Munch, eyebrows furrowed.

"Well," Munch continued, "You're a contractor in *this* city. We just need to make sure that every angle is covered."

"Look," Mr. Hedges said. "I know what I'm doing. I grew up in this city and I know what goes on. Mobsters didn't do this. This was the work of some sick freak who you people can't seem to catch. How many more *children* are you going to let this guy murder before you stop asking asinine questions and find him!"

"We'll find the one responsible," Elliot said.

"Be sure that you do, because if I find him first..."

"We understand."

"I see all four of you have spent all day on this strangler even though I told you all efforts were supposed to be on the Fayden rape."

Cragen stared at both Fin and Olivia while standing in between the two sets of desks.

Olivia glanced at Fin, eyebrows raised. "Well..."

"Forget it," he said. "I'm glad you did. I just got a call. Helena Fayden's acid stash was found in her new hotel room and, apparently, she's now adapting her story on the rape. One of you needs to be down there to grill her again on her new story. Maybe this time we'll get something accurate and we'll have something to work with."

Both detectives stared back at him, but neither said anything.

Cragen sighed. "Don't care which one, as long as someone's down there in an hour."

As he turned to speak to another set of officers in the squad room, Olivia and Fin exchanged looks.

"Call it," Fin said, taking a quarter out of his pocket.

"Tails," Olivia said, as he threw the quarter in the air.

Fin caught it and slapped it to the back of his hand. When he removed his hand, the quarter lied with the eagle facing the ceiling. Fin shook his head and picked up his jacket as Olivia sat down at her desk, a wide grin set upon her face. The smile faded a moment later when she began to review the notes that Drover had made earlier that morning.

According to what he had written in the legal pad, Drover went to a movie and a bar that Friday and had simply gone home thereafter. There were plenty of opportunities to find someone who might have remembered him and could possibly put his name to rest for the time being.

She sighed and picked up her own coat, mildly contented at the fact that she was not the one having to interview Helena Fayden for the third time. Cases such as hers turned SVU detectives apathetic and caused real victims to suffer in the process.

Starting with Drover's workplace at Rohlman-Hayworth, Olivia began asking anyone who appeared to work at the specific premises as to whether or not they had seen Drover that day. She went to the sandwich store where Drover had said he had eaten lunch, his photo in hand, and the clerk at the window, confirmed that Drover had been by the restaurant the previous day. From the sandwich store, she visited the movie theatre where he said he went to see *Letters from Iwo Jima* and the bar, Icing, where he said he was not able to get a woman to go home with him.

The woman at the theatre's ticket booth recognized him immediately and even asked if Olivia had his number, and with a bit of prodding and a slight threat into having the vice squad checking the bar's liquor license, one of the bartenders at Icing finally confirmed that Drover was at the bar until three o'clock in the morning flirting flagrantly with the young woman next to him. At each location, she continued to ask if Drover seemed agitated or appeared troubled, but all those questioned said that Drover was pleasant and endearing.

Once back at the precinct, she was troubled that they had spent so much time on Drover. Melinda had confirmed that Dominic Hedges had been killed sometime between midnight and two in the morning, and with Drover at the bar until its closing at three, the likelihood that he was involved was now very low. Then, there was Kreider to consider.

Everything about his demeanor was distasteful and she briefly understood why Elliot had so fervently chased after Drover. Even at their first discussion with Kreider, Olivia did not like him and with his lack of interest in assisting them, the only natural reaction was to look at him further for the murders.

She made several calls and pulled some of Drover's phone records for the past week, noting that everything seemed to point to Drover being nothing more than a normal guy. She even pinpointed the time when Drover reported his car stolen that Thursday with calls to family and friends whom he had mentioned calling to see if any of them had taken his car.

At seven in the evening, Olivia pushed back from her desk and ran a hand over her face. A part of her felt that the entire day had been a waste as they had found no new information on their killer, but her more rational side knew the day had been well-spent. She had managed to nearly prove that Drover was not remotely involved in these murders. All that remained was to convince Elliot and the others of the same, which seemed like the real task of the day.

Dominic Hedges' eighth grade photo lied on Olivia's desk and briefly caught the light as she rocked back and forth in her chair. His colouring was uncanny to that of both Kreider and Drover and she could only shake her head as she pictured Kreider coming to his door as if he had done nothing wrong. He was the guy, and now more than ever, she was sure of it.

As if suddenly struck by inspiration, Olivia moved her chair forward and began searching for any information available on Kreider. Nothing about him seemed normal and she knew that if she followed the paper trail just right, she would find something pertaining to what was in Kreider's sealed records.

When seven became eight, she sighed and leaned backward once again. As she began to wish she had simply lied in the bed with Jonathan that morning, Elliot walked off the elevator and into the squad room. They simply stared at one another while he walked to his desk, neither sure of what could be said given that they had not spoken since their argument that morning.

Elliot hung up his coat and sat silently across from Olivia who had returned her attention to her computer screen. Though he sat perfectly still staring at her, his heart was beating wildly, knowing he had so much to tell her, but also dreading the argument that would most likely ensue once she heard his piece.

"So," he began. "What'd you find out about Kreider this morning?"

Olivia's typing paused briefly before she spoke. "Not much from just talking to him."

"We found something about Drover," he said, nearly blurting out the words.

"Oh," she said, with an eyebrow raised.

Elliot pulled out his notes, including the arrays and pictures he had held during the day.

"We talked to some of the neighbors and one of them ID'd Drover."

"From what? From where?"

"Well, we haven't gone back to the parents yet because they either ashamed or hiding something since they failed to mention it, but the neighbor across the way from them, remembered Drover bringing Dominic home a few weeks ago. The neighbor remembered because she thought it was odd that he was bringing Dominic home to an empty house."

"How is that relevant?"

"We talked to some of their other neighbors," he continued with a sigh, "and they all said the Hedges often forgot about their son."

"Forgot about him? How could they forget about him?"

"Tell me about it. I've got four kids and I want to know where each one is at all times. What I was told, is that they've been fighting recently and both have been working a lot. It seems that poor Dominic would just get set to the side since work and everything else came first. In the past year, he's called several of the neighbors for rides home from

soccer, basketball and baseball practices and such because his parents had simply forgotten about him.”

Olivia stared at Elliot for a long time, rocking back and forth in her chair. “You want to bring Drover back in based on that?”

“You make it sound like it’s a severe problem. We talked to Drover all morning and he didn’t even mention knowing Dominic Hedges.”

“That’s because we never brought up the boy’s name and even if we did, driving a kid home from a soccer practice once does not a criminal make. There could be a dozen reasons why Drover was the one to take him home, especially considering that the parents seemed prone to forgetting about him. If his and Drover’s teams were practicing at the same complex and Drover saw that Dominic was waiting for parents who were clearly not going to show up for him, it seems perfectly rational that Drover would’ve given the kid a ride home.”

“What is with you and this guy?” Elliot said. “Why are you so intent on making his defense for him?”

“What is it with *you* and Drover, Elliot? It’s like you’re hanging onto any shred of evidence that could possibly link Drover to these crimes.”

“Because we don’t know what shred of evidence it’ll be that convicts him.”

“Only if he’s responsible and I don’t think he is.”

“The neighbor was able to pick Drover out of a photo array from an event that took place weeks ago. She said that they talked in the car a while before Dominic got out. Does that sound like a reasonable relationship with a kid who’s practically a stranger?”

Olivia shook her head and reached across the desks to look at the photo arrays. “Kreider’s picture isn’t in here.”

“It didn’t need to be. We already know that Drover has a close association with kids this age and Dominic played soccer at the same places as all the other kids. Drover’s the one whose car was seen in that video and Drover’s the one who’s been ID’d.”

“It would have been a stronger ID if Kreider’s picture had been in the array. Besides, you didn’t see what he was like this morning when Fin and I talked to him. Aside from being more annoyed than he was yesterday, he seemed tired. Exhausted even. As if he was doing something all last night that wore him out.”

“We have more now on Drover than we ever will on Kreider. You can’t tell me I’ve got nothing on Drover when you’ve got even less on Kreider.”

“That’s because Kreider is behaving like a criminal. He refuses to talk to us for more than ten minutes or come here and clear his name, give us DNA or anything! Drover has been more than willing at every step of this case.”

“How...how can you think Drover’s not involved? Even with what we’ve got on these later murders?”

She sighed. “Elliot, I’m just not willing to believe that he’s responsible when Kreider is just as likely, especially considering what I just found out about him.”

“What’d you find?”

“Well, I’m still having a time getting his old records unsealed, but I did find something else. Kreider’s been requesting records from hospitals, precincts and from ACS for the past four years. As it turns out, Kreider was adopted and has been searching for his birth mother. All the requests, however, seem to stop about a month before Jacob Lewendale’s murder.”

Elliot shrugged. "So, he's adopted. That's not exactly the prototype for a child molester."

"He told us yesterday that he didn't have any family, but if he was adopted he obviously had someone."

"Again," Elliot said, crossing his arms in front of him. "So, he's adopted. So, what?"

She opened her mouth to escalate the conversation, but hesitated. Growing up, Olivia had always felt a burning need to discover something about her father and she knew it was that need that had driven her life in its many directions. Looking at her partner at that moment, jealousy began to rise for the man who had known both of his parents and had grown up in a household full of siblings, neither of which she had had. There was no real way to explain to him how the search for one's lineage could dismiss any hopes for a well-rounded life.

"Elliot," she said. "This man, Owen Kreider, is obviously off-balanced and this search for his mother could have been exactly what was needed to light a fire under him. It could have been what compelled him to start murdering these kids. They all come from relatively happy homes. It's like George said. They all have something that he would have wanted but never had."

"The guy's a freak, Liv. We know that, but there's nothing that says *he's* the one doing this."

Olivia shook her head again and stood, shoving her things into her bag.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Home," she said. "I'm calling it a night. I've been looking at this case from every possible angle and I've been giving you so much to get you to stop focusing on one individual for just one second, but I just can't seem to get through to you."

"Oh, come on, Olivia! You want to give up on Drover altogether. I'm just saying-

"You're not even willing to look at anyone else *besides* Drover and I can't take anymore of this tonight!"

"I have a positive ID on Drover with one of the victims!"

"And you also have a false ID to counter that, as well as DNA and fingerprints that don't match and a suspect who's been more than cooperative this entire time! Kreider won't even talk to us and he looks just like Drover *and* he's got some kind of violent history that we can't uncover because he was so damn young when he did it! But, you don't want to talk about that! You wanna beat Drover into the ground instead of finding the real killer!"

"That's bullshit! You know I want to find the guy!"

"Since the day we saw Drover, you liked him for this to the point that you weren't even willing to hear about anybody else involved!"

"Because he's the guy!"

"You don't know that, you can't prove it and quite frankly, I'm sick of arguing about it!"

Olivia grabbed the bag that sat atop her desk and stormed away from Elliot, propelling the door to the stairway open instead of waiting for the elevators. Elliot continued to stare at the door even after she had gone and he could not help but notice how their voices seemed to linger and echo minutes later in the empty squad room.

Sunday January 21, 2007
SVU Squad Room
7:09AM

The sounds of Olivia's sigh bounced off the walls of vacant squad room and seemed to magnify in intensity as it came back to her.

She had left her apartment that morning with the intention of working out some of her demons on the treadmill and trunk machine, but at the last moment decided to review a few more of her files on the off-chance she received access to Kreider's sealed records. After hitting dead end after dead end, she had pushed herself away from the desk and let out a long sigh laced with both frustration and fatigue.

She had spent the previous night tossing and turning in her sleep to the point that Jonathan took one of her bed pillows and left her room to sleep the remainder of the night on her couch. They had shared a quiet dinner on the East Side and she had wondered how long he had held the restaurant reservation and if he was planning to add to her stress by introducing her to his parents.

At no point in any relationship had Olivia ever enjoyed meeting the parents of a beau. Many times she accepted dates once she learned that said suitor's parents were already dead. Always overly nervous, she never felt that she made a good first impression and would wind up ending the relationship out of sheer anxiety a short while later. It was only with Jonathan mentioning that they got their table on whim since he had gone to equestrian school with the owner that she began to relax.

All relaxation at dinner notwithstanding, Olivia felt tense throughout the night over the way she and Elliot had left things Saturday evening. She wanted to chalk everything up to hormones, but she knew there had to be more to it. Their arguments, once few and far between, were becoming an everyday occurrence and she knew that sooner or later Cragen would get tired of them and either reassign them or simply fire them both. Every bone in her body wanted to both slap Elliot and kiss him at the same time, though she knew that neither would solve any real problems.

For the second time in the past seven days, she wished that she had someone stronger and wiser to go to about her problems. Maya was always good for making her feel better when she was down, but she was often spastic and at times, showed signs of adult onset ADHD to the point that they could not have a real conversation without her constant teasing and jokes unless the situation was dire.

Jillian was solid and could be depended upon to dispense advice on any issue, but she had never met Elliot and held a strong dislike for him as well. She could also come across as forceful and end up stressing Olivia further.

Her friend, Sarah, she called too infrequently to be able to understand the situation, Adam was both too young and naïve to be of any help and as Jonathan was part of the problem, he could not be turned to either.

She leaned back in her chair and rested her hands atop her head as she closed her eyes. The roadblocks to the case had been set and it seemed that as long as Kreider's old records remained sealed, Olivia was not going to get what she needed to persuade Elliot

to see her point of view. Finding it suddenly funny that Elliot could come down so hard on his son for being stubborn when that feature was clearly inherited and passed down onto his children, she laughed out loud and shook her head, as she gathered her things.

She walked to the locker rooms on the same floor and quickly changed her clothes to go workout at the gym nearest her apartment building. It was not that she disliked the gym at the precinct, but of all the few times she felt inadequate next to her male counterparts, she felt it strongest when attempting to lift weights or run next to them.

As she closed the door to her locker, she heard footsteps coming up the corridor and saw a familiar shadow. Elliot passed by her aisle so quickly that when he glanced in her direction, he continued walking, his brain not having time to recognize her. He had just come up from the precinct gym and still appeared slightly wet with sweat from his morning workout of trying to vent his own frustrations about their partnership. When he realized whom he had seen, he took several steps backward and stood facing Olivia in the aisle.

They stared at one another, neither sure what to say to the other given the way they had separated the previous night. Each felt like an awkward teenager approaching a beau with whom they had recently ended a relationship. Olivia opened her mouth to speak, but when she saw Elliot do the same, she paused and Elliot did as well.

A smirk crept across his face and he sighed.

“Liv...about yesterday...,” he began. “I’m...I’m sorry.”

She nodded. “Me too.”

He took a step toward her, but she quickly closed the gap between them and wrapped her arms around him. Olivia could feel his arms envelope her and could smell the scent of light sweat mixed with that which made him Elliot, and she closed her eyes, cutting off one sense to make the former all the more strong. He seemed so powerful and secure as they embraced and she wondered if they could remain like that forever.

Elliot wondered if she could feel his heart beating through his chest. He had only wanted to move a bit closer to her, but when he threw her arms around him, he could not resist. His arms surrounded her so effortlessly that he felt compelled to pull her closer into him.

“What’s wrong with us?” she said into his shoulder. “Why can’t we get back to where we were?”

He said nothing, but simply squeezed her tighter in reply.

A footstep cracked from behind them and they jumped apart, turning toward the noise. Another detective was bending down to pick up a piece of paper, but upon seeing them, put up his hands defensively, as if to say he had not seen anything, and slowly backed out of their aisle.

Olivia knew rumors would soon be flying around the precinct, but she did not care. It was not the first time rumors about her and Elliot had floated among their peers and it would not be the last.

“Well,” Elliot said once the other detective had left. “We both’ve dug our heels in pretty deep with each of these guys and we both’ve got evidence for and against both. I want to focus on Kreider too, but I’m not willing to just let Drover off so quick...not until we’re absolutely certain what’s going on.”

“All right,” she said. “We’ll look at both with an open mind.”

He nodded and an awkward silence fell over them.

“So,” Olivia asked after a minute. “You wanna go get breakfast?”

He slowly shook his head. “I’ve gotta get a shower and I’ve got church at eleven. You’re welcome to join me, though.”

“For what?” she said smiling. “The shower or church?”

Elliot laughed and she shook her head. “I’ve got to hit the gym, anyway. It’s been more than a week.”

“Okay,” he said. “See you tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah.”

She left the locker room and he watched her walk down the corridor. There was something in the way that she had asked him to breakfast that made the innuendo seem not all that innocent. He shook his head and wondered what kind of rumors would be flying about the two of them on Monday, especially if they had been seen at breakfast together after their hug.

For what...the shower or church? The words rang through his head as she had never thrown that high of a flirtation in his direction previously and he was sure that he blushed when she said it.

He turned on the cold tap in the locker room’s shower, and as the cold water flowed over him, he realized it was going to take a lot of church to drive these iniquitous thoughts from his head.

Greenwich Village, New York

7:12PM

Chopin echoed from the muted instrument that stood as its owner sat near the eighth floor window. Snow and January winds blew against the window, but Olivia barely noticed as she continued to play. Much of the day had been spent either running or cleaning her apartment and she decided that her evening was going to be for her. No thoughts concerning her job, her boyfriend and especially her partner were going to plague her thoughts as her bow grazed the steel and nylon stretched across hand-crafted maple.

Her telephone had rung twice since she picked up her bow, but unlike with any other day of the week, she did not answer it. She knew that if it were urgent her home phone, cell and pager would all be ringing and buzzing. Yet, when the phone rang twice within a few minutes, she sighed, pulled her fingers from the instrument’s neck and begrudgingly reached for her phone.

“Hello?” she said softly.

“Uh...hi, Olivia?” Kathleen said on the other end of the phone. “It’s Kathleen. Are you busy right now?”

She looked down at the cello whose neck lay against her shoulder, but resisted a secondary sigh. “No, sweetie. What’s up?”

“Oh, well, I...uh, wanted to start taking these tonight and I didn’t know if there was anything special I should do.”

“Nope. They’re just like any other pills, but just remember what I told you about waiting a month before anything.”

"I will."

"And what I said about getting tested."

"We'll do that too. Thanks Olivia."

"It's no problem."

When she hung up the phone, Olivia realized that she did not reopen the subject of telling Elliot with Kathleen and she wondered if she should simply jump the gun on the issue.

The phone rang in her hand as thought in her chair and she half-hoped that it was Elliot so that she could put the issue to rest once and for all.

"Benson."

"Yes, Olivia?" a voice said. "This is Phil."

"Hi Phil," she said. "What's up?"

"Oh nothing...I just...uh, wanted to know if you were free for dinner to tomorrow."

"As friends right?"

"Well...yeah, I guess so."

"Okay, Phil, well as my Jonathan would tell you, I'm not good at keeping dinner reservations. Something always comes up, but how 'bout I give you a call in a few days when I know I'll be free?"

"Uh...okay...are you free for a movie or something right now?"

She sighed into the phone. "I'm in depth with my music. Tonight's Olivia's night."

"Oh...okay, I see." Disappointment flowed through his voice. "Well, do give me call when you're free."

"Will do. Bye."

As soon as the word "bye" had left her mouth, she pressed "End" and then *2 on the phone.

"Livia?" Maya's voice answered a moment later.

"Yeah. I got a question for you," Olivia said. "How do you let someone down, but *really* down so that they stop calling?"

Maya laughed. "Who's bugging? The twenty-nine year old?"

"Who else?"

"Well," Maya said, still laughing, "we could be here all night if you wanted me to list all my kiss-offs."

"Not all of them just some of the better ones, because the 'you're a nice guy' and the 'let's be friends' ones aren't working. Besides, you've always been better at blowing off guys since you had so much more practice than me."

"Oh, come on. That's not true. You dated way more than me growing up."

"That's because I was terrible at letting guys off easy."

"*That's* because you want to do it the easy way. It's a two-step process: first step is the nice way, with the 'let's be friends' and the 'it's not you, it's me' and if that doesn't work, you have to start with the 'look, I've told you already' or the 'the next time you call me, I'm getting a restraining order.'"

Olivia laughed, remembering a time long past when Maya had actually made good on her threat. "What was that kid's name...Mickey Something...?"

"Mickey Wallace and he totally deserved it. He was crazy!"

“He wasn’t crazy. He just had a crush.”

“He was certifiable! I can always tell the ones who are. They start asking all these questions about India right off the bat.”

“Maybe he was just really interested.”

“No one could possibly care that much.”

“I still say you jumped the gun on him. He only called twice after you dumped him and he just had a little crush.”

“Yeah,” Maya said. “A *little* crush. That’s how they all start and then before you know it, you’ve got them jumping out from behind buildings, showing up at every moment and stalking you all over the damn city. I don’t need that.”

“Oh my God! I just remembered!” Olivia said, half jumping out of her chair. “I gave Jonathan keys to my apartment yesterday.”

“You bitch!” Maya said. “And you waited until just *now* to tell me?”

“I just remembered.”

“How could you forget something like that? You kept telling me three weeks before you gave your partner keys to your place. I can’t believe you just forgot about it.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s weird.”

“Something else on your mind?”

“No...well, aside from Elliot and his daughter, no.”

“Ah! So, the other shoe drops.”

“What other shoe?”

“The Elliot Shoe! What happened today with him that pushed out the fact that you gave Jonathan a set of keys?”

“Nothing’s happened.”

Maya laughed into the phone. “Yeah, I bet nothing happened.”

“I’m serious,” Olivia said. “We didn’t fight or anything. In fact, I just barely saw him today for just-” Olivia paused, suddenly remembering the feel and smell of Elliot all around her.

“For just?” Maya asked. “Just what?”

“Nothing...just a hug. You know an ‘I’m sorry’ sort of thing.”

“Oh...I see. Just a hug, eh?”

“Maya, there was nothing to it. It was just a hug.”

“Okay, sure. So, tell me how often do you and your partner participate in these sordid embraces?”

“All right, I’m hanging up now.”

“No wait, just tell me...was it the muscles or those baby blues that pushed away those thoughts about keys?”

“Okay, g’bye!”

Olivia shook her head as she pushed “End” on the phone. All teasing aside, Maya had hit a nerve that Olivia was not prepared discuss, even in jest. The fact was, all it took was a simply hug from her partner to wash away all thoughts of anyone else and that fact, more than anything, frightened her most of all.

43 East 34th Street
Midtown, New York
8:22PM

The canorous fusion of jazz and folk music floated through the small restaurant, piquing the ears of all those present and Elliot smiled across the linen-covered table at Diana who sat with her chin resting on her folded hands.

He had called Diana, after fervently avoiding her for two days, and asked her to dinner at a small restaurant in Midtown, as he knew he could not evade her forever. The decision was made after he had come home from church feeling unnerved rather than at peace.

“Can we go get ice cream?” Lizzie had said to her father as they walked out of the church.

“It’s the middle of January,” Elliot had replied. “Where could we go, Lizzie?”

“*Elizabeth*, and I dunno. Guess I’m just in the mood for some ice cream.”

He laughed. “Maybe next week... So, what’d you do last night?”

“Nothing really. I kind of caught the kitchen on fire.”

“What? How’d that happen?”

“Well... I was cooking spaghetti and the sauce sort of spilled out of the pan and into the stove, but it wasn’t on the grill itself, so I thought it’d be fine. But... when I put the big pot back on it to cook the spaghetti, it sort of caught on fire.”

“How a big a fire?”

“Just a little one. I kind of burned myself when I was trying to put it out, but it’s okay.”

“What kind of burn? Let me see it.”

“It’s fine, really Dad. It’s no big deal.”

“Is that what the band-aid on your arm is for?”

“I put some Vitamin E oil on it and it’s fine.”

Lizzie showed him her small arm and Elliot could see a blotch of red spreading in an array from the small band-aid on her forearm.

“I can’t believe this. Why were you cooking alone?”

“I’ve got to learn eventually. Besides, I’m sure lots of people burned themselves once or twice or set their kitchen’s on fire before they learned to cook.”

Elliot sighed. “Why didn’t you ask for help?”

“There wasn’t any. Dickie was at Jessica’s drooling over her and Kathleen was... busy.”

“Well, where was Mom?”

Lizzie shrugged. “I dunno. Out, I guess.”

“Out?”

“Yeah. You know, out.”

Before he could inquire further about what “out” meant, Lizzie changed the subject.

“Did you ask Olivia about her music?”

"I did, but we got busy and I'm sure she forgot about it. But, I'll ask her again."

"Thanks. The recital is at the beginning of March. I just want to get it so I can practice before then."

"I'll definitely ask her first thing tomorrow."

"Okay. Are we still going to the ballet next month?"

"Course. I can't wait."

Lizzie smiled and shook her head. "Okay. I told Meaghan about it and she said it was really cool."

"Well, as long as *Meaghan* says it's cool..." Elliot said, his voice teasing.

Lizzie opened her mouth to say reply, but he saw that she could see a friend of hers. "Oh, there's Katie. I need to talk to her about Monday."

"What's happening Monday?" he asked.

"I'll tell you later. Bye Daddy," she said and ran down the steps to catch up with her friend.

Elliot found his son again in the small crowd and asked him how the after-game party went.

"It's was okay," Dickie said in a low voice.

"Just okay? I thought Jessica was there?"

"It was at her house, so she was there, but..."

"But?"

"But, we lost so everybody was kind of down and not talking a lot. The whole thing was okay overall, though. Thanks for letting me go."

"Thanks for finally apologizing."

"I won't do it again. I swear."

"Don't swear," Elliot said with a smile. "You just got out of church."

Dickie rolled his eyes, but returned the smile. "Yeah, I know. I know. Hey, I need to ask Mrs. Murphy if she still wants me to shovel her sidewalks today. Bye, Dad."

He gave his son a nod, as he quickly walked toward an elderly woman holding a large, floral print, woolen bag.

Elliot then caught sight of Maureen standing with her boyfriend out of the corner of his eye. She had brought him with her to the morning service and Elliot had made sure to sit right next to them, staring down Justin Wheeler with every errant movement he made. Any time he appeared to kneel too close to Maureen, Elliot threw a look in his direction and Justin made certain to include an extra space between him and Maureen.

He caught up with them and gave his daughter a long hug. Justin stood by nervously looking between the ground and Elliot's stern glare in his direction.

"How'd your paper go?" Elliot asked.

"Okay, I guess. I haven't got it back yet. We'll get them Monday."

He nodded. "How 'bout the other classes?"

"The E-con is kicking my butt a little, but everything else is fine."

"Very good," he said and he turned toward Justin who held a very worried expression on his face. "And how are *you* doing this morning."

"G-good, sir," Justin said. "I'm doing good."

"Doing *well* you mean," Elliot said.

"Wha-yeah. Exactly. Sorry! I-I meant well. I...I normally say 'well' it's just that...uh...well...um..."

Maureen took Justin by the hand and rolled her eyes. "It's fine, Justin. We'll see you later, Dad."

As the pair walked down the stone steps, Elliot could hear Justin whisper to Maureen, "Your dad kinda freaks me out, you know?"

Once they were out of an earshot, Elliot saw Kathleen slowly walk out of the church, the last of the remaining stragglers and well-wishers. She had her arms crossed in front of her and her eyebrows were furrowed to the point to cause a small wrinkle to appear in the middle of her forehead.

He felt tense upon seeing her expression as he was "allowed" to spend time with her this Friday coming and worried that whatever was wrong might explode during the precious little time they had together.

"You have anything in mind for Friday?" Elliot asked her.

Kathleen shrugged. "Not really. I guess maybe a movie or something after dinner."

"Well, I've got some tickets to a play. That sound good?"

She nodded silently.

"You okay?" he said after staring at her a moment. "You look kinda bummed about something."

"Everything's fine," she said quickly. "I've just got a lot on my mind."

"Anything you want to talk about?"

"No," she said shaking her head. "It's nothing. Just school and stuff."

"About where else you want to apply?"

"No...just other stuff. It's fine. I don't think I want to talk about it now."

"Okay," Elliot said, nodding his head. "Maybe later?"

"Yeah, maybe."

He could not help but notice how throughout their conversation, Kathleen refused to raise her eyes to meet his and her normally buoyant and amenable demeanor was disguised by a despondent expression. Of all the things that could be wrong with her, Elliot could not imagine what could have disheartened Kathleen to the point that she did not even raise the issue of her parent's divorce while both he and Kathy were present.

Instead of continuing to push the question, he decided to save it until Friday when he would have time to speak to her alone.

"So, what'd you do this weekend?" he asked. "Do anything fun on Friday?"

She visibly tensed and stared at the ground. "Nothing much. No one really wanted to do anything since it was so cold out Friday. I mean, I kind of went to dinner, but that was it."

"Oh...okay. How 'bout yesterday?"

"Nothing really. Just hung out with Mike."

"Mike..." Elliot repeated.

"Yeah Mike. You *know* Mike, Dad."

"Tall kid...spiky, gelled hair?"

Kathleen rolled her eyes. "See, I told you, you knew him."

"Where'd you hang out?"

"Am I trouble or something?"

"Why would you think that?" he asked, taken aback by her assumption.

“Because you’re grilling me pretty hard. Like you know something and you’re just fishing for information until I spill.”

“Well, are you hiding something that needs to be spilled?”

“No.”

“ ‘Cause that sounds like the assumption of a guilty conscience.”

Kathleen shook her head at him. “I’ll see you Friday, Dad,” and she began to walk down the steps.

“Hang on a sec,” he said, grabbing her by the arm. “I’m just trying to figure out what’s going on. Mom’s been saying that you’ve been down lately. What’s up?”

“Nothing, Dad,” she said after taking a deep breath. “There’s nothing wrong. I told you, I’ve just got some things going on right now.”

“You can tell me about them.”

“No...I mean it doesn’t matter. It’s not a big deal and it’s nothing to get all worried about.”

“Okay, fine...But, you’re moping around and that’s just not like you.”

She sighed. “I know, but it’s fine. It’s just...nothing.”

Elliot nodded without believing a word she said. “All right.” He then decided to change the subject again. “Was, um, your mother home when you and Mike were *hanging out*?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything happened.”

“I didn’t say anything did, I was just curious.”

He stopped trying to pull information from her about Kathy’s Saturday night outing and spoke to her a few moments more, before the cold got to them and he watched as his family piled into the car and drove back to his former home.

As he watched the car head into the Sunday traffic, he could not shake the residual feeling of shock and anger at the idea that Kathy had simply gone “out.” It had previously occurred to him that Kathy could start dating, but the thought sickened him and made his stomach burn.

“...but, seriously. Kids today can just be so outrageous. But, being a father, I guess you already know that.”

Diana’s continuing diatribe in her always-seductive voice broke Elliot’s trance and he tried to pay attention to her again.

“There’s something about high school kids, you know. They’re always acting out.”

Out. She just went “out.”

He attempted to focus on her, but his thoughts kept drifting back to Kathy. Until she actually filed the divorce papers, she was still technically his. She had no business being “out.”

The sheer frank nature with which Lizzie had stated it was what hurt him the most. *I dunno. Out, I guess.* As if it was an ordinary thing for her mother to be dating. He set down his fork and restrained from shaking his head at the thought. Who knew how long she had been seeing other people? She could have been dating for months and he

would never know. What if that was really the problem with Kathleen? With her mother dating, Kathleen was facing the reality that her parents may never get back together?

Diana laughed out loud at her own joke and Elliot chuckled with her, not knowing whether she had said something witty or completely asinine, but the questions continued to stir. What if there had always been someone else? He was barely there and Kathy was a woman with needs. What if she had been going “out” for ages and served him with papers so that she could run off with her new lover?

“How’s your penne?” Diana asked with a smile.

Reverie broken, he returned her smile. He found it fantastic that he managed to wonder how Kathy had the audacity to see other people, while he sat having dinner with a woman who was neither his wife nor a close friend.

“Fantastic. I love it here.”

As the words left his mouth, a distant memory jumped into Elliot’s mind. Less than a year earlier, he had been simply watching television with Kathleen who insisted that they watch the broadcast version of a *Sex and the City* airing. He obliged only because he simply enjoyed spending time with his daughter, but the episode’s story was what piqued his mind.

In the episode it seemed apparent that Carrie’s Mr. Big was taking her out to dinner at the same restaurant all the time, but it was a restaurant in a part of the city he never visited otherwise and looked to be the type of place that men took dates they were too embarrassed to take to nicer places where they would be seen by other people they knew.

As Diana smiled at Elliot again, the episode played in his mind and he considered The Eaststone. The small restaurant sat in a part of Midtown that he rarely visited and the only reason he knew about it was because his brother had mentioned it to him some time earlier, after taking a “not-so-attractive” woman to dinner there. He knew few people on the east side of the city and The Eaststone seemed attractive to him because of that. No good could seemingly come from someone catching him having dinner with Diana, regardless of his marital status. Dinner with Olivia at an intimate setting would raise an eyebrow, but Diana would cause family and friends to whip out cell phones and talk would fly. The restaurant served as the perfect getaway to have dinner with someone without any accusatory looks and glances.

“Elliot?”

He snapped back to his senses, realizing that she was asking him a question.

“You okay?” Diana asked. “You seem like you’re miles away.”

He shrugged. “Just preoccupied. The case and...my kids.”

“I understand,” she said, taking his free hand in both of hers. “Tell me about your kids, Elliot. You don’t talk about them enough, but I know they’re your whole world.”

“Yeah, they’re my life.”

“Now, there’s Maureen and then the twins...?”

“Maureen, Kathleen and the twins, Dickie and Lizzie.”

“Oh, I bet they’re close. My younger sisters are twins and you couldn’t pry them apart with the Jaws of Life.”

“Well, they’re growing apart a little now that they’re getting a little older. Lizzie insists she’s going to be called Elizabeth and she doesn’t want to do anything that’s not

feminine and Dickie's busy falling over himself for a girl with big brown eyes and thick hair."

Diana laughed. "That's how kids are. They grow up. A little too soon for most parents..."

They talked throughout the rest of the meal chatting about Elliot's children and Diana's one son who, since she had him when she sixteen, was older than Maureen and about generalities in their respective careers. All the while he spoke to Diana, Elliot's thoughts were on other women.

He was still unnerved by Olivia's hug, having never previously touched her in such a way and he thought his arms and chest still tingled from the embrace. When he was honest with himself, he did not like the fact that Olivia dated either. In his eyes, she was practically his as well, but she was off dating million-dollar assholes, for whom he knew she was too good and the very thought of it seemed painful.

What if she married Jonathan? Would they ever hug like that again? Would he have to put up with smug face for the rest of the time that he knew Olivia? How was he going to cope if Jonathan decided to retire at a young age and took Olivia off to live in Europe or the Caribbean? What was he going to do with his ex-wife and former partner lying in the arms of other men?

Between Kathy's outing and Olivia's hug, his head was spinning and as he came to the realization that he was not going to be able to focus on Diana with any amount of effort, his cell phone rang from his suit pocket.

"One second," he said, cutting Diana off in mid-sentence.

He looked at the phone, gave Diana a quick nod and walked to a quiet corner of the restaurant.

"Kathy?" he said into the phone.

"El, hey," Kathy said. "What...uh, what have you been up to?"

"Nothing really. Just out."

"Oh, I see," she said and Elliot could hear a frown sliding across her face. "Well, I saw you and Kathleen talking today and I wanted to know if she's told you anything about what's going on."

"She wasn't spilling."

"Well, she's been acting even stranger lately. She was leaving to go out with her friends on Friday by the time I was getting home at five and then, she wouldn't even look at me all day Saturday. I tried getting her to talk, but she won't talk about it."

"Kath, I don't know what to tell you," Elliot sighed. "You know if she's not opening up to you, she won't with me."

"It's just that she's been so...off lately."

"She's eighteen. When has she not been 'off'?"

"Elliot, I'm serious. I'm worried about her and I just wanted to let you know about it, so that when she's over there Friday, you'll know to look for it."

"Okay," he said. "I will."

"Yeah, well, I don't know if Dickie showed it or not, but he was really grateful for you letting him off punishment yesterday."

"He told me."

"Good, 'cause-"

"Kath, um, I hate to do this, but I'm kind of busy and I have to go."

“Oh, okay. Well, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay.”

“Say ‘hello’ to Olivia for me,” she added.

He repressed a sigh. “I’m not with Olivia.”

“Oh...all right. Well, bye then.”

He stood in the corner a moment more, wondering if he could simply leave the restaurant and never go back to the table. When he did several minutes later, his mind was spinning even faster than earlier.

Of all the women in his life: his wife...ex-wife, who went “out” on Saturdays, his partner who gave long hugs that left him more confused than comforted, his daughters who considering careers he did not want for them, hanging around people he did not want them to and growing up faster than he wanted them to, Elliot wanted to be with Diana the least. As she smiled at him from across the table, green-grey eyes shining and light brown hair catching the candlelight, he realized that not wanting to be with her was not going to stop him from going home with her that night.

Using the glow from neighboring buildings and the glare from her large monitor as her only light, Olivia sat at the desk in her apartment and scrolled through e-mails in her Gmail account. Maya had been sending her “Dirty Joke of the Day” e-mails for weeks and Olivia spent a fair amount of time deleting each of them. She half-wondered if she could block Maya from sending her junk, but decided against it. Every once in a while, Maya had something important to say via e-mail and the dirty jokes were humorous, sometimes.

After her conversation with Maya, Olivia found it too difficult to continue playing her cello and took to cleaning again. She had scrubbed and polished every part of her apartment, all to keep from returning to the haunting faces of the murdered boys.

The case was ever at the forefront of her mind and though she knew she needed a break from it to be able to approach it with a clear head, her eyes would continually dart to the open files that sat in her bag.

Having cleaned every other orifice in the apartment, Olivia turned to her Inbox to perform a final cleaning before going out to surprise her workaholic boyfriend at his office.

With the last junk e-mail deleted, she rose from her desk, but heard a knock at her door. She opened it, expecting to see Jonathan and found Adam in her doorway instead. From the look in his eyes, she could tell immediately that something had gone very wrong in his life.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. I...uh, just came by to return this book of yours.”

Adam handed Olivia her copy of the book she had given him earlier, but she held up her hand.

“No, no. That’s yours now. I told you. It’s a gift.”

“Girl, it was terrible,” he said with a weak smile. “It was a damn shame and I don’t want it in my house.”

“I told you it was bad.”

"But, I work for a publisher and I help 'em toss bad books all the time. This was the kind of crap that we woulda tossed."

She rolled her eyes. "I told you."

"You know, I was raised in the church and all, but I could deal with the blasphemy. But, it wasn't even written well. That's what pissed me off. And the bad guy at the end? Come on now!"

"You should've known better. Not everyone can read a book that's well-written and if *everybody* likes a book that much, you should've known what was coming."

"*You* shoulda known what was coming. You bought that damn thing."

"It was a gift and I couldn't just say 'no.'"

"Well, gift or not, you can have this back."

"You can't give it back to me. It was a gift. You gotta do the same thing I did. Re-gift it."

Adam shook his head. "You played me with this book, Liv."

"Hey, I was just being nice. Give it to your girlfriend. You've been trying to expand her horizons for a while now. Not that that book will do it, but it's a start."

The smile faded from Adam's face and he lowered his eyes to the floor.

"What?" she asked. "What's wrong?"

"Me and uh...Me and Taysia broke up."

"Oh no. When?"

"Today...*right* after church."

"What happened?"

"She just...I don't know."

Olivia beckoned Adam into the apartment and they sat down on her couch.

"Did she say what was wrong?" Olivia said.

Adam shrugged. "She just kept saying she was tired of my shit. Tired of the fact that I lived too far away, tired of me telling her she needs to act her age, tired of *me* not doing more to help *her* out. She said she was tired of all my mess. Like, she don't have problems or something. *She's* the one who's living with some guy she says is *just* a roommate."

Olivia rose from the couch, took two tumblers from her cabinet and poured each of them a Scotch.

"You sure it wasn't just a bad fight?" she said, handing him the glass. "I mean, I've thrown Jonathan out loads of times and eventually, we both calm down and everything's fine."

"She made it real clear that she was done with me. But, is there something wrong with me? Does it make sense that she would just say this to me out of the blue? She...she musta been into something 'cause I'm just not feeling this."

"There's nothing wrong with you. You're a good-looking guy with a great job. She's still struggling through her first year of law school. She'll be kicking herself come Monday."

Adam nodded, but Olivia was unsure if he heard her.

"I think I'm getting tired of this city," he said with a sigh. "The way people treat each other up here...it's just not right. And, all this damn snow is getting too much for me. I'm fit'na go back home."

“Cause of her. Oh come on, Adam. You make it sound like she’s the only woman in all of Manhattan. And, you’ve been living through the snow for years.”

“I’m a country boy, Liv. I can’t handle all this cold.”

“It’s not the cold that’s getting to you. It’s just the fact that you’re missing her. And, you shouldn’t because you’ll meet somebody new... somebody better.”

He shook his head again. “Finding a good, Christian woman in this city? Please. I might as well start digging for oil on Times Square.”

She laughed and they both took a drink.

“You know anybody? Why don’t you set me up with one of your friends?”

“Which ones? The married ones?”

“What about your girl Maya?”

“No way,” she said shaking her head.

“How come?”

“Well, first, she’s not a Christian.”

“I could... I could give on a couple things.”

“Yeah right. But, anyways, she’s too old for you.”

“I don’t mind older women. They can’t be crazy like my old girl.”

“And, she cheats. A lot. I mean I love her to death, but I wouldn’t throw Maya at anyone I cared about.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Trust me, if it’s bad enough that you have to consider dating Maya... you may want to consider simply taking a vow of celibacy.”

They shared another laugh and Olivia turned quickly toward her door as the handle began to shake and turn.

A moment later, Jonathan stepped into the apartment; a loose leather briefcase slung over one shoulder, a dusting of snow in his hair and a surprised, but sour expression on his face.

“Hey!” she said with a smile. “I’m glad to see that the keys work, but you can still call, you know.”

Jonathan nodded and stared at Adam. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Adam said, setting down his glass and standing to shake hands. “Good to see you again.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said, slowly.

“Sit down,” Olivia said, a cheerful spirit in her voice. “Have a drink with us and help me keep Adam from moving back to Texas.”

“Thinking of moving back home?” Jonathan said, his eyes never leaving Adam.

“It’s the cold, you know. I don’t think I can take another winter of all this.”

“Well, New York’s not for everyone,” Jonathan said. “If the people don’t get to you, the cold definitely will.”

“Tell me about it. But, uh, I was just on my way out.”

“You don’t have to leave ‘cause I’m here.”

“Naw, I’m fine,” Adam said. “I’ll catch ya’ll two later.”

Olivia walked Adam to the door and turned toward Jonathan.

“Did you come straight from your office?” she asked looking at the bulk of his briefcase. “Or have you brought all this stuff here to make me help with your work?”

Jonathan remained silent as he took off his coat and hung it over the back of her desk chair.

“Jonathan?” she said. “What’s up?”

“Do you always have other men running in and out of your apartment?”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Why was he here?”

“Because he’s a friend and he just broke up with his girlfriend. He needed a drink.”

“There’s a million bars in the city, but he needed a drink from you?”

“Why are you making such a big deal out of this?”

“He just broke up with his girlfriend and *you’re* the first person he comes to see?”

“He lives just two floors up. I’m sure it was just out of convenience more than anything.”

Jonathan shook his head and a familiar smug smile spread across his face. “You know, it’s absolutely fascinating.”

“What?”

“Jillian told me about this when she first told me about you.”

“About what?”

“How you can be so intelligent one minute and a complete idiot the next.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Olivia! When a man comes to see you after he breaks up with his girlfriend, he’s coming for pity sex.”

“No, not Adam.”

“And what? Is he somehow immune to his own hormones? He’s a man, isn’t he?”

“You *must* be joking.”

“He came here, got you to get the drinks out and figured maybe one thing might just lead to another.”

“You’ve lost your goddamn mind! Adam is not like that. He’s a friend!”

Jonathan laughed. “Yeah, a friend. I’m sure that’s all he thinks he is too...just a friend.”

“I’ve known Adam a lot longer than I’ve known you and I’m telling you, he’s just a friend.” Jonathan stared at her silently and she continued. “If I was going to start something with Adam, why on Earth would I start now?”

“Because he’s coming to you with those sad, big, brown eyes now that his relationship is over!”

“We’ve known each other when we were single at the same time, but nothing’s ever happened. There’s nothing going on. We’re just friends. Why are you so jealous? Do you really think I’m cheating on you?”

“Are you?”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “You know what? I can’t listen to this tonight. Maybe you should leave.”

“No. Why don’t you just tell me what’s going on?”

“Jonathan! There’s nothing going on!”

He glared at her for a solid minute that seemed to stretch for hours. “Who’s Philip?”

Her eyes grew wide and her mouth dropped. "Please...please don't tell me you've been going through my voice mail."

"Who is Philip?"

"What the hell does it matter? I can't even believe you!"

"It matters because when I was leaving yesterday, that crazy old bat next door asked me when you were going on another date with 'her Philip.' Why would she even bother asking that?"

"Because she's lonely and she doesn't have anything better to do!"

"Then, why would you assume that I'd gone through your voicemail when I brought him up? Has he been calling? Have you been expecting messages from him!"

She shook her head. "Fine. Fine! You wanna know who Philip is? Philip is a twenty-nine year old kid who thinks the world of me, whose crazy mother hounded me into having dinner with him last week. Okay? I admit it! I confess! I went to a *chain* restaurant, wearing jeans and an old sweater with someone I didn't even like on a Thursday just to shut his mother up, and now he's leaving me messages everyday, even though I let him down as easy as I could, *because* I'm with you!"

Jonathan looked down at the floor, but a stern expression remained on his face.

"Well," he said after a moment. "Since you're in a confessing mood, tell me this... You've got twenty-somethings chasing after you, guys upstairs and across the hall itching to get their piece and I've seen the way your partner looks at you. God only knows how many others look at you the same way any given day. Tell me...look me in the eyes and tell me: Is there something going on?"

She sighed. "Where is this coming from?"

"Olivia...I don't get to see you that often and it's like every time I do, I have to face all these other guys."

"What other guys?"

"Well, if it's not Adam coming down to chat about his girlfriend, it's Mark across the hall checking in on you, and if it's not him, then I gotta hear about Elliot *this* and Elliot *that*. You know? Almost every night it's 'Elliot and I had to eat *here* today' or 'Elliot said *this* to a perp.' And if it's not all about him, then it's about his daughter who's coming to you about birth control or the one asking questions about what it's like to be a female cop or it's another one asking for cello or piano or violin lessons. And when we're all done talking about your partner's family, it's onto his marriage and how it's falling apart, and then it's back together, and then it's divorce papers and so on and so forth. All I want is you and all I seem to be getting is other men, *especially* your partner."

Olivia crossed her arms in front of her unsure what to say. "There's no one else, Jonathan. It's just you. Adam is a friend; nothing more, nothing less. He is *just* a friend. Philip is...I don't know...going through some kind of crush right now, but I *assure* you there's absolutely nothing going on there. And Mark...God, Jonathan. How could you be jealous of Mark? I mean honestly! Mark? He's the guy across the hall. I don't know if he works for a living or if he's living off his parent's money...I don't even think I know his last name! He's *nobody* to me."

"And your partner? He's somebody to you."

"Jonathan...I've known Elliot a long time."

"Right. And that whole, long time, he's always been the married partner with the kids and the house and the American dream, and I know you well enough to know that

you'd never do anything to break up a happy home. But now...now his wife has left him, taking the kids with her. He's all alone and he's hurting. Any guy would give up something to be with you, but a man who has no one left who cares about him but you? I just don't know..."

"Do you really not trust me at all?"

"I don't...I don't trust him, Liv. I don't like him around you. And...I know he's your partner and I trust *you*, but...I feel like...all he has to do is reach out for you and...and eight years of friendship just trumps me any day of the week."

She rubbed a hand over her face as the memory of her moment with Elliot that morning came flooding back to her.

That was purely platonic, she thought. *Wasn't it?*

"I can't believe I'm even having this conversation," she said taking a step toward him. "You want a confession? Fine. Here goes: yes...I care about Elliot. He's my partner and in the past eight years, we've been through hell and back more times than I can count. But, he's my partner. My *friend*. There's nothing going on between us. If anything, his marriage breaking up and this case especially is moving us farther apart, not closer. I'm not sleeping with him...and how dare you even suggest it."

Silence fell over the pair of them and Olivia looked toward the ceiling to keep the tear that had welled in her eyes from moving down her face.

"I'm sorry," Jonathan said. "I don't...I don't know what to do."

"About what?" she whispered. "What do you have to do?"

He sighed. "I'm so used to women, who when they look at me, I think I'm seeing love in their eyes and all I'm really seeing is dollar signs. Other...other girlfriends have been so pretty, but when I think everything's fine, I come home and find them in *my* bed with some random guy. I look at you and I know money doesn't matter, so all that's left for me to worry about is the other thing, which is really easy to do when I see men coming at you from every direction. Lately...it seems like we're almost drifting apart and in the past distance has always led to me spending every waking second at my office because I can't bear the fact that I'm alone again."

Olivia took a step forward and wrapped her arms around him. "Jonathan. You have absolutely nothing to worry about. I'm not doing anything and I'm not going to. If I seem distant, it's because I've got a million things on my mind right now and half of those are all about work. But, I promise you, I'm not planning anything, especially with my partner. I love *you* and you're the only one I want to say that to."

Jonathan lifted her face to meet his and though they were in her bedroom a moment later, Olivia could not lose the feeling that she had just told the most grievous of lies to someone she cared for very much.

Chapter Eight

Monday January 22, 2007
SVU Squad Room

Jeffrey Drover's image stared back at Elliot from his computer monitor and the detective felt a grimace fall over his face. He had been studying everything he could find

about Drover's past for several hours though it was only six o'clock in the morning. Originally, he had come in early to keep from having to extend his time with Diana, but once he began digging on Drover, he was glad he did. Holding George's analysis on The Boxing Strangler in his hands, Elliot's scorn for Drover grew stronger.

White male, late twenties or early thirties, not a true pedophile who would seek sexual gratification from children, but simply abuses them so that he can control them, and was most likely molested at the same age as the victims.

Elliot could only shake his head at the photo of a young Jeffrey Drover on his screen. After running the name "Drover" through the system, Elliot discovered that a Christopher Drover, aged fifty-six, was serving time at Rikers Island for molesting four thirteen year old boys fifteen years earlier. Elliot did a quick calculation in his head and realized that Jeffrey Drover would have been exactly thirteen fifteen years ago. Upon further research, he found a divorce decree for an Amelia Ryan-Drover who in 1992, had obtained sole custody of her two children named Sarah Emily and Jeffrey Christopher.

Elliot made a phone call to a friend who owed him for helping bail out his kids and minutes later, he was looking into the details of Christopher Drover's crimes. It seemed that Christopher and Amelia Drover were living the American dream on Staten Island when Christopher lost touch with reality and began molesting his son, Jeffrey, when he turned thirteen. The abuse went on for months until one of Jeffrey's friends came forward to announce what Christopher had done to him as well as two other boys, and Drover Senior was sentenced to ten years for each of his victims, all to be served consecutively.

Pity briefly struck Elliot as he re-read the case file on Christopher Drover, but it passed quickly. No matter what had been done to him, nothing gave Drover the right to molest anyone. The profile on their killer now matched Drover perfectly and it was only a matter of time before they would be able to explain what had happened in regards to the DNA mismatch on Jacob Lewendale. He had seen everything from doctors managing to contaminate their own blood to massive mistakes leading to and away from convictions. It was simply the difficulty on discovering the how behind Drover.

He considered calling Olivia when she had not appeared in the precinct by eight, but decided against it. It was not like Olivia to be late, but there could be an entire host of reasons behind where she was and time was of the essence. He knew she would want to drag out the inevitable by wanting to compare Drover and Kreider again, but he wanted a warrant executed for Drover's apartment as soon as possible. With six boys dead and a solid lead, there was no time to be wasted. Within an hour, he had called Casey, received his warrant, alerted Cragen and was heading down Second Avenue with Munch and Fin ready to bust Jeffrey Drover.

Greenwich Village, New York
6:08AM

Olivia rolled onto her side and slid one foot from beneath the covers on her bed to balance her spiking body temperature. Most of the men she had dated preferred to have their space when they slept at night, but Jonathan liked to sleep completely spooned

together. For the most part, she did not mind, finding it rather comforting to wake up with someone right next to her, but every once in a while, she would become feverish and the feel of his warm, heavy body all over her became nearly unbearable.

She knew half of her fever came from simply stress. Stress from the job, stress from peers, stress from life. It came at her from all angles, and as she stared up at the ceiling wondering what horrors the new day would bring, she felt the stress pressing over her most upsetting case. Six young boys had been murdered and while she felt a strong certainty that Kreider was involved, without cooperation from Elliot, she knew they may never apprehend him.

Her alarm clock switched to six-fifteen and she reached around to pull herself from Jonathan's grasp, speculating all the while about what had gone wrong in his childhood to make him cling so tightly in bed. The moment her feet hit the wooden floorboards, the cell phone on her nightstand chirped its irritating song.

She answered it quickly hoping not to wake Jonathan. "Benson."

There was only the sound of someone breathing on the other end for a moment.

"Hello?" Olivia said.

"Yeah...hi," an unfamiliar voice said. "This is Olivia right?"

"Yes, this is Detective Benson," she said her eyebrows furrowed. "Who's this?"

"Um...this is Evelyn. Evelyn Rivers."

"Evelyn, yes. What can I do for you?"

"Yes...well..." There was a hesitation in her voice that caused Olivia to stand as if doing so would allow her to hear better. "I was just...you know, wanting to say...um, hello. So, hello."

Olivia heard her sniffle into the phone. "Evelyn? Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah," she said. "Everything's...everything's fine. Just fine. I just wanted to make sure that you haven't forgotten about me or anything."

"No, I haven't forgotten about you. Are you all right? Do you need anything?"

"Um...no." She heard Evelyn sniff again and was certain by the nasal sound of her voice that she was crying. "Just...you know, saying hello. 'Cause you said I could call...any-anytime, so that's why I...uh, have called."

"It's okay. I want you to call." Olivia paused. "Do you need me to come over?"

"No," she said quickly. "I'm fine, and I, uh, don't want to wake Micah or anything."

"Evelyn, has Micah hurt you? Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm...I'm just fine. I was just calling...to tell you that I was okay."

Olivia nodded into the phone. "Tell you what, Evelyn. I'm going to get dressed and I'm going to come pay you a visit this morning. Okay?"

"Well...you don't have to do that...I mean...if you want to, but everything's fine."

"Yeah, I know, but I want to. So, I'll see you in a little bit, all right?"

"O-okay, Olivia. Th-thank you."

Olivia closed the phone and sighed as she thought about Evelyn Rivers' state. The woman was calling at six in the morning and was obviously already crying. There was no question in Olivia's mind that Micah Diorel had been violent against Evelyn again. It was only a matter of how badly and if he would still be in a woman-beating mood when she arrived at their apartment.

She heard Jonathan rustling in her bed and she turned toward him. "I have to go."
"I understand," he said nodding, but as she crossed the bedroom he sat up in the bed. "Hang on a second. Dinner tonight? The Avant. We've got reservations."

She lowered her head. "At eight?"

"Yeah. You can make it, right? If all you can do is just run out of the precinct, you can just meet me. I'll bring you a dress. I just really would like to make this one."

"I'll try."

He sighed. "That's all I can ask for, I guess."

"I'll call by seven if it's not looking good."

"Okay," he said, but stared at the ceiling all the while.

By the time she reached Evelyn Rivers building, it was after seven and she warily walked into the building whose outer door held a broken lock. "Evelyn?" she said, knocking on the door. "It's Olivia. Open up."

She heard footsteps pace behind the door for a moment before the door locks began to slide and the apartment door opened.

Evelyn stood in the doorway, barefoot, wearing a blue cami and matching pajama pants, with an anxious expression etched on her face. There was a splatter of a rusty red substance on the cami where the spaghetti strap met the rest of the shirt and Olivia could see that Evelyn's lower lip, looking puffy and swollen, held a cut that was just beginning to mend.

"Hi," Olivia said softly.

"Hello. You really didn't have to come. I'm fine, now. Really. Everything's fine."

"You sounded so scared on the phone, Evelyn. I just wanted to see how you were doing for myself. Can I come in?"

Evelyn nodded and opened the door to let her into the apartment.

"Is Micah here?"

"No, he-he's gone. He left for work a little while ago."

"Are you expecting him back any time soon?"

"No," she said shaking her head. "He probably won't be back 'til, like, much later tonight."

"What happened to your lip?"

Her hand immediately flew to the cut on her lip. "Nothing. I don't know. It was just there when I woke up. I guess...I just bit my lip or something."

Olivia nodded. "What's that on your cami? It looks like blood."

Evelyn crossed her arms in front of her chest. "It's not. It's just a stain. I should probably just throw this out." Her voice cracked and sounded as if she were restraining a sob.

"Evelyn, please," Olivia said, taking a step toward her. "Why are you staying here with him? He beat you and he raped you and he's going to keep doing it unless you leave him."

"I-I...I can't."

"Why Evelyn?" she said, taking the young girl by the shoulders. "Why can't you leave him? You're not married or even engaged. You don't have children together. You're a pretty girl. You can find someone else."

Evelyn shook her head. "You...you don't understand. He loves me. I know he does. He just gets angry sometimes, but I know he loves me."

"How can he love you if he's hurting you like this?"

"He...he loves me and I can't just leave him. He'll fall apart without me. I know it. I can't leave him." Olivia gave a deep sigh, but Evelyn continued. "Have you ever been loved by someone? Really loved by someone?"

"Have *you*? Because from what I know about Micah, he can't be the one you're talking about."

"Have *you* ever really loved someone?"

"Trust me," Olivia said. "I understand."

"Then you'd know what I'm talking about. That feeling that you'll never find anyone in the world who'll love you as much as he does...it's strong. And I can't just let all that go."

"But at what cost? I know what it's like. I get it. I really do. He's a good-looking guy and you're trying to do everything to keep from feeling so alone. I understand, Evelyn. I know you think you love him and I know what it's like to think that if you just give him one more chance, he'll change. But, he's not going to change. Guys like Micah don't change. They just get worse and worse."

"Micah...Micah loves me, Olivia."

"Evelyn, the night I first saw you, you told me what really happened and then you changed your mind because you said he'd hurt *you* even more."

"I was...I was angry...at myself and I was on medication."

"You told me what happened before they gave you any medications."

"That was a long time ago."

"It was barely two weeks ago."

"He's changed since then."

"In two weeks?"

"Yes. People can change completely in a day."

"Then, why do you have a cut on your lip?"

Evelyn stared at the floor and her eyes began to tear. "I...I told you. I...um, fell."

"I thought you said it just appeared overnight?"

Evelyn's eyes darted upward, but she was unable to stem the flood of tears.

"Evelyn," Olivia said shaking her head. "Please. Just come with me. Right now. I'll take you someplace safe, where Micah will never find you and he'll never hurt you again. I promise. Just come with me. Please."

Evelyn shook her head and gave Olivia a tear-stained smile. "Everything's fine. Really. I'm...I'm okay."

"Then, why did you call me this morning?"

She swallowed and looked around the room for an answer. As she looked, so did Olivia, who noticed a red-brown stain on the carpet and a curvature in the neighboring wall that looked very much like the indentation of a fist.

"I'm sorry I called you," Evelyn finally said. "But, I won't bother you again."

"No," Olivia said. "Evelyn, you haven't bothered me. In fact, I want you to call. All the time. I want you to call, if you're sad or lonely or feeling hurt in anyway or even if it's raining outside and you're just feeling down. And, I want you to call if everything's really fine too. If the sun's out and shining and birds are singing and children everywhere are laughing, I still want you to call. Please. Any day, at any time. Always call."

The flow of tears coming from Evelyn's eyes was steady as she nodded and showed Olivia the door. Begrudgingly, Olivia passed her and sighed as Evelyn closed the door. She had half a mind to simply kick in the door and drag Evelyn out of the apartment to save her from herself, but she knew she could not. What troubled her most as she headed for the subway entrance was that for every one Evelyn Rivers that they were even notified of, there were still dozens of others who would never be found in time.

When she got to her desk at the 1-6 and began to take off her coat, Cragen approached her.

"Don't bother," he said. "They're executing the warrant on Drover's apartment."

Her jaw dropped. "Based on what? How'd we get a warrant when his DNA didn't match?"

"Casey said the judge didn't care, though I'm not sure if the decision was based on the law or the fact that he was Connor Wickfield's great-uncle. But anyways, you'll want to get down there. If anything incriminating is found, I want all four of you seen bringing him in."

She nodded and headed for the elevators.

When she arrived at Drover's apartment, Elliot, Munch and Fin and several other officers were tearing apart the place. Drover was standing in the corner shaking his head at an officer who was pulling each of his books off the shelves and tossing them onto the floor.

"Oh my God!" Drover said upon seeing Olivia. He crossed the room in two leaps and was standing directly in front of her. "Please! Do something! You've got to call them off. You know I didn't do anything."

Olivia took a step around him and entered the apartment. "Jeff, we have a warrant to search your place, so the best thing to do is to stand back and let us do our job."

"Your job? Come on! What could you possibly be looking for? I didn't do anything!"

"Jeff... just step back."

"You said if I gave you a statement, you people would back off. You promised I wouldn't have anything to worry about!"

"I didn't promise anything."

"Goddamn it! You said if I gave you something, you could write me off. You'd stop looking at me, but here you are tearing through my apartment!"

"Just stay here and let us take care of this," she said and went through the apartment looking for Elliot.

She found him a moment later pulling everything out of Drover's dresser drawers.

"Looks like I'm a little late to this party," she said as she snapped on a pair of latex gloves.

"Yeah," he said. "I tried calling you on the way over here, but I just got your voicemail. You wanna help look through the rest of these drawers? I'll start on the nightstand."

"I went to see Evelyn Rivers this morning," she said opening a drawer full of socks. "She called me at about six saying that she just wanted to say hello and when I went over there, it looked like Diorel had been beating her again."

"Surprise, surprise," Elliot said. "Help me flip the mattress."

“Do you really think we’re going to find anything here?” she said taking one end of the mattress. “I mean if he’s involved, he didn’t kill anyone here.”

“We just need to find something to hold him for a bit, Liv.”

They lifted the mattress off of the box spring and flipped the box spring as well. Under it, they found a worn shoebox, which Elliot scooped up a moment later.

“Look at this,” he said beckoning Olivia. “His little stash. It’s a collection of kid’s pictures.”

“They could be just kids he used to train,” Olivia said. “Some of these look like they’re several years old.”

He rolled his eyes. “Under his bed? Come on, Liv. Work with me a little on this.” He flipped through several of the images. “Look! That’s gotta be Ricky Schrader from a few years ago.”

Olivia took the picture. “You’re right.”

“And, look. Connor Wickfield. And this one too of a whole team...Doesn’t that look like Dominic Hedges?”

“Yeah, it does, but under his bed or not, his lawyer’s going to say that these are just pictures of kids he used to coach.”

“I don’t care what his lawyer has to say. This is enough for an arrest.”

He handed her the box and walked down the hall.

“Found something!” Fin yelled from the bathroom.

Elliot and Olivia appeared at the bathroom room door a moment later.

“Blond hairs all around the sink and...” He bent down to the small trashcan in bathroom with a disgusted expression on his face. “...a bloody, used condom in the trash.”

Elliot nodded at Olivia and walked back to Drover who stood still shaking his head in the corner of the apartment.

“Turn around!” Elliot yelled to him.

“No, please!”

“Jeffrey Drover!” Elliot said as he forced Drover against the wall and took out a set of handcuffs. “You’re under arrest for the murders of Jacob Lewendale, Connor Wickfield, Ricky Schrader, Daniel Richardson, Manny Scheibley and Dominic Hedges. You have the right to remain silent. If you choose to give up that right, anything you do or say can be used in a court of law...”

Olivia stared at the space that her partner and Drover had just occupied as Elliot continued to give Drover his rights, marching him down the hall. She knew there was no way that the arrest would stick, but there was no doubt that Drover’s neighbors had heard their commotion and the arrest, valid or not, was likely to haunt him for the rest of his days.

As she followed Munch and Fin out the door, allowing the other officers to continue combing Drover’s apartment for other evidence, she hoped with her heart that Drover was guilty. If not, Olivia knew that they would have just destroyed an innocent life for nothing.

11:33AM

"My client has been more than cooperative at every step of your investigation," Warnoff said.

Elliot, Olivia, Casey, Drover and his lawyer, Warnoff, all sat staring at one another in the poorly lit interrogation room. Drover was hunched over looking dejected and Olivia felt the same overwhelming pity come over her again.

"I want him arraigned as soon as possible," Warnoff continued. "There's no way a judge, an *unbiased* judge, will let these charges stand."

"We found pictures of all the murder victims stashed under his bed," Elliot said. "Your client has some explaining to do."

"They're just pictures!" Drover said.

"Jeffrey," Warnoff said. "Just stay quiet...As Mr. Drover has already pointed out, yes, he has some photographs, but they are just that. Photographs. Pictures of kids he happened to coach in the past."

"He said he didn't know Manny Scheibley," Elliot said pulling out a picture of fourteen ten-year-old boys in a group. "But here he is."

"That's a coincidence!" Drover yelled. "I keep pictures of all my teams and the kids send me pictures of their new ones when they get older. They all play in the same damn league! It's just a coincidence that that kid was in there!"

"Why keep them under your bed?" Elliot said. "A little night-time fun?"

"All right, that's enough," Warnoff interrupted before Drover could yell again. "My client has given a valid explanation for those photos and since I'm sure you didn't find anything related to any kind of kiddie porn in his apartment with your grievously obtained warrant, I don't think you have a leg to stand on."

"Well, we found some hair in his bathroom," Olivia finally said. "Our lab tech's just got back with the analysis on it and it belongs to Connor Wickfield."

"I *knew* Connor Wickfield," Drover said.

"Well enough for his hair to be found in your bathroom?"

"Come on! This is ridiculous! You fucking promised me--"

"Don't get excited," Warnoff said. "If they had anything solid, we wouldn't even be talking."

"The case is building up quite nicely, actually," Casey said. "Your client neglected to mention that he had one of the victims in his apartment recently. The victim that he *found* in the park."

"I was in shock!" Drover yelled. "I was running that night and I just found him. I didn't know what to think."

"Jeff," Warnoff said. "Shut up. Now, we all know there's a million reasons why one of the victims' hair could be found in the bathroom."

"Including the probable reason," Elliot said. "Which is that Drover invited him over for a little chat before he killed him."

"Fine. You have your theories, but you've got quite a few hurdles to jump through before you've got anything solid on my client. Or are we all forgetting that the DNA analysis on one of your victims doesn't match or even that pesky false identification we dealt with last week? Not to mention that you accounted for my client's whereabouts for the time that this last kid was killed."

Elliot glanced at Olivia, but she kept her gaze fixed on Drover.
“Your case is weak at best and I want my client arraigned. Now.”

The sharp clicks of a heeled shoe coming down upon cold, grey tiles alerted the four lead SVU detectives of Casey Novak’s approach. She brushed past several uniformed officers and made a beeline for the set of four desks that stood in the middle of the squad room, angry, but not at those she sought.

“You don’t look happy,” Elliot said when Casey appeared beside his desk.

“I’m not,” Casey said. “I just got a reprimand from Arthur Branch for going to Judge Headdley for Drover’s warrant. Apparently, I showed judgment unbecoming of a New York district attorney by asking Headdley for the warrant when I knew that his impartiality was questionable considering the proximity to the case.”

“But, if the judge couldn’t be impartial,” Olivia said, “he shouldn’t have signed the warrant.”

“That’s what I was going to say, but in order to keep my job, I kept my mouth shut. And, to make matters worst, the arraignment judge cut Drover loose and she threw out the case.”

“Goddamn it!” Elliot yelled slamming his hands on his desk. “What do we have to do to get this guy behind bars?”

Munch simply shook his head. “Well, we barely had anything to go on in the first place. And the hairs and pictures were a stretch at best.”

“I wanna go see the Whickfields,” Elliot said standing. “I want to know just how well Drover knew Connor. If Drover was close enough to Connor to have him at his apartment for any length of time, we should’ve been told right from the start.”

“Their son had just been murdered,” Olivia said. “And you remember the mother’s reaction when we told her what happened to Connor. I’m not surprised they forgot something.”

“I’m going,” Elliot said, coat in hand. “You coming?”

The question spoke volumes. Following Elliot would mean that Olivia had his back, if even for the time being. Staying put, meant that she was standing firm and stubborn and ensuring that another fight lay in the near future.

Olivia stared at him a moment more before rising with her own coat and heading toward the elevators.

Minutes later, she and Elliot were driving toward the Whickfield residence on West 66th Street.

“You should’ve called me before you all went to Drover’s,” Olivia said.

“I did,” Elliot said. “You didn’t pick up.”

“You called once and you didn’t even leave message. I could’ve been there earlier if I didn’t come all the way back up here to get the word from Cragen.”

“I didn’t have time to track down wherever the hell you were. I had a killer to catch.”

She felt her eyes narrow at Elliot. “You make it sound like I was lying around until nine, just waiting for the day to start.”

“I know,” he said. “You and Evelyn Rivers. I remember.”

“And I can see you’re sympathetic about it.”

“I would be if it was worth a damn, but we both know what’s going to happen to her. It would’ve been better if you were there when we got to Drover’s. Maybe you could’ve calmed him down sooner...considering what you told him on Saturday.”

“What’d I tell him on Saturday?”

“You tell me,” Elliot said, his tone biting. “You’re the one who got him to spell out every place he went on Friday. You seemed to’ve developed some kind of rapport with him and I’m suspecting it might have something to do with promising him that we’d back off if he told you where to go.”

“I didn’t promise him a thing. I told him it might *help*, but that’s all.”

“Yeah, that’s all.”

“Elliot, I didn’t promise him a goddamn thing.”

“I’m not saying that you did, but I still think it was stupid of you to actually trace his footsteps.”

“Why not? Now, we know exactly where Drover was during Manny Scheibley’s murder. Something you might’ve found *useful* before running out to tear Drover’s place apart this morning.”

Elliot turned toward her. “How the hell did you know that he wasn’t setting you up for something?”

“He didn’t. He’s not clever enough to do something like that.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll give you that, but you had no way of knowing. What would be better for a killer than to set up one of the cops who have been tracking him down? He could’ve been leading wherever and you just walked right into whatever he laid out.”

“What are you kidding me? In the middle of the day? At movie theatre and a bar?”

“Look,” he said. “Let’s just...stop, all right? I don’t want to get into this here.”

“We’re not getting into anything. I just asked a simple question and you started questioning my ability to do my job.”

“I’m not questioning anything,” he said. He opened his mouth to continue, but paused and allowed the heat of argument to cool to a low simmer before he spoke again. “Is there something bothering you? ‘Cause I know you’re not picking a fight over me not calling you earlier.”

Olivia shook her head wanting to say something about her frustration over the Kathleen situation, but she said nothing.

“I’ve noticed that you’ve been a little...I don’t know, off, for lack of a better word.” He leaned toward her. “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged. “Maybe it’s just that time...”

“No,” he said with a small smirk. “I know it’s not that. Something with Mr. Moneybags?”

She rolled her eyes. “No, we’re...we’re fine.”

“What is it, then? I know it’s something other than Drover.”

She looked him in the eyes and sighed knowing that she would need to tell him about Kathleen eventually, but she knew that it was neither the time nor the place. “It’s not. Don’t worry about it.”

Elliot nodded, though he was tired of hearing women tell him “don’t worry about it.” As he thought about what might be troubling his partner, he remembered Lizzie

telling him about Kathleen's breakfast date and also the way that Kathleen looked when Olivia came to get him that past Friday. He doubted the two issues were related, but he felt the stress pressing on him either way. Figuring that the moon must be causing some strange tides or something of that nature, Elliot shrugged off the issue and decided that all the women in his life were just going crazy simultaneously.

Within the hour, they were sitting at the Whickfield's kitchen table discussing Drover.

"Yes," Mr. Whickfield said. "Jeff and Connor were close, but it didn't seem all that important at the time. You'd just told us that our only child was dead. What did it matter how close he was with his soccer trainer?"

"It matters," Elliot said, "because we could have saved some time in trying to track down your son's killer."

"Why Jeff?" Mrs. Whickfield said, a handkerchief crumpled in her hand. "We told you he wasn't involved right from the beginning."

"Our evidence was pulling us in a specific direction," Elliot said.

"What evidence?" Mr. Whickfield said. "On Jeff? That's ridiculous. He brought Connor home from their practice and would have all the boys over for sleepovers and even take them camping. If something was wrong with him, this wouldn't have been the first time we would have heard about it."

"We taught Connor about the predators that were out there," Mrs. Whickfield continued. "If Jeff was doing...something to him or any of the other boys, Connor would have told us."

"We have to go where our evidence leads us."

Mrs. Whickfield sniffed into her handkerchief. "I don't care about your evidence. You barely asked us about Jeff and we told you what kind of person he was... He called us Saturday, you know? Came by here and just cried with us. Like he'd lost his own son. Does that sound like a person who would murder a thirteen-year-old boy?"

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another as the question posed seemed more than valid and neither felt comfortable saying anything more. Olivia took a photo array from her coat pocket and slowly slid it across the table toward the Whickfields.

"Do any of these other boys look familiar to you?" she said.

"Who are these kids?" Mr. Whickfield asked as he looked at the small array.

"They are the other victims who've been murdered the same as Connor," she said. "We're looking for some kind of link between all of them to help us find this killer."

Taking the photo in her hand, Mrs. Whickfield sighed. "All these babies..."

Mr. Whickfield shook his head and narrowed his eyes at Elliot and Olivia. "I don't recognize any of them."

"Wait," Mrs. Whickfield said as Olivia reached to take back the photo array.

"This one...at the top. I think his name's Jacob. Yes, that's it. They used to play on the same team several years ago. I remember him because for half of the season he wouldn't come to the Friday evening or Saturday morning practices because he's Jewish, but I think they might've gotten over it a little later. His father brought him one Saturday morning and I remember being surprised that he wasn't a Jew too. Apparently, it was just the mother."

Olivia nodded and pulled out the second array that she had put together. "Is there anyone in here that you might recognize?"

Together the Whickfields stared at the picture. Mr. Whickfield shook his head again and walked across the room to stare at the photo of Connor that still sat on the fireplace mantel, but Mrs. Whickfield spoke after a moment.

“Yes, this one,” she said. “I’ve seen him before at some of Connor’s games. The only reason I remember him is because he kind of looks like Jeff. I figured he might have been a relative or something or maybe a cousin or uncle of one of the other boys on the team.”

With Kreider’s image identified on the photo array, Olivia took it back and placed it into her coat pocket saying “thank you” in the process.

“Is there anything else you can think of?” Elliot said. “Anything that you might not have thought of as important at the time?”

“Like what?” Mrs. Whickfield said, her eyes growing redder by the minute. “We’ve told you everything we can think of to help you find this...this man, but you haven’t, have you?”

“Your son’s case is at the top of our list,” Olivia said.

Mr. Whickfield rounded on her. “That’s not what I’ve been hearing. It was in the newspaper...some politician’s daughter was attacked in a hotel somewhere and you people were called off looking for my son’s murderer to help her. If you call that putting Connor at the top of your list, you can save it. We can’t even bury him...put him at rest yet and you’re telling me he’s at the top of your list! I find it absolutely unbelievable!”

Olivia swallowed and looked at Elliot, not sure what to say to the grieving man before her.

“I assure you,” Elliot said standing. “We’re working this case non-stop. We’ll find the man responsible.”

Mr. Whickfield stood in front of Elliot as if sizing him up. “Then, I expect to see results. And soon.”

Lewendale Residence
73 West 69th Street
5:46PM

Elliot could not help but notice that all the mirrors in the Lewendale home still seemed to be covered. He knew very little about Jewish traditions, but he felt a slight pang in his chest each time he passed a cloth-covered frame, knowing they stood as signs of mourning.

In the past three hours, he and Olivia had spoken to each of the kids on Connor Whickfield’s soccer team again, this time armed with a photo array holding Kreider’s image. Each teammate identified Kreider as being seen at either a game or a practice at one point or another, but each had assumed that Kreider was the relative of someone else on their team or the opposing team. After taking a small break to regroup and a small tiff over whether or not they should approach them having learned so little about their son’s crime, he and Olivia decided to speak to Jacob Lewendale’s parents again.

“Why can’t you just leave us be for a little while?” Mrs. Lewendale said with a wavering voice. “We just want to mourn our son in peace. Is that so much to ask?”

"We wouldn't be here if we didn't think it was absolutely necessary," Olivia said sitting across from the Lewendales. "But, if you don't help us now, more families will suffer just like yours has."

"You don't know anything about suffering!" Mrs. Lewendale scathed. "My son... my *child* is gone. Taken away from me for no reason and you have nothing to tell us about the person who did it."

"We just have a few more questions," Olivia said softly.

"Why do you have to keep coming?" Mr. Lewendale said matching Olivia's tone. "We've told you everything we know. Unless you're coming to tell us that you've found the man responsible, we've got nothing to say to you."

"Mr. Lewendale, please," Elliot said. "We just--"

"Have a few questions," he interrupted. "Yes, I've heard. Do you have children, Detective?"

"Yes," Elliot said. "I have four and I know what you're feeling."

"No, you don't," Mr. Lewendale said. "You *have* your four children. You get to see them again... watch them all grow up... become a grandfather. I'll never see my son again. I'll never watch him graduate from high school or watch him marry the love of his life. Nothing! My life has been taken from me and you people are standing around here asking questions."

"Mr. Lewendale," Olivia began, "there have been six boys that have been murdered so far just like Jacob and it appears that Jacob was the very first."

"How is that important?" he said. "Is the fact that Jacob was first supposed to console us!"

"It's important because it means there was something about Jacob specifically that attracted him to the killer and it is only going to be through Jacob that we find the person responsible for murdering all these boys."

Mr. Lewendale rubbed a hand over his face and sighed as he sat down next to his wife.

"Now," Olivia said as she showed them the photo array containing Kreider's image. "Do you see anyone you recognize?"

Mrs. Lewendale looked at the array first and gasped. "My...my goodness."

"What it is?" Olivia asked, eyes wide.

"That's...that's Owen. My sister's son. Why on Earth would he be in here?"

"Did he attend Jacob's games?" Elliot asked.

"I don't think so," Mr. Lewendale said. "We knew he still lived in the city and asked him to come just so that he could have some sense of family. We figured we could make a bit of an outing out of it and allow Jacob to get to know his cousin some, but we probably haven't seen him in close to a year."

"Why's that?"

"He's an odd person," Mrs. Lewendale said. "He...Owen hasn't had the best life. His father left when he was still young and my sister died a short time later. No one else in the family has spoken to him since my sister died ten years ago."

"Did Jacob know him at all?" Olivia asked.

She shook her head. "I don't see how he could have. The last time he would've seen him was when Jacob was still...just a baby."

“Why develop a relationship?” Elliot said. “If your sister’s been gone all this time and it doesn’t seem like you knew him well before...I don’t understand.”

Mrs. Lewendale pursed her lips before speaking. “When I lost my mother, it got me thinking about family. My sister and I weren’t very close and I’d never gotten a chance to know Owen really. It just seemed like as good a time as any to start, but he stopped returning the phone calls and he only stopped by just the one time. But...but, why would you have Owen’s picture in here?”

Olivia and Elliot exchanged glances.

“You said that Owen’s had a hard life,” Olivia said as if Mrs. Lewendale’s question had not been said. “What did you mean by that?”

Mrs. Lewendale looked at her husband who stood and crossed the room before she began to speak. “Well, his father never really accepted the fact that Rosalyn was Jewish.”

“How is that significant?”

“Because he insisted that Owen be raised a Christian, which might have been fine, but considering...”

“Considering what?”

“He was adopted, so he wasn’t really theirs anyway. Rosalyn had known for years that she couldn’t have children, so they adopted early on. Sometimes, I felt like she was sorry she had since Owen had so many problems.”

“What kind of problems?”

Mrs. Lewendale shrugged. “Mostly disciplinary, I think. Rosalyn was never very specific.”

“And you never developed any kind of relationship with him?”

“No. Owen was fifteen by the time Jacob...by the time Jacob was born. I tried to get to know him about that time, but since Owen wasn’t raised Jewish...he was just sort of outside the rest of the family.”

“Is that why no one in the family’s spoken to him?” Olivia asked with an eyebrow raised.

“Well, it’s not the *only* reason, but it’s part of it. I mean, when do you normally see your family? Religious holidays, right? What’s the point in inviting him for Rosh Hashanah when he’s not Jewish?”

“And, that’s why you tried to...entice him with Jacob’s soccer games? Something secular to bring him into the fold?”

“We tried, but like I said, he hasn’t returned any more of our calls

“Were you at all aware that Owen’s been trying to locate his birth mother?”

“No,” Mrs. Lewendale said. “I don’t imagine he would’ve told me anyway. But, you still haven’t answered my question. Why would you have Owen’s picture in here? You don’t think he’d hurt Jacob, do you? I mean, he’s never even seen Jacob. Why would he want to hurt him?”

A new layer of white snow had descended on the city, leaving its downy blanket to gather on lightly used sidewalks and building awnings. The normal electric whirl of the city seemed dulled by the pale cover and Olivia continued throwing expectant glances

toward the squad room windows that showed nothing but darkness, vaguely worried that her noisy city seemed oddly quiet.

She sat typing her notes from her discussions with the many families she and Elliot had spoken to that day while Elliot had gone to find more information on what was discovered in Drover's apartment. She was annoyed that he felt the need to do so considering the weight of all that they had learned about Kreider, but knew it was necessary to ensure that the Drover issue was finally put to rest. The evening had turned to night quickly after leaving the Lewendales and she had taken a break from her notes to tell Jonathan that she would not be making their dinner date that evening. He had suggested that she simply bring her work with her and he would "allow" her to work while they waited for their dinner, but she declined.

"God, Liv," he had said. "I've had these plans for a while, you know?"

"I know and I'm sorry, but I can't get out of here just for dinner."

"Just for dinner? Olivia, this was important."

"Jonathan, I'm sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

He sighed. "Don't worry about it."

But she did worry and with each passing moment, she worried about him even more. He had used the word "important" to describe dinner and she felt her insides burn and her breath catch at the thought.

What was so important about dinner?

As she typed, the same question rolled in her mind. He had planned evenings for them previously, many of which had had to be cancelled, but he described this one as being important. Olivia shook her head involuntarily as her fingers flew back and forth across her keyboard. "Important" could only mean one of two things: either he had planned for her to meet his family or he was planning to "pop" the question.

"Oh God," she said aloud and she found herself in the ladies' room a moment later bringing up her dinner into a porcelain fixture. Thankful that she was one of the only females to be found for several floors at that time of night, she sank to the floor and closed her eyes feeling suddenly very foolish.

Any other woman in the world would have felt ecstatic at the idea of marrying a Hallowsay, but Olivia felt her skin prickle and her insides squirm at even the memory of the thought. It was not that she was afraid to get married, but it was everything that led up to saying "I do" and the concept of "forever" that troubled her. She was no stranger to having a ring set upon her finger by someone who loved her, but she also did not want to repeat any of her past mistakes, and watching her partner go through the hardship of divorce when he had tried so hard to keep it together, made the idea of marriage even harder to imagine.

She loved Jonathan more than she had any other man she had ever dated, but there were problems in their relationship that were hard to allay. Even before their lengthy discussion the previous night, Olivia knew he was often jealous of every man with whom she came in contact and she found it more aggravating than endearing. There was also the problem that he could be smug, arrogant and even pretentious from time to time, to the point that she could not stand to be around him, however, when he was in an understanding mood, she could let all of her worries melt away with his touch.

All of his problems notwithstanding, she could not forget those of her own. The job always came first, and, as described by a former co-worker and former flame, would

be the only “marriage” she would ever know. She could barely find the time to meet Jonathan for an occasional dinner that he had been planning for some time. How would she keep a marriage together?

“Liv?” she heard Elliot’s voice say from the restroom outer door.

“Yeah?” she said jumping off the floor.

He opened the door a crack and peeked his head inside the room. “Can I come in?”

“Yeah, I’m...just washing my hands.” She turned on one of the faucets and hoped that the colour would return to her face before he was able to look at her too closely.

“Were they able to turn up anything else at Drover’s?”

“Well, nothing new,” he said looking at her through her reflection in the mirror, “but you wouldn’t believe what we found on those pictures we found under his bed.”

“What’d you find?” she said lathering her hands for the second time.

“Old semen on some of the pictures,” Elliot said. “I’m willing to bet anything he takes them out every once in a while just to pleasure himself.”

She refused to say anything trying to keep the image of Drover masturbating to pictures of ten-year-old boys from forming in her head.

“I think we might be able to get him back in here and hold him for a bit.”

Olivia continued rubbing her hands under the lukewarm water, but said nothing.

“At least while we talk to Kreider again,” Elliot continued, but then paused staring at Olivia’s reflection. “Is...is there something wrong, Olivia?”

“No,” she said still facing the mirror. “Everything’s fine.”

“You look a little pale. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Elliot, I’m fine.”

“Is this something about that doctor’s appointment you’re hoping I’m going to just forget about?”

She turned off the faucet and whirled around, her hands dripping onto the tiled floor.

“Elliot,” she began. “It was just a doctor’s appointment and there’s nothing wrong. I just came in here ‘cause I had to pee and now, I’m done. I’m fine.”

“You’re not *fine*, Liv,” he said, putting his hands into his pockets. “Maddox said he saw you *running* for the bathroom. Are you going to tell me what’s going on or what?”

“Well, you know,” she said, drying her hands. “I *did* drink that whole liter of water today...”

His expression remained stoic and fixed on her and she sighed. Her eyes rested on the floor just in front of Elliot’s shadow and she felt every urge to simply fling her arms around him again and tell him everything from how his little girl was not so little anymore to the fact that she was near terrified of allowing Jonathan to get close enough to her to ask her to marry him. Instead of doing either, she decided to simply get on the defensive and change the subject.

“There’s nothing to discuss, Elliot,” she said after a minute’s silence. “I had to use the bathroom. I’m allowed to do that every once in a while, aren’t I?”

“You can try to change the subject all you want, Liv, but I’m going to keep pressing until you give it up.”

“There’s nothing to give up,” she lied.

“The hell there’s not. I *know* you, Olivia.”

“Look, Elliot. I don’t even know what we’re arguing about at this point. If we’re going to talk about something, let’s talk about the fact that you still want to waste more time on Drover when we’ve already got so much on Kreider.”

Elliot stared at Olivia directly in the eye until she broke the contact and turned her attention to the brown paper towel she was using to dry her hands. He knew from Olivia’s body language that she was hiding something deep and her attempt to quickly change the subject was part of the show. Taking a deep breath, he decided to play along hoping that she would eventually tell him what was wrong before he had to shake it out of her.

“We’re not *wasting* time with Drover. We’d just be keeping an eye on him while we’re gathering more on Kreider.”

“You talk about *me* wasting time,” she said sardonically as she tossed the crumpled towel into the nearby trash. “We’ve had positive IDs on Kreider for most of the day. More than half the kids we talked to ID’d Kreider which is especially significant because it wasn’t like they saw one or the other and just didn’t know it. They all know Drover and they could identify Kreider as a specific person who visited that complex.”

“And, the fact that Drover jerks off to pictures of kids he used to coach makes no never mind to you?”

“Is it even his semen?”

“Of course it is. That was the first thing I had them check.”

“What about that condom we found in his trash? I’m assuming that didn’t turn up anything, so that’s why you’re on about these pictures.”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed at her. “No. The condom had vaginal cells on it which doesn’t make me hate him any less. If he’s turned on by teenaged boys, then I’m sure he messed some woman up pretty good because she wasn’t have what he wanted. And aside from that, you’re forgetting something *significant* about these IDs today: the Lewendales.”

“I didn’t forget about them,” she said. “In fact, they pretty much seal the deal on Kreider since he’s Jacob Lewendale’s cousin.”

“Exactly. She pointed out Kreider immediately from photo array. Don’t you think she might’ve noticed if her estranged nephew randomly appeared at one of her son’s soccer games? If she noticed him instantly from a photo, wouldn’t it be fair to assume that she would notice him standing around among the throngs of other parents? But, she didn’t, did she? You heard it just like I did. Hadn’t seen him in over a year, which means that there’s a low possibility that Kreider would’ve had a chance to even see what Jacob looked like let alone track him down and attack him. Drover had a *relationship* with most of the victims and a deeper one than probably the parents knew about with Connor Whickfield.”

“Elliot,” she said taking a step forward. “No matter what you may think about Drover, his prints and his DNA don’t match Jacob Lewendale, but we just found out that Kreider is blood relative. Everything lies on Jacob since he was the first and I’m not willing to put Kreider on hold until we get DNA from him.”

“If the killer was a relative, Melinda would’ve told us if there was some kind of match between the DNA of Jacob and the killer. She didn’t because there wasn’t.”

“But, there wouldn’t have to be, Elliot,” Olivia said. “Kreider and Jacob share a grandmother, not a mother. There’s only a fifty percent chance that they would share the same X-genes since they are only related through their mothers.”

Elliot shook his head. “I’m not sure I’m willing to buy that just yet. Deborah Lewendale didn’t seem that upset that her ‘odd’ nephew was in that photo array.”

“She kept asking me about it.”

“Out of curiosity, not concern.”

“Elliot, she’s grieving for her child. I’m not surprised that her emotions are all over the place.”

“I don’t want to stop looking at Drover with just this.”

“Just this! Kreider is blood relative of the first victim.”

“A relative she picked out the moment she saw him! Now, if Kreider was at that soccer complex, she would’ve noticed him being anywhere near Jacob, so now we’re left to piece together how Kreider would’ve even seen him.”

“As opposed to the *downhill* battle we’ve got with Drover’s DNA and prints not matching and his amazing praise from every person we’ve spoken to?” Her sarcastic words were biting and he glared at her in return.

“As opposed to dealing with someone who’s got proximity to each of the victims and who’s a *confirmed* pedophile!”

Olivia gave a deep sigh as a young officer quickly flung open the door to the restroom.

“Oh, sorry,” she said looking surprised at Elliot standing directly in front of her.

“No, Alexa. I’m leaving,” he said, throwing Olivia a dirty look and walking out of the restroom.

“Elliot, fine,” Olivia said back at her desk. “We don’t drop Drover just yet, but you and I know both know it’s going to take far more than that to get an arrest on him, especially considering that the judge just threw out the case today.”

“He’s a pedophile, Olivia, or don’t we investigate them anymore?”

“A little semen on some old pictures isn’t going to convince any grand juries. His lawyer will have half a million reasons for that if we could even get that past a judge.”

“I have faith in Casey.”

“As do I, but wouldn’t you like to have something a little more concrete this time before we send her to the wolves again?”

“Fine,” he said, resting his arms at the back of his head as he leaned in his chair.

“What do you suggest we do?”

“I want to talk to Martha Harvand again.”

“The woman who lives above Kreider? Why?”

“The first time we talked to her, we’d been answering phones all day and we were both so out of it that we didn’t even pick up on the fact that Drover and Kreider looked alike. I say we go visit her first thing in the morning when we’re fresh. Make her tell us what it was about Kreider that made her even decide to call in the first place. If she can’t give us anything legitimate, we sit every single boy with Huang and figure out what, if anything, Drover’s been doing.”

Elliot nodded. “And, if she’s got anything serious to say?”

“Then, won’t it be convenient that she lives right above Kreider? That way we’ve only got to walk down a flight of stairs to throw those cuffs around him.”

“Okay,” he said with a sigh. “First thing tomorrow.” She gave him a nod and he continued. “You ready to go or are you meeting the Million-Dollar Baby somewhere?”

At the mention of Jonathan, Olivia felt her eyes grow involuntarily wide and she tried to tear her eyes away from Elliot.

“Now see. You look like your stomach just dropped three floors. What’s going on?”

She sighed to regain her composure. “It’s nothing. He’s just...stressing me out a bit.”

“Why?” Elliot said, his tone lowering into the one he reserved for when he heard that someone was troubling a member of his family. “What’s wrong? What’s he done?”

Olivia shook her head. “Nothing specific. It’s just the nature of the relationship. You don’t have to worry about it, okay? I’m fine.”

Again, Elliot met Olivia’s gaze until she finally broke contact to stare at her computer screen.

“All right,” he said. “Well, when you’re ready to talk, you know where to find me.”

“Thanks,” she said with a small smile and she reached into her bag. “Oh, I almost forgot. I brought these for Lizzie. If she plays it right, there won’t be a dry eye in the house.”

She handed him several sheets of music and he nodded as he leafed through them. He could tell immediately that either the music was very old or the print job was of a lower quality as the piece’s title, “Lately,” had faded significantly. To the right of the title, in small bold letters read “by S. Wonder” and directly under it read the line, “as composed by O. Benson.”

He glanced up at her, smiling. “Did you make this yourself?”

“Yeah,” she said nonchalantly packing her things into her bag. “I made it a long time ago and I found it when I was cleaning yesterday. I’m not exactly sure what she means by cool, but I’d made it so that the accompaniment doesn’t overshadow the whole melody. If she doesn’t like it, let me know and I’ll try to find something else...cool.”

“Trust me,” he said shaking his head and still smiling. “This’ll be fine.”

They headed toward the elevators, but Elliot could not stop smiling at the thought of his partner reworking Stevie Wonder in her younger years.

“My partner composes music,” he said softly more to himself than to Olivia.

“I know,” she replied. “How will you face the world now?”

He laughed. “So, what else can you do that I don’t know about?”

“Well...I can knit.”

“Knit? So, where’s my sweater?”

“Sorry, only baby blankets. But, I can write the preamble to the Constitution with my feet.”

“Just the preamble to the Constitution, eh? When did you learn you could do that?”

“The guys who lived across the hall from Maya and I in college liked to bet on things. They suggested I do something stupid with my feet and I made it up as went along. I won fifty bucks for doing that.”

He shook his head. “You had too much time on your hands during college, Olivia.”

“But, when else are you supposed to learn useless crap like that?”
“Well, I won’t call it useless. That foot writing thing may come in handy one day...”

The telephone was ringing in its stand as Elliot walked through the door to his apartment and he crossed the living room in three steps to answer it.

“El?” a male voice said when Elliot picked up the phone.

“Bryce!” Elliot said brightly to his older brother. “Hey. I just walked in.”

“Yeah,” Bryce said, his voice eerily similar to that of Elliot’s. “Just the customary call to remind you to call Ma this Friday for her birthday. Even though you like to pretend to forget every year.”

“No, see last year I really did forget.”

“Yeah, there’s always something.”

“You’re a cop,” Elliot said. “You know what’s up.”

“That’s the beauty of being a cop out in the ‘burbs. Less hassle altogether. Speaking of hassle, how’s that case with those kids coming?”

“Which one? There’s always some case with some kids.”

“The one where I saw you on TV the other day.”

“Still got a couple people we’re looking at.”

“Humph. Well, I’ll be looking to see your big head in the papers again.”

“Trust me, you’ll see it,” Elliot said, smiling into the phone. “Hopefully, it’ll be something positive.”

“How come you’re in such a good mood tonight?” Bryce said. “Normally, you sound like a strong wind might blow you over.”

“Don’t know. Just in a good mood, I guess.”

“How are Kathy and the kids?”

Elliot sighed. “See, Bryce. You always know how to kill the mood.”

“So, sue me. How’s Maureen doing in school? She’s ‘sposed to graduate soon, isn’t she?”

The conversation with his brother continued for another hour as they discussed Maureen’s impending graduation, Kathleen’s mood swings and Dickie sneaking out of the house and his eventual apology. When talk turned to Lizzie’s insistence on being called Elizabeth, Elliot remembered the piano music that now lied on his coffee table and Bryce noticed that Elliot sounded like his spirits were lifting.

“What’s with you tonight?” Bryce asked. “You’re sounding all cheerful again?”

Elliot laughed. “Just thinking about music...”

“Music? Thought Dad would have stamped all that out of you?”

“Not all of it, besides, it’s not my music. Lizzie’s...well, Olivia’s. She gave Lizzie something to play at her next recital.”

“And that’s got you happy all of a sudden?”

“Well,” he said with a shrug. “It’s just weird how you can know a person for years, but realize you barely know anything about them.”

“Why’s that? You don’t know your partner?”

“This music she gave Lizzie...she wrote it herself.”

“She writes music now?”

“Apparently. I mean, it’s Stevie Wonder, but she wrote new piano music to it, probably back when she was in college. I don’t know...it’s just the little things that surprise you sometimes.”

“Is this the same woman I met when me and Nolan were moving you in?”

“It is.”

“Uh-huh...”

“What?” Elliot said.

“Nothing. I’m just...uh, thinking that’s all.”

“About what?”

“You’re all happy all over her music?”

“Yeah. It’s like I said...it just makes you think.”

“Uh-huh,” Bryce said before going completely silent.

“Hey! I know what you’re thinking and it’s not like that. I’m not looking at Olivia like that and nothing’s going on. She just handed me this music that she composed herself and I was...I don’t know...awestruck.”

“Awestruck...yeah, okay.”

“What ‘okay?’” Elliot said, getting aggravated. “I just find it fascinating that she would even think to write music let alone give it up so freely. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Guess not,” Bryce said. “Though, that story would be a little more believable if I didn’t already know what your partner looks like.”

Elliot rolled his eyes. “C’mon. It’d be fascinating no matter what she looked like. Even if she was some ugly troll who composed music, I’d still think it was interesting.”

“Like I said: oh-kay.”

Elliot sighed and quickly changed the subject to how Bryce’s kids, all of whom were about Maureen’s age, were doing. After he hung up ten minutes later, Elliot sat staring at the phone, Bryce’s words rolling around in his head. He hated any implication that relations between he and Olivia were anything but platonic, even when the idea came from people who did not know them both. Bryce had met Olivia just one time and although he never said anything specific to Elliot about her, his tone said more than enough.

He shook his head at the thought of his brother’s suggestion and rose from the couch to approach the nearby closet. Hardly used because he rarely had company outside of his children, Elliot had used the coat closet as extra storage more than anything else. He rifled through some boxes he never bothered to unpack until his hand came upon something long and heavy. Giving it a strong tug, he managed to pull the black 88-key keyboard out of the closet.

Dust floated throughout the apartment for a moment as the light layer that had settled on the keyboard was disrupted by a wave of Elliot’s hand. He quickly set up the keyboard near his window, trying to remember if he had even turned it on since he had moved to the other end of Woodside.

The keyboard, an item scrimped and saved for by he and Kathy for close to a year before buying, was the only that thing that he and Kathy had actually argued over when he moved out of his house. She had stayed at her sister’s home throughout his departure,

as he assumed she hoped to make it seem like nothing significant had happened, but when she saw that the keyboard was missing, she called him immediately.

She demanded that he return it because she and the kids used it more than he did, but when he argued that she had the whole piano and that he wanted the kids to have something on which to practice when they were at his *new* place, Kathy did not have a retort.

He plugged in the massive instrument and pulled a chair up to it. After a moment of staring at the old notes on Olivia's sheet music, he sighed, went into his bedroom and pulled a pair of reading glasses out from their case in his nightstand. He preferred not to use them, thinking that they made him look old and had once voiced his detest over the glasses to Olivia. She allayed some of his aging fears by calling him "sexy" while he wore them and even winked at him in the process.

Elliot laughed at the memory and settled back at the keyboard. As he spread his long fingers across the black and white keys, he had a sudden flash to his youth where Sister Hannah would slap his hands with a ruler each time he made mistake on the piano and he took a deep breath to clear the thought.

Olivia's notes soon began to echo out of the electric instrument and he smiled as he continued to play. He was rougher with the fingerings than he had been in the past and wondered if he could find more time to play in his week. Page after page, he kept playing, all the while picturing a twenty-something Olivia playing the song on a cassette tape over and over again until she knew how she wanted "her" piece to sound. By the time he had finished the song, the smile that had been spreading across his face wider and wider all night had stuck and he shook his head as he leafed through the music once again.

Fatigue finally beginning to pull at his eyelids, Elliot packed the keyboard away for another day and showered before he allowed himself to fall into bed. As he rolled over in his bed, for once grateful that it was empty, his mind was only his partner.

It really was a beautiful song.

Unknown Time and Place

The decaying square radio cackled in its corner as heavy snow clouds passed over the neglected building. Circa 1971, a layer of dust nearly a half-inch thick lied flat on the radio surface giving it the appearance of a weathered machine. The several knobs and dials that had once gleamed across the radio's face were scratched and tarnished and only three of the original six remained.

Static from the radio cleared and an old tune rang from the single speaker, causing him to raise his eyebrows at the change in atmosphere. Olive oil bottle in hand, he spread the yellow substance across his arms, legs and face, all the while finding the bottle's label, Extra Virgin, rather ironic considering the task at hand. The smell was simply alluring to him and he took a deep breath to keep from becoming too excited too early, as he knew the scent of blood and oil together was the most enthralling fragrance on earth.

The radio's song switched to an old favorite and he paused the rubbing of the oil to increase the volume on the radio. The small dial broke off in his hand as he turned it

and a smile, full of white teeth spread across his face. He threw it over his shoulder, knowing the broken dial on the floor would only add to the ambiance.

Moving to the room's other side, he prepared two handcuffs with long intertwining chains from their position in the ceiling and rubbed oil into the leather whip that had sat, unused since his last performance, in the corner. He had longed to use it during his brief interlude, but as the others were fragile at this point, he did not want to risk it.

The work continued dully as the minutes ticked by, but he hummed along with the song as he worked the whip's end and the individual cuffs into a shine in the dim light of the room. He enjoyed the labor though the work was straining; fun, but straining. And even if they found him or tried to shut him down, he would fight for it whole-heartedly, guns blazing and heart on fire.

When the song ended, he turned off the radio and stared at himself in small mirror that covered the room's only window. His pale skin made his sharp blue eyes nearly glow in the haze of the room; *painfully* blue as his mother had once described. The straight wisps of blond hair were falling into his face, half shading his eyes, but he decided to leave it. The slight disguise of his eyes kept the anonymity going and had proven to raise sales in every production. He took a deep breath at his nude visage and crossed the room to bring her to the stage.

Her screams bounced against the cement walls as he tangled his arms around torso to drag her into the room. This one was normally quiet throughout each production, and resisted silently which is why he chose her out of the four that remained, but for some odd reason she screamed when he grabbed hold of her.

Unlike some of the others, he became bored with her quickly and as he connected the cuffs around her emaciated arms, he drowned out her screams with the words of the song playing in his head.

A long, long time ago, I can still remember...

He could remember a time before he would do this. It felt like a lifetime ago; a life he would just as soon forget. He took the black whip in his hand and lashed out at her.

How that music used to make me smile...

A wide grin slid across his face again as he threw strike after strike at her screaming form. The music always did seem to draw a smile to his face like few things did. He might even consider adding it to his tried and true ritual.

And I knew that if I had my chance, I could make those people dance and maybe they'd be happy for a while...

Everything he did was to make other people happy. Would he rather be living someplace warm and comfortable? Who would not want to be? But, he had a job to do; a job he liked, one he adored and would not give up for the world.

But February made me shiver, with every paper I'd deliver bad news on the doorstep...

His body shivered involuntarily at her last scream and as she hung, he wondered if he had overdone it. She would have to last for a while and he needed her to be strong enough for the main feature.

I couldn't take one more step...

Her voice continued to echo against the room's walls, piercing him in all the wrong ways. She was crying to the point that it was nearly unbearable and he half wanted to throw her away with the others right then and there. Her scream was not pleasant; simply a gargled half-moan that sickened him. She kept repeating her name, Amy, as if it meant something, pleading with him to let her go. All it really meant was more work for him in the end.

I can't remember if I cried when I read about his widowed bride...

Setting down the whip and took keys from their hiding place by the radio and released her from the chains. She kicked him in the stomach the moment she was free and ran as much as her legs would allow.

His heartbeat raced as she bounced against each of the walls in the dark, unable to see the only door to the room. He loved the chase, but did not with this one.

He watched her run for a bit before slapping her side at each lap she made around the room, teasing her with every strike. She settled to floor screaming that horrid scream and crying once again. He stared down at her ugly form for a moment before enveloping her with his arms to take in every part of her beaten body with his mouth.

But something touched me deep inside...

He pulled her to the middle of the room and took her as hard and deep as her body would allow. Blood from her whipping had spread across his chest giving him a purple appearance in the murk and he laughed as sweat from his brow dropped onto her face and mixed into her open cuts and wounds. With every thrust of his pelvis he felt genuinely excited and quickened his pace as her cries grew softer. Climax came swift and he touched her face softly as if she were his lover.

The day...the music died.

Perhaps, perhaps, he would not throw her aside...just yet.

Chapter Nine

Tuesday January 23, 2007

Lower East Side

When Elliot pressed the buzzer for Martha Harvand's apartment, he expected to hear the hoary voice of the seventy-year-old who lived alone in the apartment above Owen Kreider. Instead, he and Olivia heard the voice of a male police officer.

Several minutes later, after being let into the building by the officer at the buzzer's helm, Elliot and Olivia approached the open door of Apartment 12B. From just outside the door, they could see flashes of Crime Scene Unit cameras and could hear the voices of several detectives speaking just above murmurs. Inside the apartment was a scurry of activity by men and a few women in black and navy jackets marked "CSU" in yellow and several sets of uniformed officers speaking to detectives in suits.

"Who called *you* guys?" Melinda said once she saw the pair walk through the apartment door showing badges to the officers stationed at the entrance. "This isn't looking like an SVU case."

She was standing next the body of an elderly woman who lied, face up, in a pool of what could only have been her own blood. Elliot glanced at Olivia who remained stoic at the sight of Mrs. Harvand dead at Melinda's feet.

He sighed. "No one called. We came because we needed to talk to her again."

When Elliot nodded at the body, Melinda glanced back down at the woman and gave Elliot a look that read, "You're just a little too late."

"What happened?" Olivia said.

"Stab wound to the back," Melinda answered quickly. "The knife's missing, but the wound looks serrated at first glance. I'm going to guess an ordinary steak knife, but I'll know more once I take a good look at the wound. Given her age, a stab to the back would incapacitate her and would've kept her from being able to fight back at all, but it wouldn't have killed her instantly. From the amount of blood lost and the placement of the blow, it probably took her a while to die."

"How long?" Olivia asked.

"Twenty minutes to a half an hour."

"Why do this?" Elliot said, speaking his thoughts aloud. "If the killer wanted her dead, why not just stab her in the chest and be done with it?"

Olivia nodded without having an answer for him and looked about the living room. Her eyes scanned the old woman's walls that were lined with tall bookshelves and old pictures in every space not occupied by shelves. Her scrutinizing gaze came upon a spot beside the door and she quickly crossed the room to view the blank spot carefully. The area seemed out of place in the cluttered apartment and Olivia looked about quickly to see if there were any other places in the apartment that seemed similar.

"Liv?" Elliot asked, when he noticed her looking around the room. "What's up?"

"This spot," she said softly. "It's...I don't know...out of place. I means she's got stuff everywhere in here. Every inch of space on the floor or along her walls is taken up by something except this spot."

Elliot shrugged. "What're you thinking?"

Olivia shook her head, lips pursed, hands in her pockets and her leg twitching unconsciously as she continued scanning the room littered with CSU officers. Elliot and Melinda crossed the room to stand where she stood and Melinda bent down to look at the floorboards near the door.

"Well, there's some dirt on the floor here," Melinda said. "But that's really it. Maybe it's where she kept things like shoes when she came through the door."

"No," Olivia said slowly. "Something's missing. Something was here and now, it's gone..."

"Who called SVU?" a tall, black detective said, noticing Elliot and Olivia by the doorway.

Elliot reached out and shook his hand. "Spencer. This is my partner, Olivia Benson. Dr. Warner you know already. Liv, this is Craig Spencer, Homicide at the 8th. No one called us. We actually just came here to re-interview your victim."

Detective Spencer nodded his head. "For what? From what we've heard, she was just a lonely old lady who might've been followed home."

"She has a loose connection with someone we're looking at for this strangling case."

"You notice something over here?" Spencer said nodding toward the spot over which Olivia looked.

"Something looks like it's missing," Olivia said. "Like maybe your killer took whatever might've been sitting here."

"I'll have my guys take a look. Anything I should know about the vic?"

Elliot shook his head. "She called us a week ago about one of her neighbors, but we've already got our finger on him."

"Well, keep me posted," Spencer said. "She hasn't got any family and she didn't seem to have too many friends in the area. The only reason we were notified so quickly is because the guy downstairs complained about 'something red' leaking through his ceiling. It's not that I'm trying to pass off any cases, but if she's related to your strangler..."

"I'll keep you in the loop," Elliot said as he watched Olivia head out the door.

"Hey," he said when he caught up with her on the stairs. "You think Kreider might be involved?"

She paused mid-step. "That spot between the nearest bookcase and her door is roughly the same size as the boxes that Jacob Lewendale and Manny Scheibley were found in. What if she pulled one of Kreider's boxes from the trash and kept it there until she could call us again? If Kreider found out about it... That may be the reason she's lying dead in her apartment."

"But, would he alert the police about it so soon?" Elliot said. "I mean, assuming he's involved, why risk telling anyone about blood on his ceiling? You know what he's like about his rights. Why would he even chance the police coming to investigate?"

Olivia shrugged. "Let's ask him."

Ten minutes later, she and Elliot were walking back down Kreider's corridor with the building superintendent, Ronald.

"Yeah," Ronald said. "He called yesterday telling me that there was this red stain coming through his apartment and when I went to check on Mrs. Harvand..."

"Did he say where he might be going?" Olivia asked.

"He might've gone to a hotel or something. It'll take me a few days to get his ceiling cleaned and I don't blame him for not wanting to stay."

"He leave any number where he could be reached?" Elliot said.

Ronald shook his head. "Naw, in fact, until you two came to get me, I didn't even know he was gone yet."

Olivia gave Elliot an apprehensive glance and a moment later they were in Kreider's apartment. When she had entered his apartment on Saturday, Olivia saw that every bit of space was occupied by books, CD cases and furniture, however now the apartment looked nearly empty. All the books and items had been removed from their shelves and the little furniture that remained had been pushed against the walls of the living room.

"Aw, that bastard had better not've picked up and left in the middle of the night," Ronald said.

The detectives walked through the rest of the apartment looking for any signs that Kreider had not pulled up stakes, but they found none. There was nothing in his closets or dresser drawers, the bathroom was missing all the normal amenities and his kitchen was completely bare.

“Goddamnit!” Olivia said, slamming his fridge door shut. “I can’t even believe it.”

“He’s got some family in the city,” Elliot said. “Maybe he’s-”

“Maybe he’s *what*, Elliot? Gone to stay with family whose son he just murdered?”

“He found his birth mother, what if-”

“Oh, this is such bull!” she shouted. “He murdered those boys, he murdered his neighbor who knew too much and now he’s taken off, so that we’ll never find him! We wasted *days* on Drover and now the real killer gets to run!”

“We didn’t waste days on Drover!” he yelled in return. “We wouldn’t’ve looked at Kreider if it wasn’t for what we found or didn’t find on Drover.”

“How many days ago did we first get confirmation on Kreider!”

She was screaming so loud that Elliot’s ears were ringing and her face had turned snow white in the process.

“We’ve known about Kreider for *five* days and you dragged your feet on him every, *single* day! We could’ve moved on him days ago, but you *insisted* on looking at Drover! Now, he’s gone and none of those families will ever get justice for what he did them!”

“Olivia...” he began.

“Save it! I’ve had enough of your bullshit!”

She brushed past the super and left the apartment that continued to echo with her strained voice.

SVU Squad Room
10:38PM

Elliot’s fingers paused over his keyboard as he considered how best to form his next sentence, but no literary inspiration seemed forthcoming.

He had come to depend on Olivia’s meticulous note taking to aid him when writing reports and as she had not reappeared in his presence throughout the remainder of the day, he knew it was unlikely that she would be assisting him.

Sighing, he took a sip of the lukewarm coffee on his desk to keep him awake for a little while longer.

After it seemed apparent that Olivia was not returning to Kreider’s apartment, Elliot borrowed the CSU team from Martha Harvand’s apartment to comb through Kreider’s place for anything on which they might find DNA. They were able to recover a single comb that had slipped between the closet door and floor and Elliot immediately had asked Melinda to run an analysis against the DNA that had been found on Jacob Lewendale. It was a complete match.

He rubbed a hand over his face and neck, feeling an ache in every bone in his body. It was not so much that Kreider had fled that bothered him. Criminals had escaped New York jurisdiction hundreds of times and they approached each case with the possibility that suspects might run. It was simply the matter of being proved so wrong in regards to a suspect that was causing his stomach to burn under the stress.

When he had returned to the precinct, Munch and Fin informed him that Olivia had stopped by briefly, however, she only stormed toward her desk, snatched a few files out of her drawers and stormed back out, saying that she was taking the rest of the day. Elliot's only reply was that Kreider was gone and that it looked like he murdered his neighbor to make sure she kept quiet.

Nothing was said between the remaining men for thirty minutes, Olivia's demeanor when she had come and gone and Elliot's announcement saying more than any words could. Even Cragen had little to say when he was notified of the situation. He told them that he would hold off for a day to see if they could pull any information on Kreider before announcing that he had slipped through their fingers, but that he would put out an All Points Bulletin for Kreider in the meanwhile.

Cragen's initiative did nothing to quell Elliot's dire disappointment because they had no way of telling when Kreider had gone. Detective Spencer told Elliot that Kreider would have said something about the blood stain in his apartment about the same time he murdered Mrs. Harvand and it was highly likely that he ran a short while afterward.

Elliot had spent much of the day looking through all of Kreider's bank and phone records, but there was nothing in any of them that showed that Kreider was experiencing any irregular activity nor was there anything that suggested that Kreider was expecting to leave the city. The little money that Kreider did have in his bank account remained untouched and there was no activity on his credit cards.

Deciding to say he had gone after the wrong suspect for two weeks as delicately as possible, Elliot rose from his desk to stretch, noting that the clock on his desk, framed with the etched words "Greatest Dad," read after eleven o'clock.

Fin had called an hour earlier to tell Elliot that he and Munch were calling it a night since they did not find anything when they questioned Kreider's co-workers at Rohlman-Hayworth and Elliot felt simply drained throughout the conversation. Olivia had yet to return any of his calls and he worried about what kind of fury the next day would bring. He and Olivia were just beginning to get themselves together and now with Kreider gone, he feared that they would never be on the same page again.

As he drove home, he imagined having to start all over with a new partner. Since Olivia, he had gotten into an actual fight with one new partner and ended up kissing another. At this point in his life, he wondered if he could even handle a new partner and if he would just retire when he hit his twenty years with the force.

When he got home, Elliot looked at his phone that was blinking to signify that he had unanswered messages, however he knew exactly from whom they were. He had left Diana's apartment abruptly Monday morning, knowing that he would tell her that he crept out quietly to keep from waking her, though it was just to keep from feeling so incredibly guilty.

He did not care much for Diana. She laughed at her own unfunny jokes constantly and she managed to direct any conversation, whether it was about something regarding Elliot or something as obscure as The Sphinx, always back to herself with a boring story regarding her own life. In reality, she was just a woman to touch to combat loneliness and keep him from lusting after his partner in Kathy's wake.

For more than twenty years, Kathy had slept by his side, holding him when he needed to be held and loving him the way only a woman could. Waking up each night alone was not hard originally as anger diffused any loneliness that could accrue, however

in recent months, he found himself often reaching toward “her side” of the bed and feeling his spirits dampen at the realization that she simply was not there. With Kathy gone and loneliness ensuing, his eyes would automatically look toward Olivia.

More often than not, he allowed himself to watch her walk when she walked away from him, stand a bit closer to her on elevators or walk nearer to her when they walked the streets. Everything in his mind told him it was wrong to look at her that way, but need oft times outweighed reason.

He set down his things and sighed as he felt his stomach burn. From his kitchen, Olivia’s sheet music caught his eye and instead of being amused once more by the sight, he felt anger stirring within in him. Olivia sounded as if she was placing all the blame regarding Kreider and Drover squarely on him, but the fact was she had stood on the same bandwagon as he had.

Elliot threw the dishtowel he was holding onto the counter and glared at the sheet music as if staring down his partner. *She* interviewed Drover and *she* helped track him down throughout the investigation. If she truly thought that Kreider was the killer from the start, she should have stood her ground and proceeded with the investigation in that direction on her own.

He thought of the potential delight that would be set on Lizzie’s face at receiving Olivia’s music, but he pushed the idea out of mind. As far as he was concerned, he did not want Olivia anywhere is children at that point.

Just as Elliot was considering putting on his coat and appearing at Olivia’s door to rant about the blame she placed entirely on him over Kreider, he heard banging on his own door.

He crossed the apartment and opened the door cautiously to see Diana glaring back at him.

“Hi,” he said softly.

“Oh hi,” she said in a hiss. “Yeah, you’re neighbor let me up.”

“Oh,” Elliot said, wondering which neighbor might have done something like that. “You wanna come in?”

“No, I don’t want to come in.” She was nearly yelling and her face was flush. “I’m just glad to see that you’re still alive since you haven’t returned any of goddamn calls.”

Elliot sighed as she turned and strode back down the corridor. He wanted to say something to her to feel less guilty, but no wise words came to him, so he remained silent.

Sensing that Elliot was still watching, Diana stopped at the elevator.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she said turning back toward him.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Something, *anything*. Anything to tell me that you even give a damn!”

“Why are you so angry?” he asked softly still standing at his door.

“I’m *angry* because you left Sunday, sometime in the middle of the night and you haven’t returned any of my phone calls!”

“I only got two of them and I’ve been busy. In case I never told you, I’ve got a hectic job.

“What about the message I left at your precinct?”

“I didn’t get it.”

"How could you not have gotten it? I left a message with someone."

"Who, Diana? There's a million people working at the 1-6."

"I called your precinct and a woman answered the phone. She was actually really rude with me, but she said she'd pass it on."

He squinted at her. "Olivia?"

"So, you know who I'm talking about, so why couldn't you have found one damn minute to call and say thanks for a great night or *something*!"

"She didn't give me the message."

"Oh, that's bull."

"Look, Diana. I don't know what to tell you, but I know I can't be bothered with this right now."

"Well," she said walking toward the apartment. "If you're stressed, that's what I'm here for. I thought we already established that you could talk to *me*."

Elliot sighed. "If you want to come in, fine, but I'm telling you now, I'm not going to be good company."

She stared at him for a solid minute before brushing past him into his apartment and sitting, arms crossed on his couch.

"So, do you at least want to talk about what's wrong?"

"I screwed up...and now, my partner's pissed."

"Well, he'll get over it."

"She won't. Not for a while considering how things have been going."

Diana stared at him a moment more. "The woman I spoke today...that's your partner?"

"Yeah."

"Oh...what's she like?"

"Pretty," he blurted out without thinking and he spoke quickly to cover the indiscretion. "Brown hair, brown eyes, tall. You know, she's a good person, it's just that lately we've been arguing almost everyday and sometimes she can be a real bitch to me."

"Well, maybe you just need a change. Perhaps a different partner."

Elliot resisted the urge to roll his eyes, remembering this same sort of jealousy erupting from his wife regarding Olivia. He knew it was his own fault by calling Olivia "pretty," but he was more than annoyed that he even had to discuss the issue with Diana.

I shouldn't have taken her dinner, he thought.

Dinner meant more than just a fling; more than something that was simply physical.

"I don't know," he said with another sigh.

"You're right," she said. "You aren't good company tonight."

"Look, I've got a lot of stuff to still get to tonight. Why don't I just give you a call in a few days?"

She nodded and stood to leave. "Well, considering I'm up against your ex-wife, who you still talk about with dreamy eyes and your *pretty* partner, I won't be holding my breath for that call."

He rubbed his hands over his head when she slammed the door as she left. It had been so long since he had had to deal with a new woman in his life that he had forgotten just what kind of pain in the ass they all were.

"I can't even believe it," Olivia repeated in her darkened apartment.

She had been sitting in the dark staring at the far wall of her apartment for more than an hour, replaying the day's events in her head.

Somewhere in the twenty-minute gap between the moment she saw Martha Harvand's body and the moment she realized that Kreider had fled, she had become sick of the mere sight of her partner. She and Elliot had been doing so well, their case notwithstanding, and as she sat sipping her barely-chilled glass of wine, all seemed lost.

If only she had stood her ground over Kreider...perhaps, Dominic Hedges would still be alive. The thought that an innocent life had slipped through her fingers was enough to throw Olivia into an all-out depression.

Regardless of what had happened on the case, she knew she should not have walked out on Elliot, but she knew she would not be able to contain her anger if she stayed. With every step taken in Kreider's apartment, she received further confirmation that he was gone and with every step taken, resentment for her partner grew stronger and stronger.

"Goddamn it, Elliot," she said aloud.

When the memory of their hug not two days earlier jumped to mind, she tried to shake it away by physically shaking her head and she laughed at her complete mood swing in the past forty-eight hours in regards to Elliot. Two days earlier, she was swooning at his touch; today, the very thought of him caused every inch of her skin to burn. Never in her life had she wanted to hurt someone and hold him close at the same time.

She had spent most of her day making notes on all thirteen of her other open cases and seeing what headway she could make in regards to test results on her own. She had called witnesses and visited several victims and was actually feeling better about herself as a detective, until she saw Elliot trying to call her. The moment she saw his name on her cell phone display, the rage began to build again and she decided to collect her thoughts at home. Changing into loungewear, a cami and baggy pajama pants, Olivia settled onto her couch with one of her better wines and her afghan and took to staring at her wall in hopes of easing the tension in her body.

She heard keys rattling in her door and closed her eyes to wince at the thought. Of all the things she wanted at that time, company was the least of them.

"Hey," Jonathan said as he came through her door. "Why are you sitting here all alone in the dark?"

"Sshh," she said taking another sip of her Smith Woodhouse port. "I just need quiet right now."

"I missed you. I figured you'd probably be working through the night yesterday, so I didn't even bother coming over. Is everything okay?"

Olivia nodded, but put a finger to her lips to reiterate that she wished to listen to nothing but the sounds of her breath.

"Something bad going on with work?" Jonathan whispered as he lounged onto her couch.

"It's fine," she said, half mumbling.

He ran the back of his hand against her bare arm. "You don't sound like everything's fine."

She shudder when he touched her, though she could not be certain if it was because of the cold or the fact that she simply did not want to be touched.

"And, you're tense," Jonathan continued. "Whatever happened, it must've been really bad."

She only nodded again in response.

Jonathan went into her kitchen to retrieve a wine glass and poured himself a glass of her port. They sat together silently for close to twenty minutes, Jonathan fidgeting next to her every once in a while, however, when he drained his glass, he began to brush his fingers against her again.

"Come on, Jonathan," Olivia said, shaking his hand away from her. "I'm not in the mood."

He leaned close to her and removed the now empty wine glass from her hand. "Your glass seems like it's been empty for quite some time."

"I've...just been thinking."

Jonathan nuzzled her neck and she shook him off again. For some reason, it suddenly felt wrong to have him touching her. The memory of Elliot's embrace was still fresh in her mind and Jonathan's hand against her skin almost felt like she was cheating.

Cheating on whom? she asked herself.

"Liv..." he said with a sigh. "Whatever it is, I'll make it better."

He nuzzled her again and she leaned away from him.

"C'mon, seriously. I just want to sit here for a second."

He kissed her collarbone and she swatted at him as she backed against her couch cushions.

"C'mon, stop."

"It's good for what ails ya."

"Stop, seriously."

"God, I'd love it if you said 'stop' in that cop uniform."

Olivia felt a nerve pop and she shoved him away from her as she stood. "I told you to stop, goddamn it!"

"Okay, okay," he said softly. "I was just trying to get to you to loosen up a little."

She crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Look," he said. "Just sit back down, okay? I didn't mean anything by it."

"I told you, I was not in the mood and you went for it anyway."

A blank stare came over his face before he spoke. "Well...I mean, I guess I thought you were just playing around or something."

"Jonathan, have I ever *playfully* told you that I wasn't in the mood?"

"Liv, please. Just sit down. We'll sit here in silence for as long as you want. Just sit."

"No," she said still standing. "I think you should leave."

Jonathan jumped off the couch. "Honestly Olivia! It's not like I was going to hurt you!"

"I told you when first started dating never to pull that kind of bull on me. When I say 'no,' I mean it."

"Liv, I don't see what the problem is. I...I was just trying to get you to loosen up a bit. I can see you're overly tense."

"I'm tense because my job is kicking my ass right now, and I don't need this kind of stress!"

"And I'm just trying to make it better!"

"Get out, Jonathan. I don't want to deal with you right now."

"Olivia!"

"Jonathan. Leave. Now!"

"You've got to be kidding me! I was just trying to help."

"Do I look like I'm kidding? Do I *sound* like I'm kidding?"

"Olivia," Jonathan said in a suddenly calm voice. "I know what it's like to have a rough day. It's the story of my life. I just wanted to make you feel a little better."

"Well, what's going to make me feel better right now is solitude. I want you to go."

"Whatever is bothering you, I know it's major. I don't want you to be alone right now."

"And, luckily for me, it's not up to you."

Jonathan shook his head and put his hand on the doorknob.

"Don't forget your coat," Olivia said before he walked out of the door.

"You're being absolutely ridiculous."

"Just leave," she said slowly. "And lock the door on your way out."

He glared at her for another moment before he walked out, slamming the door shut.

Sitting back down on the couch, Olivia pulled her knees to her chest and rested her forehead on them. She knew she should not have thrown out Jonathan, but she felt she had no choice. If he had stayed, they would end up talking and when the conversation turned to Elliot, as she knew it eventually would, she was in no mood to try and dodge the issue to avoid Jonathan's jealousy. There was also the issue of Monday's dinner and the idea of him finding some obscure, but romantic moment that night to tell her something *important* was more than she could bear at that moment.

After five minutes of silence and solitude, Olivia heard knocking at her door.

"Go away, Jonathan!" she shouted toward the door, but the knocking continued.

"I said, go away!"

When the knocking continued, she leapt from the couch.

"Goddamn it, Jonathan!"

She crossed the room in three angry steps and threw open the door. Instead of Jonathan, Mark stood in her doorway, looking pale and confused.

"I...I'm sorry," he said cowering slightly from the anger resonating off of her.

"Mark," she said surprised. "No...it's fine. I was just expecting..."

"Jonathan. Yeah, I uh...gathered that."

Olivia felt her face grow warm as she stared at Mark, feeling suddenly very exposed to someone who was quite the stranger to her.

"Did you want something?" she said crossing her arms across her chest.

Mark shifted his weight on his feet. "Well...I just sort of overheard you two arguing and..."

Olivia rolled her eyes. "I'm sorry, Mark. I hope we didn't disturb you or anything."

"No, I just wanted to make sure that *you* were okay. I mean I wasn't trying to listen or anything, but I...I just wanted to see that you were okay. I mean it's never easy breaking up with someone."

"Well," Olivia said, looking at the floor. "We're not...I don't know...at least I *hope* we're not, but I'm fine regardless. Thanks for checking."

"I just want you to know that if you ever needed someone to talk to...I'm here."

At that, Olivia could only smile. "Thanks Mark. Really, I'm fine. I've just had a hard week and it's only Tuesday."

"It's just that I noticed you've been seeing just this one guy lately."

"You noticed that?"

"I don't mean that in a creepy way," Mark said with a smile. "I just mean, we both've been living here for ages and normally...I've seen you dating...I don't know a couple different people and with this guy-"

"Jonathan," Olivia corrected.

"Jonathan...you haven't been seeing anybody else."

"Yeah," Olivia said leaning against her open door. "We got set up by some friends of ours and we just kept seeing one another."

"Well, it just seems like you find of fight often..."

"More often now than before, but I guess it happens."

"Not to sound...I don't know...like I'm preaching to you or anything, but do you think your mother would approve of this guy?"

Olivia stared at him for a long time before speaking. "I don't know. 'Course, I'd never been one to care whether or not my mother approved of the men in my life anyway. Why do you ask?"

"Well...I...I kind of remember a lot of things that Serena would say and-"

"And, you thought I'd make a better decision about Jonathan if I thought about what my mother might've said if she'd met him?"

"That...that kind of thing always kind of helps me out when I'm in a stressful situation. You know, I kind of knew Serena better than my own mom and sometimes a mother's words are all it takes to give us...I don't know...direction or something. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that if you ever need someone to talk to...a shoulder to cry on...I'm here."

Olivia smiled at the little man before her and patted him on the shoulder. "I'll keep that in mind. G'night."

She sighed as she shut the door and her smile quickly faded. Glancing at her phone on the wall, she wondered whether she should call Jonathan just to apologize. She decided against it and simply went to bed feeling angry again once thoughts of Elliot invaded her mind.

As she allowed sleep to overtake her, a single memory of her mother rolled into thought.

"All men are crazy, Babygirl," Serena had said, half splashing her Scotch on to her lap. "They're all crazy and they're all stupid."

Wednesday January 23, 2007
SVU Squad Room
7:38AM

Olivia's shoes clicked against the floor as she came off the elevator and the scorn that had spread across her face deepened when she saw Elliot at his desk. The anger she felt as she fell asleep gave her bad dreams and she woke up in an even worse mood than when she had left the previous day. She approached her desk silently, set down her bag and poured herself a cup of coffee at the coffee station in the corner.

"Everything all right?" Elliot asked when she sat at her desk.

"Do you even have to ask?"

She had not meant to come off so angry toward him, but between losing Kreider and going through her troubles with Jonathan the previous night, she was in a mood that nothing could cure.

"I mean besides the obvious," Elliot said softly.

"No. Everything's just fine."

He rolled his eyes and decided not to pursue a morning greeting any further. It was days like these that Elliot hated every single thing about his life and without any real remedy, he could not see it getting any better.

In the past, Olivia had been completely aggravated with him, but he could always wait her out by consoling with his family. He knew eventually, she would calm down, but with this case and her demeanor upon entering the squad room, he had no way of gauging how long it would take.

They sat in silence for another ten minutes before Melinda appeared in the squad room with a somber expression on her face.

"I heard about Kreider," she said, "and I'm sorry."

"What are you sorry for Melinda?" Elliot said. "It's not your fault he's a bastard."

She nodded at him and set the file she had been holding on his desk. "I found something in one of the boys that you may want to look into."

"What'd you find?" Elliot said opening the folder.

"When I was reviewing all of my observations on each of the boys, I noticed that Daniel Richardson showed some damage and tearing that looked older than any of the others. Now, I overlooked it at first because they...just kept coming. But, I thought you may find it relevant when you find this guy."

"You're saying that Daniel was abused before he was killed?" Olivia asked, her eyebrows furrowed.

"I can't say how long for certain, but at least for the last few months. Maybe even the last year."

"And you're certain that Daniel was killed by the same guy?" Elliot said.

"Absolutely," Melinda said. "Everything matches except for your MO...Let me know if you need anything else from me. I'm on my way down the 8th precinct."

She left the detectives pondering her newfound news with a nod of her head and walked quickly toward the elevators.

"Who could've been abusing him?" Elliot thought aloud.

"He might have had some kind of contact with Daniel that Richardsons didn't know about," Olivia said. "I mean we didn't grill them as hard about Kreider as we did the Whickfields or the Lewendales."

"Or about Drover."

Her eyes narrowed at him. "You can't still be on about Drover?"

"As the killer, no," Elliot said. "As a child molester, always."

"You think he was molesting Daniel Richardson?"

"I think he was probably molesting several of those kids, but if Daniel Richardson was showing signs of previous abuse, I'm willing to bet anything on it."

"But he said he didn't even have any contact with Daniel," Olivia said.

"And since when have you started trusting pedophiles? He said he didn't know Daniel, but I think that's bull. All the pictures we found under his bed of were little boys, all right around ten or eleven. Daniel Richardson was just eleven years old."

Olivia shook her head and turned her attention back to her monitor. Elliot stared at her a moment and opened his mouth to say something about her attitude, Fin walked into the squad room.

"Hey," he said, approaching their desks. "Found something on your friend Drover."

"What's up?" Elliot said, arms crossed.

"We were talking to some of the parents again about Kreider when we got to the Richardsons. They told us they were hearing some stuff about Drover from people close to them."

"What kind of stuff?" Elliot asked.

"Mostly about the arrest," Fin said. "But, here's the thing: they said they were concerned because they knew Drover."

Elliot tensed and resisted the severe urge to glance at Olivia. "How well did they know him?"

"Pretty well. Drover trained Daniel's old soccer team last summer. Apparently, they've also been paying him under the table for a while now to give Daniel private soccer training. They said they wanted him to be the best."

Keeping his eyes off of his partner, Elliot sat a little straighter in his chair.

"Melinda just told us that Daniel Richardson was being abused before he was killed."

"You think Drover?" Fin said, eyebrows high.

Elliot shrugged. "Who else? Besides, he told us, point blank, that he didn't know Daniel Richardson. Said he'd never seen him before. Why leave something like that out?"

"Well," Olivia said. "He was pretty upset when we first started questioning him."

"But, he stopped all his belly aching when we mentioned Ricky Schrader," Elliot said. "I showed him a picture of Daniel and he didn't act any different."

"Well, Cragen wants to know what we're gonna do about Drover altogether. I'll be back."

Fin dropped some things off at his desk and walked down the corridor.

"What are we going to do about Drover?" Elliot asked having retrieved a few words out of Olivia.

"Drover can go to hell as far as I'm concerned."

"He's child molester, Olivia. We owe it to all the kids he coaches to investigate, especially knowing that he lied about knowing Daniel Richardson."

"Drover's a wash," she said toward her monitor. "At this point, we couldn't do anything with what we've got. The only complaining witness is dead and there's no evidence as to who might've been abusing him. Jumping on Drover, *again*, this early doesn't make any sense."

As Elliot stood to escalate the building argument with Olivia, he saw a flash of bright red and turned to see Veronica Schrader walking steadily in his direction.

"Mrs. Schrader," he said solemnly when she reached his desk.

"What's going on with my Ricky's case?" she said.

Her face was very pale and her eyes looked sunken with new wrinkles and circles. While her hair looked like it had been washed and combed, the stains on her dress were reminiscent to the last time Elliot had seen her.

"We're still working the case," Olivia said as she stood. "However, it does look like one of the suspects has fled the jurisdiction."

"What did you people find out about Jeffy?" she said. Tears were beginning to form in her eyes and as she wiped them away, she smeared her mascara.

Olivia glanced at Elliot. "We're still unsure of his involvement."

"Oh, he's involved," Veronica said, raising her voice. "I know he's involved and he should be arrested for this. Right now!"

"Veronica..." Elliot began softly, but she cut him off mid-sentence.

"He touched Ricky," she said. "I know it. I remembah Ricky acting all different after I started seeing 'im, but I didn't know what was wrong. He touched 'im."

"You're coming forward now?" Olivia said, unable to mask her disgust for the woman before her.

"Look! I'm just coming down offa'...and I realized that my Ricky...my baby... I'm nevah going to see him again."

"Veronica," Olivia began, "I understand what you're going through, but..."

"But nothing! I was looking for 'im on Sunday and that's when I realized that he's nevah comin' over again. Nevah! ACS took 'im away from me, but he always kept comin' back to me because I'm 'is Ma and he knows, I could always take care of 'im, no matter what you people say! Now, he's gone...and I'm nevah gonna see 'im again!"

Elliot took a step towards her. "You should talk to Victims' Services," he said softly. "They'll be able to help you through this."

She shook her head, tears dropping to the floor. "I don't wanna talk to nobody but my Ricky and I can't do that because of Jeffy! Why in't he arrested yet?"

"We have nothing to arrest him on," Elliot said.

"He touched my boy before he killed 'im!"

"Jeffrey Drover didn't kill Ricky or any of these boys," Olivia said.

"I don't care about any otha kids! I just care about Ricky. Jeffy touched 'im and he gets to go right on coaching and goin' about 'is business?"

Neither detective had an answer for her and she shook her head at the pair of them.

"I can't even believe this! I betcha if you people'd found that Jeffy was touching one of them rich boys, you'da had 'im in here faster than he could blink! I'm sick of all you!"

"Please," Elliot said. "Talk with Victims' Services. They can help."

She shook her head again and stormed out of the squad room.

"We should really talk to Drover again," Elliot said once she had left.

"Are you kidding me?" Olivia said, crossing her arms in front of her. "Drover didn't kill those boys."

"Fine, but this is the second confirmation we've had about him being a pedophile...in so many minutes."

"From some vague suggestion from a victim's parents and the garbled ramblings of Veronica Schrader as she's coming down from whatever she's been shooting in her veins for the past few days?"

"Combined with the pictures, I think it's a valid claim."

Olivia scowled at him. "You just can't let him go, can you? You can't take the fact that Drover's not involved?"

The intensity in her voice was rising and other detectives around the squad room were beginning to stare at them. Munch and Fin, who had both watched the exchange with Veronica Schrader, were standing, braced for the impending explosion between their co-workers.

"Olivia! He may not have murdered these six kids, but he *is* a child molester. What do you want, a notarized certificate saying he likes little boys?"

"This isn't based off actual evidence! You're just making assumptions because you have a vendetta against him!"

"And you don't want to look into this any further because you don't want to admit that you went to bat for a pedophile!"

"If *I* hadn't stepped in, we would still be going after him for these murders and if you hadn't been going after Drover so zealously, we would have Kreider locked up at this very minute, instead of *hoping* we might be able track him down!"

"Don't try to place all the goddamn blame on me! You wanted Drover in here just as much as I did!"

"I wanted to catch a killer! You just wanted to prove that you weren't wrong! I'm placing the blame exactly where it should be!"

"Hey!" Munch said stepping between them. "Come on. We all dropped the ball in regards to Kreider. We could've kept the investigation going on both Drover and Kreider at the same time, but we didn't. There isn't one of us that doesn't deserve some of the blame."

Olivia broke her glare at Elliot and let the full force of the fury behind her eyes lay on him. He took a step backward and continued.

"Look, we know that Kreider was looking for his birth mother. If we can find her through his adoption records...maybe she'll be able to tell us something if he contacted her."

"In the meanwhile," Elliot said, "I want to talk to Drover again. Whether or not he's related to these murders, we still need to investigate him. He has access to dozens of kids through his soccer training and we know that one of the kids he gave private lessons to was sexually abused."

"There could be half a dozen reasons-"

"I *know*," Elliot said. "But, I want to talk to Drover anyway."

"You're just not gonna learn your lesson, eh?"

Elliot opened his mouth to respond, but Fin spoke up instead.

“Look, I’ll go with Elliot to talk to Drover.”

“No,” Olivia said picking up her coat. “I don’t have problem with talking to Drover again. I think it’s a complete waste of time, but I don’t have a problem with it.”

With those words, she brushed past Elliot and Fin and headed for the elevators. Elliot resisted rolling his eyes and followed after her.

The drive to 14th Street Loop was tense and aside from Olivia demanding that she drive, nothing had been said between the detectives.

Initially, Drover refused to let them into his apartment when arrived, but after some coaxing on Olivia’s part, he buzzed them into the building. The moment they entered his apartment, however, Olivia laid into Drover with questions about Daniel Richardson.”

“What?” Drover screamed. “You’re taking *his* side now!” He pointed toward Elliot.

“I never *left* his side, Drover,” Olivia said. “He’s my partner and you’ve neglected to tell us just a few too many things for us to let this go.”

Elliot glanced at her, taken aback at the sudden shift in her response toward Drover.

“Why are you doing this?” Drover said staring at the floor.

“Why did you lie about Daniel Richardson?”

Drover’s colourless eyes stared back at Olivia and Elliot had a glimmer of pity for the man.

“I...I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You trained his team last summer,” Olivia continued. “You spoke to his parents. Told them that he had lots of talent. Offered to give him *private* lessons. Does this ring a bell at all?”

“Okay, okay, fine. Look, I didn’t tell you anything about the Richardsons... because I’m not allowed to give private lessons. It’s part of the training deal. Unless I get special permission from the association. But, they want him to be the best and I just wanted to help.”

“Wanted,” Olivia corrected. “The Richardsons *wanted* their son to be the best and now that’s never going to happen.”

“Look, you people are trying to frame me! I didn’t do anything wrong! I thought we’ve already covered this.”

“Those look like latex gloves to you, Liv?” Elliot said, pointing to Drover’s bathroom, into which they could clearly see from their vantage point in his living room.

Allowing Olivia to press further into Drover, Elliot took the time to look around in his apartment for something damning. At this point in the investigation, it was more than simply getting Drover to confess. They would need some kind of hard evidence to ensure that he remained behind bars.

Olivia leaned closer to see to what he was pointing. “You know...they most certainly do. Why do you have latex gloves just lying around, Jeff?”

“I don’t have to answer that without my lawyer.”

Elliot started to interject, but he could feel Olivia's anger heating up and he stayed still to let her continue into him.

"You know, you're right," Olivia said. "You don't. In fact, let's all of us take a trip to our precinct and you can tell us when your lawyer gets there."

"Fine, okay. Fine. I've got the gloves because sometimes the kids get hurt on the field and I don't want to get in contact with their blood."

"They're kids, Jeff," she said. "What do you think you're going to catch?"

"You're an SVU detective and you're asking me that? Kids today have everything. One of the kids on the team I train caught an STD last fall. The Clap! At thirteen years old! You're damn straight I'm not coming into contact with their blood!"

"What about your pictures?" she said.

"What pictures?"

"Your little spank bank. We found them under your bed. It looks like you might've left a little something extra on some of those photos because we found a bit of you smeared all over them."

His eye twitched as he stared at her. Drover then crossed the room to sit in the recliner in the corner of the room and she continued. "Why don't you come clean, Jeff? It'd save us all a load of time."

"I don't know why you're doing this to me," Drover said softly. "I didn't kill those kids and you know it. Why are you being so hostile? I thought--"

"You thought what! What, Drover! What! You thought we wouldn't find out the real reason you like spending all that time with these kids? Is that it?"

Drover's eyes began to tear again and he shook his head. "You just...I can't believe you're just..."

"Just what!" she yelled. "I'm disgusted that I even came in contact with you! You *abused* Daniel Richardson!"

"No, I didn't..."

"You're a pedophile! A child molester! You make me sick!"

Drover covered his face with his hands and dissolved into tears, but Olivia grabbed him by the shirt collar, forcing him to face her.

"Is this what you do, Jeff?" she said in a low voice, very close to his face. "Do you cry with them? Make yourself seem like a kid, just like them? And then you get close to them. You get nice and close to them. So, close that you can smell every drop of sweat on their small bodies."

Drover shivered under her and made as if he were trying to get away from her, but she held him tighter and bent down lower.

"You think about all those boys, don't you? *This* close to you. All you have to do is reach out an arm and they're yours."

Drover shook his head, but she shook his shirt collar and straddled him in the chair. "Yes, you do," she whispered right next to his ear. "In fact, I bet you're getting all hot and bothered just thinking about it right now, aren't you? Aren't you? Just like you do when you're alone at night. You're dreaming if you think you're fooling anyone. Sleeping with those boys' mothers just to spend the night. You do it just to get closer to them, don't you? Don't you, you bastard! You probably finish with their mothers and then you slip into bed with them right afterward."

Drover was breathing hard by now and he shook violently to get Olivia off him, but she was now leaning her whole body onto his chest. He grabbed her leg and Elliot had his gun out a moment later. The safety clicked and Drover froze.

"Elliot," Olivia said still staring at Drover while she sat on top of him. "Give me a second with Jeffy here." She glanced back at him. "Trust me, I'll be fine."

Elliot eyed Drover suspiciously, but he backed away from them and out of the apartment door, leaving it open a crack.

"We're all alone now," she whispered to Drover, knowing it was far from the truth. "Anything you want to tell me now that it's just the two of us?"

"Leave me alone," Drover sniffed through a haze of tears. "Get off."

"Get off? Is that what you do with your little collection of pictures, Jeff? You get off with them?"

He shook his head and sobbed. "They're just pictures."

"Well, if they're just pictures, why are you all over them? Why do you even have them out when you're climaxing?"

"They're just pictures," he repeated.

"You keep saying that, but I don't believe you." She lowered her face so that her lips touched his ears when she spoke. "I've known a lot of guys, Jeff, and I'll tell you with most of them...if I was sitting on top of them just like this, they'd be so hard their dicks look like they might just fly right off. But, not you, Jeff. Not you."

"Th-they're not the ones wh-who you've been calling a child molester."

"But, if I was wrong, then I'd be feeling something, wouldn't I? Right here."

Drover jerked beneath her, but she maintained her grip on his shirt collar. "I bet you'd be nice and hard if I was a ten-year-old boy, wouldn't you?"

He tried to shake his head, but she wrapped her free hand around his head to hold him still. "Yes, you would. If I was a thin, growing and changing little boy, you'd be ready to jump. If I was little Daniel Richardson or Connor Wickfield...nothing would be able to stop you..."

"What do you want?" he said, his tears beginning to wet the side of her face.

"I want you to say it, Jeff. Just say it. Say I'm a child molester. C'mon, I know you can do it."

"Just leave me alone."

"No, Jeff, I need you to say it. Say it! Say, I'm a child molester."

"Please, just go."

"Say it. Repeat the words with me."

"Leave me alone...please."

"Say it, you bastard! Tell me how you abused those boys! Tell me you're a child molester!"

"I...I...I didn't do any-"

"I don't want to hear that! Don't lie to me, goddamn it! Say it!"

"Okay...I'm a ..."

"A what? You're a what!"

"...a molester..."

"Yes," she said releasing him slightly. "Yes, you are, Jeff."

She smacked him on the forehead and jumped off of him to head toward the door. Drover leapt out of the chair, having gained his courage, and followed her.

“You people can’t come in here harassing me like this!”

“And how long do you think you can go on molesting boys before you’re caught?” she yelled, ensuring that the sound of her voice carried down his corridor.

“I don’t do that! And, if you people had anything on me, you would’ve already thrown the damn cuffs on me again! I’m not a...molester.”

“Of course you’re not,” Olivia said sardonically and walked out the door.

She brushed past Elliot in the corridor and made her way to Drover’s elevator. Olivia pushed the “down” button for the elevator, but after a few impatient seconds, she let out a huff and stormed out the side door to the stairs.

“Liv,” Elliot called after her. “You’re just going to walk down nine flights of stairs just because?”

“I’ll be fine,” she said without pausing on the stairs.

“Hey!” he said when he finally caught up with her. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing!” she shouted. “Nothing’s going on. We still haven’t found Kreider and Drover’s a pansy-ass, crybaby, just like I figured he would be. *Nothing* is going on!”

“You know you were outta line up there.”

“I don’t care!” she shouted. “I don’t give a rat’s ass about Drover! Kreider *murdered* six children and he’s gone! We’re not going to find him and he killed his neighbor too, just to make sure that we wouldn’t. A cold-blooded killer slipped through our hands because we spent *days* looking further and further into the wrong guy. *This* wrong guy. And here we are again, looking at this same goddamn person! I don’t care about Drover. Okay? He is shit to me!”

They walked the remaining five flights of stairs arguing over Drover and carried the argument into the car, uptown back to the precinct, onto the elevator toward the squad room and continued as it spilled out onto the squad room floor.

“Why don’t you just say it to my face, Olivia!”

“What?”

“What you’ve been dying to say all day! Just say it!”

She took a step toward him. “Fine! *You’re* the reason that Dominic Hedges is dead!”

“Look, I thought we already talked about this,” Munch said once they had approached the desk pairs.

“I don’t want to hear it from you, either!” she yelled.

“The only person responsible for Dominic Hedges’ death is Owen Kreider,” Munch said.

“Don’t bother arguing,” Elliot said. “She’s on a roll now and she’ll just trample you too.”

Olivia whirled back around to Elliot. “I have every right to be ‘*on a roll!*’ I tiptoed around you for days because I knew you’d explode if I approached this Kreider thing the wrong way and this is what’s happened. Another boy died while we were dicking around with Drover!”

“*We* were looking at Drover, Olivia!” Elliot said. “Your words, not mine. *We* were looking at him. If you felt so strongly that Kreider was the one, you should’ve stuck to your damn guns! Don’t try to pin this all on me!”

“Who should I blame? *You’re* going through a divorce. *You’re* kids are acting up. *You’re* having trouble ‘cause Kreider’s been murdering boys your son’s age, but *you’re* the only one who can’t be held accountable for his actions!”

“Oh, you’re full of shit!” Elliot shouted.

“No, *you’re* full of shit! You knew you had problems with this case from the very first day and instead of being a *man* and stepping down before you were too far in, you pressed on, completely blind to what was going on! I don’t care how many ways you want to point the finger! All the blame lies on you!”

Elliot glared at her, rage building with each passing second. As he thought about how hard he would deck Olivia at that moment if she was not a woman, Cragen called them both into his office.

“All right,” he said. “Whatever is going on between the two of you...I don’t care what it is, I want it over with. Now! I have to make an announcement about Kreider and this is going to look bad enough with the two of you screaming at one another like you’ve lost your goddamn minds! If you can’t get it together, I’ll reassign you both!”

Elliot and Olivia glanced at one another at the word “reassign.” As angry as they both were at the moment, neither wanted to lose their position in the in the SVU nor lose the other as a partner.

“Everything’s...fine, sir,” Olivia said softly.

“And it sounds like it is,” Cragen said glaring at her. Elliot began to say something, but Cragen held up his hand. “I don’t care. I don’t want to hear about it. Just get it together. Go home, the both of you. Take today, clear your heads and do whatever you have to do to get your acts together.”

The detectives glanced at one another and silently filed out of the office. They picked up their things and said nothing to anyone as they left the squad room and parted ways at the street.

Chapter Ten

Wednesday January 24, 2007
Greenwich Village
8:18PM

For the second time that week, Olivia found herself sitting in silence and staring off into space as she wondered how so many things could go wrong in one day.

When she and Elliot had been “asked” to leave for the day, they did not speak one word to one another and she opted for the stairs instead of taking the elevator with him. An uncontrollable anger had spurred from her that morning and having no other avenue upon which to express it, every bit of it was directed straight at Elliot.

The ring of her telephone pierced through the air and Olivia allowed it to ring three times before reaching over to answer it with a sigh.

“Hello,” she said softly, praying that Elliot would not be on the other end of the phone.

“Olivia?” Jillian’s voice said brightly. “It’s Jillian. How’ve you been?”

Olivia sighed into the phone, letting it speak for her.

"I see," Jillian said. "Well, how busy are you right now, because Joshua's got the boys for this guys' night out thing and I'm in the city."

"I'm actually not busy at all."

Jillian was silent for a moment. "Liv, what happened?"

Olivia sighed again and Jillian interrupted her. "Forget it. I'm at Maya's and she and I will be at your door in twenty minutes. If you're not busy, we're taking you out for a bit."

Olivia nodded into the phone, though she knew Jillian could not see her and she quickly made plans to, instead, meet Maya and Jillian at a restaurant close to her.

"God, Livia," Maya said, upon seeing her. "You look like hell. What's been going on?"

"This case," she said leaning back in her chair. "Everything about it has gone wrong from the start..."

Maya and Jillian glanced at one another.

"Can we ask-" Maya began.

"He's gone," Olivia said quickly. "The guy is gone. A rapist and a murder is gone and we have absolutely no way of finding him." When neither Jillian nor Maya spoke, she continued. "And what's most frustrating is that I have no one else to blame but myself. I let us continue looking at this case from the wrong angle instead of going my way and now the guy's gone."

"Olivia," Jillian said. "Everyone makes mistakes."

"But not everyone's mistakes allow a sociopath to run freely on the streets."

Silence settled over the trio again and Maya slipped out of their booth to get drinks for them.

"You can't keep blaming yourself for what happened," Jillian said when Maya had left.

"Jill, I've run this through my head a hundred times and I know what happened. A boy is dead because I didn't do the right thing."

"Olivia..." Jillian began, but Olivia interrupted her.

"I screwed up. Anyway that you look at this."

"You weren't the only one working this case, Olivia," Jillian said. "You have a partner, other detectives, captains, so on and so forth. If you want to say that the ball was dropped on this, then you can't blame yourself. I know that there were at least half a dozen people who let this case go, aside from you."

"Jill, I knew about this other guy five days ago."

"And did you keep that information to yourself for five days?"

Olivia's eyebrows furrowed at her friend. "No."

"Of course not. Because you're a good cop. And since other good cops knew about him too, how can all the blame be placed directly on you?"

Olivia shook her head slowly as Maya returned to the table with three glasses.

"What'd I miss?" she said.

"Olivia's blaming herself for something that's not her fault," Jillian said grabbing her drink by the glass's mouth.

"Livia," Maya said handing her a cosmopolitan. "What about Elliot? If this guy is gone then it's probably just as much his fault as it is yours or anyone else's for that matter."

"See," Jillian said. "*Maya's* saying the exact same thing I am."

Olivia rolled her eyes and took a sip of her drink.

"Look," Maya said. "You can't just wallow in self-pity all night."

"Oh, yes I can," Olivia said. "I was sent home today. Not *asked* if I wanted to take time off. *Sent* home. Both me and Elliot. I think a little self-pity is necessary."

"But, I'm sure you were asked to come back."

Olivia stared into the shining brown eyes of her upbeat friend and sighed. "We were sent home because we argue non-stop now. We can't even talk about any case without it turning into a competition to see who can get their point across louder."

"I'm so surprised," Jillian said sardonically as she took a drink.

"C'mon, Jillian," Olivia said. "That's the last thing I need right now."

"Well, what do you want from me?" Jillian asked her eyebrows high on her forehead. "Are we really supposed to be surprised that the two of you are arguing all the time? You're just not good for each other. I wish you two would just split up."

"You may get your wish Jill because my captain's already suggesting it."

"Good," Jillian said.

"No," Maya said. "It's not good. If there's a problem between the two of you, it can't *just* be Elliot." Olivia glared at Maya, but she continued. "Look, you two worked together fine for years and all of sudden you guys are arguing all the time. It takes two to argue, Livia. Even if he was yelling at you day in and day out, you had to've yelled back to keep it going."

"So, now *you're* blaming me for everything..."

"Isn't that what you wanted us to do in the first place?"

"Touché, Maya," Olivia said cracking her first smile that day.

The conversation moved from Olivia to Jillian's sons to the children of the man Maya was seeing, to Maya's other beau and then back Olivia and Jonathan. Olivia had been dreading the idea of bringing up Jonathan with her friends since the moment Jillian had called her and when Jillian asked about him brightly, it was all she could do to keep rolling herself into a ball on the bar floor.

"We fought last night," Olivia said solemnly.

"What else is new?" Maya said finishing the last of her margarita. "The two of you fight every other day. The real surprise would've been if you'd said 'Oh, everything's roses between us. Thanks for asking.' Some couples are just like that."

Olivia shook her head at Maya and started laughing. "Everything's already worse than I'd thought. Jonathan and I...I just wasn't in the mood because everything that's going on and he came at me the wrong way. I ended up throwing him out."

"You threw out Jonathan?" Jillian said, eyes wide.

"Again," Maya said. "Tell us something new."

"But, what do you mean by 'threw him out?'" Jillian continued. "I mean, didn't you just give him your keys? How could you throw him out?"

"Well, he didn't move in," Olivia said. "He still has his own place...thank God."

"What happened?" Jillian pressed.

"I don't know," she said. "I was worried about this case...no. No, I was angry at Elliot and that just spilled over onto Jonathan who didn't even do anything."

"It's just stress," Jillian said. "We've all been through it before."

"You've been through it?" Olivia spat. "Tell me, Jill, when was the last time someone woke *you* up at four AM to tell you a thirteen year old kid had been raped and murdered and left in an alley?"

"Fine," Jillian said. "We all know that *you're* job and *you're* life is more stressful than anybody else's, but we're *trying* to help you."

"I'm sorry," Olivia sighed. "I didn't mean that."

"We know," Jillian said. "It's like I said. It's just stress."

"Livia," Maya began. "Why don't you just take some time off?"

"I can't. There's no time," Olivia said, taking a sip of her drink. "Besides, I'm already being sent home by my captain because of what's going on between me and Elliot."

"You could make time, if you really wanted to," Jillian said. "You should just get out of the city for a little while. Some time away from here...away from Jonathan, away from the job...away from your partner...It might do you a lot of good."

Olivia sighed again. "I don't even know how it got to this point. Two weeks ago, we were right back on track. Hell, two *days* ago we were fine, and now...It feels like we take one step forward and three steps back. It's like everything I'm doing is wrong."

"Or," Jillian said, "maybe you just need a change...a real change."

"What do you mean?"

"Well," Jillian continued cautiously. "You seemed almost refreshed when you came home from working with the FBI. May this is just...God's way of telling you that you need to get out of there. I mean, no one expects you to spend the rest of your career in that unit."

Olivia stared at the ice floating innocently at the top of her new rum and coke, pondering Jillian's words, but Maya jumped on the defensive.

"She'll leave when she's ready. And, Livia, you don't want to do anything rash. Anything you might regret later. Especially right now."

"If not now, when?"

"Hello? Livia?" Maya said in a sing-song voice. "Have you heard anything we've talked about tonight? You're under stress. More than usual. This whole thing with Elliot and Jonathan just magnifies everything going on with your case. It's got you outside yourself. Now, especially, is not the time to make life-altering decisions like leaving your unit."

"Why not?" Olivia said her voice distant. "My captain as much as said I'm out if Elliot and I can't get it together. What if this *is* something telling me it's time to move on?"

"Because everyone at this table knows that's bull," Maya said.

"She's right," Jillian said, interrupting before Olivia could retort. "You *should* probably move on, but I don't recommend anything until some of this passes over."

Olivia shook her head. "Nothing's going right. Elliot's just angry all the time and when he's angry, he doesn't talk to me about what's initially bothering him and that just pisses me off. He seemed to be fine for a bit and then we get this case and we're at each other's throats again."

"Well, just think of the positive," Maya said, flagging down one of the bartenders. "I mean, you're employed, you've got a rent controlled apartment in the village and

you've got Jonathan. And if things don't work out with Jonathan, then screw him. We'll find you somebody better."

Jillian giggled. "Yeah, there's a guy who works with Joshua who'd love you... and if he didn't work out, there's always that Philip kid."

Olivia laughed into her drink and talk turned to the more light-hearted topic of Maya's lack of a legal practice. An hour later, they parted ways and the moment Olivia was in her apartment, the telephone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"So, what's the real issue here?" Maya said as if they were already in the middle of conversation.

"Maya, are you even home yet?"

"Course not," she said. "I'm still in the cab. Are you going to tell me what's going on or what?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Olivia said. "We already talked about everything tonight."

"Yeah. You can kid yourself and maybe Jillian if you want, but you can't fool me. I know you too well. So, I'll ask again, what's up?"

"With what?"

"Everything, or should I say everyone?"

"You mean with Elliot?"

Maya laughed. "Well, I meant Jonathan, but now that you bring him up... what about you and Elliot."

"There's nothing," Olivia said sighing. "After today, I doubt he'll even want to talk to me. In fact, I'd be happy if we were just on speaking terms again."

"You're really going to tell me half your fight with Jonathan didn't have anything to do with Elliot?"

"Of course it was, but not how you're suggesting. I wasn't in the mood and Jonathan acted like a jackass."

"Or," Maya continued, "you were preoccupied with one guy and when another one tried something on you, you reacted badly."

"You are so full of it, it's unbelievable!" Olivia yelled into the phone.

"Okay, okay," Maya said. "Fine, fine, fine. If you say so."

"Maya, I've still got a lot to do tonight to save my job. I'm hanging up now."

"Will you at least prove to me that nothing's wrong by calling Jonathan?"

"What makes you think I haven't called him since yesterday?" Olivia was met only with silence and she asked again. "Maya? What makes you think I haven't spoken to him?"

Maya sighed. "Because he called *me* last night in a panic over you."

"And did you tell him your little Elliot theory?"

"Okay, now you're starting to get angry over nothing, which sounds like par for *you* these days."

"All right! Now I *am* done. G'bye, Maya."

Olivia hung up the phone and turned on her television to one of the instrumental music channels. Thankfully, Maya knew when she had pushed the limit and Olivia knew that she would not call again that night, but she felt aggravated altogether. It was no

surprise that Jonathan would call Maya when they were having problems, but the idea still infuriated her.

Olivia turned off the television after one song and changed into running clothes. Too worked up for either sleep or simple self-pity, she knew the only thing to be done was to get out some of her frustration at the gym.

EK Mitchell's
Queens, New York
10:13PM

Elliot sat in the restaurant on 62nd Street and glanced at his watch. He had been waiting for ten minutes and he had severe doubts if she was actually going to show. She had called him, saying that she just wanted to talk and though he was in no mood to do so, he agreed. He had had half a mind to turn around when he got to restaurant that was both coffee shop and pub at the same time, but he took a seat near a window and hoped for the best.

A curly-haired waitress came by for the second time offering coffee and beer, coddle and hamburgers, and French fries and goody. He declined her offer for anything other than coffee and she walked away, rolling her eyes.

Elliot sighed as she walked away and stared at the door.

She's got three more minutes, he thought.

As if on cue, Kathy appeared at the door and quickly found his table.

"Hey," she said as she sat. "I would've been here sooner, but I had an argument with Kathleen about her dress for this upcoming formal thing."

"At least you've got her talking," Elliot said.

"Yeah. Could I get a tea with lemon?" she asked the waitress who appeared the moment Kathy sat at the table.

Elliot stared at his ex-wife for a moment and suppressed a sigh. Her face was slightly pink from the cold and her eyes were shining even through the false, fluorescent light in the restaurant.

"So, what'd you want to talk about, Kath," he said.

"I...uh, just wanted to talk to you about the kids."

"Here?"

"Well, it's easier than trying to break the phone free from one of them."

He was about to bring up using a cell phone, but took a sip of his coffee instead. He rarely got to see her and even when he did, it was hardly ever just the two of them.

"It's just that Dickie's been bouncing off the walls a lot lately," she continued. "I got a call from the vice principal and he says Dickie's been disruptive in his classes lately."

"Disruptive how?"

She shrugged. "He wasn't very specific, but from what I gathered he's just talking a lot in class and drawing a lot of attention to himself."

"What do you think is problem?"

"I don't know," she said shrugging again. "Maybe it's this girl he keeps talking about every other second. Jessica...I think she's a bad influence."

Elliot laughed. "Come on, Kath. He's just a got a crush."

"But, he was never like this before he started talking about her non-stop."

"And, he's never been thirteen before, either."

"Yeah, I guess that's true," she said with a smirk as she stirred her tea.

"Oh, I should give this to you," Elliot said taking some papers out of his inner jacket pocket. "Lizzie wanted some music from Olivia for her recital. When it is it by the way?"

"March 4th, and I suggest you mark it on your calendar now, because I doubt she'll forgive you missing this one."

"Trust me, I won't."

"So, why'd Lizzie want music from Olivia?"

"She said she wanted something new and she knows that Olivia plays. I'm sure she'll like it. Olivia composed it herself."

"Really," she said, her smirking fading slightly. "'Lately'...well, I know Lizzie will love it."

He nodded and took a sip of his coffee. "*Elizabeth*."

A grin quickly spread across her face. "Yeah...God, our kids are growing up quick."

"You know, Lizzie burned herself the other day when she damn near set the house on fire?"

Kathy sighed. "Yes, I know. I saw it when I got back home. It took me an hour to clean the stove."

"Where the hell were you?" Elliot said.

"Well, she's thirteen, Elliot," Kathy said, narrowing her eyes at his sudden change in tone. "She doesn't need a babysitter."

"So, you just left her to set the house on fire by herself?"

"She was fine and she wasn't alone."

"She got burned and she could've done some real damage while you were out wherever."

"You've got to be kidding!" Kathy said, leaning forward. "I met with my book club on Saturday and some of us went out for a few drinks afterward. I wasn't just out wherever."

"Yeah, okay. You're out and meanwhile, Lizzie's busy burning down the house."

"Don't be patronizing with me, Elliot! How many nights a week did you and Olivia and all the guys from the precinct go out for drinks after a case, leaving the rest of us here? You spent every waking second at work and when you had a moment off, you spent it with other people!"

"You're right," he said softly after a long pause. "I did that a lot...and I'm sorry."

Her expression softened immediately and she sighed.

"It's okay, Elliot," she said and she leaned back in her seat.

He was relieved and impressed by how quickly she calmed down with the simple apology and wondered if that was all it would take to reduce some of Olivia's fury.

"So," Elliot said after taking another drink of his coffee. "What's going on?"

"I just wanted to see how you were doing."

“Well, a killer’s loose and my captain’s threatening to reassign me because Olivia and I are fighting non-stop. How do you think I’m doing?”

Kathy’s eyes fell to her teacup and he immediately regretted the statement.

“I didn’t mean that,” he said.

“You never mean it. I know. I remember the drill.”

Silence fell over them for a moment before Elliot spoke again.

“So, what did you really want to talk about?”

“Just you, Elliot,” she said sighing. “Just you.”

He nodded and they proceeded to talk about old times when the kids were little, how the neighborhood had changed so much in recent years and what they might expect from Lizzie having seen what Maureen and Kathleen were like through adolescence.

They started laughing about the time Kathy tackled him at their front door to keep him home when he had the flu and just as Elliot suddenly realized that EK Mitchell’s was not that far Diana Willex’s school, he saw a flash of light brown hair through the window. His heart jumped into his chest when Diana’s face came into view. He directed his attention completely on Kathy, but he could see that Diana recognized him and was making her way into the restaurant.

Aw shit, he thought as she approached them.

“Hi,” she said curtly.

“Hey,” Elliot said into his coffee.

She stood in front of the table for a moment, before Kathy gave her a bright smile.

“Hi there. I’m Kathy.”

“Diana,” she said still staring at Elliot.

“Do...you want to join us?”

Diana glared at Kathy. “No thanks. I just came in for a quick drink.”

She turned on her heel and flagged down a bartender.

A part of Elliot wanted to laugh out loud at the situation while another part of him wanted to bang his head against the table.

Kathy turned her attention back toward Elliot. “A friend of yours?” she said, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah, I guess.”

He could see in her eyes that she wanted to inquire further, but he took another drink of his coffee to break the eye contact and quickly changed the subject to Dickie and Jessica Barrow.

After another thirty minutes of discussing their children, Elliot was in his car driving up 58th Street with Kathy beside him. He wondered, not for the first time that night, why she had not driven herself to the restaurant as she shifted in the passenger seat. She had said she wanted to see how he was doing, but during their last conversation, he could still feel the same frustration that caused her to leave him radiating off of her, yet there they were, having coffee and tea.

When they approached the house they had once made a home, Elliot shut off his car engine and stared at Kathy. They sat in silence for a moment before Kathy reached for the door handle.

“Hang on a sec, Kath,” he said. “What was all this about tonight? I mean...you really just wanted to see how I was doing?”

She shrugged. "Yeah. You just seemed a bit off when I saw you on Sunday and I just wanted to make sure that you're okay...*Are you okay?*"

He smiled at her. "I'm as 'okay' as I can be, considering..."

"Well...goodnight, Elliot." She squeezed his hand and went into the house. As she walked away, Elliot felt his heart sink with every step. He missed everything about her and it took every bit of strength to keep from running after Kathy and begging her to let him come home.

He went back to his apartment and lied awake staring at the ceiling, his mind swirling, until three o'clock, when he got dressed and took a drive. His relationship with anyone he cared about was hanging by a thread and if he could just get one of them going in the right direction, all the others might fall into place.

On the other side of the East River, he planned on going to the precinct to exercise, but he found himself continuing on 9th Avenue instead of turning onto 47th Street and his phone was in his hand a moment later.

Diana was a mistake over whom he would just as soon not trouble himself and Kathy was at best, an extreme work in progress. As all four of his children were most likely asleep, there was just one relationship he could touch that night.

A swift January wind hit Olivia's face the moment she opened the door to her building. She pulled her coat tighter around her and took a deep breath as she stepped forward to face the winter air.

The café on Bleecker Street was open all night and as it was just a half block away, she more annoyed about the cold than she was worried about walking the streets so late at night.

She had attempted to work out her frustrations on the treadmill at the precinct, but had no luck. Olivia was just as tense and irritated passing the three-mile mark on the treadmill as she was on the cab ride up to the precinct. Still stressed, she returned home to lie on her couch and stare at her phone, willing Jonathan to call her. Perhaps, if he just called could clear up things between them and she would be able to "handle" Elliot the next day.

It was only when Olivia had given up on Jonathan for the night and was falling asleep that the phone finally rang. She had leapt out of the bed and crossed the room in a single bound to get to the phone after just one ring. To her dismay, Elliot's number appeared in the phone display and she hesitated before answering.

She could hear that he was driving as he spoke and decided that only a special breed of "mean bitch" would stand him up at the café when he took the time to come all the way from Queens for her.

The metal door to the café felt brutally cold as she pulled it open and she regretted not bringing gloves with her. She rubbed her hands as her eyes scanned the café, half-hoping that Elliot wouldn't show.

In the corner of the café, Olivia found him with a despondent expression displayed on his face. She ordered a decaffeinated tea at the counter before sitting down at Elliot's small table.

"Drinking coffee?" she said. "Are you expecting to be up for long?"

"It's decaf," he said in a low voice. "And, I don't need coffee to keep me up at this point."

"I see," she said as she took off her coat.

"Olivia..." Elliot began, but paused. He was not sure what was going on between them, but he was certain that they could not continue on their current path. "Whatever it is...I need you to just say whatever you need to say to me right now. You can say anything you need to get off your chest. Anything. I don't care what it is...because we cannot go on like this. Not if we expect to keep our jobs."

Olivia sighed. "Honestly, I think I said just about everything already."

"Well," he said rubbing a hand over his face. "Can we just...start over? I don't know what I did to get us to this point, but I really need for us to...get back, close to the same page."

"I know, Elliot," she said softly. "And, it's nothing you did. I'm just...frustrated. This case has been hell from the beginning and I've been under a lot of stress lately."

Elliot sighed and wanted to bring up the issue of her doctor's appointment again, but hesitated, realizing that of all moments, this was the worst of all possible ones to do so.

"Whatever I've been doing to cause that frustration...I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," she said. "It's not because of you."

"Then what?" he asked before he could stop himself.

She shook her head and shrugged. "Life. But, it's like I said, you haven't done anything wrong and I'm really sorry about what I said today. None of this is your fault."

"You say that, but I must be doing something wrong. We keep going forwards and backwards, but we're still stuck in this same groove." He paused for a moment as her gaze left his eyes and fixed on her cup. "Look, can we just say that we were both wrong and move on? I'm so ready to move on, Liv, and I can't seem to function right when you're this mad at me."

"I'm not...not at you. I'm just going through some things right now."

"Must be some pretty serious stuff," Elliot said, "because when I didn't have a comeback for what you said to me today, I nearly decked you."

She gave him a small smirk and stirred her tea. "It's not that serious. It's just stressful for the sake of being stressful."

"Is there anything I can do?"

She started to shake her head, but spoke instead. "Actually, there is. When something is bothering you, really bothering you...just, please come to me about it. Because when you're stressed about something and you won't talk about it, I get stressed over what you're not telling me and then I get angry and then we fall into this angerball cycle."

He stared silently at her for a moment. "I'll try. If you'll do the same."

"Okay."

They sat in silence for a few minutes as a voluptuous woman with big hair laughed loudly at what the man sitting across from her had to say at the next table. Finishing their coffee and tea without words, they paid and left, and Elliot walked Olivia home, though neither said anything until they reached Olivia's building.

"You didn't have to walk me home, you know?" she said with a smile. "It's only half a block and this is nice neighborhood."

"Tell me about it," Elliot said. "Though, if I could pay *eight* hundred a month for the Village, I'd be out here too."

She laughed. "Oh, the beauty of rent-control."

"I'm surprised they haven't run you out of here yet."

"My landlord keeps trying, but I'm not budging. It was my mother's and her mother's before her. Besides my neighbor's been in her apartment forever, so if he was really trying to oust anyone, she'd be the first to go."

They chuckled together as a light snow began to fall giving a small lull to the city's night noise.

"I better go if I expect to get some sleep," Elliot said.

"Yeah," she said. "I'll see you in the morning."

"G'night, Olivia."

When he got back to his car, Elliot let out a long sigh. As the light snow became heavier, he realized his muscles were still tense from keeping back the steady urge to reach out and hug his partner as they stood before her building. His senses were still piqued from the past Sunday and he kept the heat off in the car as headed back over the river.

With the situation as it was with Kathy and also Diana, he could not afford to complicate anything with his partner and Elliot knew that another hug, no matter how benign, would turn into something severe with Olivia.

Thursday January 25, 2007
94th Street and Lexington Avenue
11:21AM

Sunlight peeked through an opening in heavy grey clouds and Elliot squinted as the streets were showered with the new light that bounced off the gleaming snowdrifts. Olivia sat next to him in the car looking carefully for Building 1480.

They had spent the majority of the morning trying to catch up on their other cases by making phone calls, collecting files and retrieving statements from several witnesses. Everything was followed up, except for the Kreider case. Cragen was going to make a public statement later that afternoon as no word had been heard regarding Kreider and it was beginning to appear that he simply disappeared off the face of the earth.

Though nothing had been said officially, Elliot and Olivia had been pulled as the lead detectives on the case and while neither was happy with the situation, they did not complain. Solace came for both detectives when Cragen saw them working in tandem at their desk pair, instead of yelling or snipping at one another.

As their most poignant case was Marianas Garcia's, they found themselves driving up Lexington Avenue in search of the residence of Kevin McDaniel, to whom they had intended on speaking over a week earlier, but Kreider came in the way.

"Is that him?" Olivia said pointing to a man shoveling snow in front of Building 1580.

Elliot pulled the car the side of the street and he looked at the image Olivia held in her hand.

He nodded. "Yeah, looks like."

They got out of the car and approached the red-faced man who was pounding at the snow that was hard packed to the ground.

"Kevin McDaniel?" Elliot said with a hand about to pull out his badge.

The man stuck his shovel into his building snowdrift and looked up at the two detectives. Elliot and Olivia both showed their badges and as Olivia opened her mouth to introduce them to him, McDaniel dropped the shovel and took off running down the street.

The detectives glanced at one another before giving chase, but only ran a few steps before watching McDaniel's feet hit a patch of ice. His arms spun wildly in the air for a moment before his body gave way to gravity and fell spread eagle on the ground, hitting his head in the process.

Thirty minutes and long laugh at McDaniel's expense later, the detectives were in an interrogation room across from McDaniel who held an ice pack to the back of his head and angry expression on his face.

"Remember to keep ice on that," Olivia said, smirking slightly. "Or else you'll have a nasty bump on your head in the morning."

"Yeah, whatever," McDaniel said in a gruff voice.

"So," Elliot said. "Are you gonna tell us what happened with Marianas Garcia or what?"

"Look," McDaniel said. "All I did was ask for that girl's number and she turned me down."

"And you thought raping her was just revenge?"

"No," he said, tossing the ice pack on the table. "She turned me down and then me and a buddy 'o mine were walking down the street when we saw her a few days later. I told him about her and *he* said we should jump her."

"Oh, so this wasn't your fault at all?" Elliot said sarcasm biting in his voice.

McDaniel sighed and stared at the table. "It was all Lanaghan."

Olivia snorted and drummed her fingers on the table. "And so I take it your semen just magically beamed into her?"

"Lanaghan said we should do it!"

"But, you've got a brain of your own," Elliot said. "You knew exactly what you were doing and you hurt her anyway."

"Doesn't matter anyways, Elliot," Olivia said. "He raped Marianas because of someone else and now he's going to prison...just for someone else."

"Hey!" McDaniel said. "What do I gotta do to fix this?"

"Nothing," Olivia said. "You can serve your full sentence and live whatever life you've got left when you're finally let out and...considering the fact that this'll probably go down as a hate crime...your parole board members are probably still walking around in diapers at this point."

"What hate crime!" McDaniel yelled. "We didn't do it 'cause she was Spanish! We did it 'cause she was a bitch!"

"Yell all you want, but all three of us know how this will go down," Elliot said.

"Two white guys, up in Spanish Harlem, raping a Spanish girl...well, at least you'll have an active social life while you're inside."

"Aw, c'mon!" McDaniel said. "If I could take it back, I would, but this wasn't a hate crime! You gotta be able to do something."

Olivia took out a legal pad and a pen. "We might be able to talk the DA into giving you a deal, if...*if* you give us a statement and if you testify against Lanaghan."

"And end up his bitch in the joint? No way."

"You're gonna be somebody's bitch in prison either way," Elliot said. "It's just now a matter of how long. You give us a statement and testify against Lanaghan, you can walk out of Sing Sing in maybe five years. You wait until the DA tries your case, and trust me with DNA evidence, you're definitely going to lose, you're looking at close to fifteen years once the hate crime is added on."

"Fine," McDaniel said after a long pause. "Gimme the damn paper."

An hour later, Casey and McDaniel's public defender reached an agreement for McDaniel to serve four years once he testified against his accomplice, Timothy Lanaghan, and instead of celebrating on a case quickly closed, Elliot and Olivia were preparing to meet the public and deliver the news of Kreider's flight.

The announcement was scheduled for three o'clock and Munch and Fin walked into the squad room at fifteen minutes to three.

"How goes the hunt?" Olivia said.

"It isn't," Fin said. "We've been trying to find some relations, but Kreider's an only child and his dad hasn't seen or heard from since he was a kid."

"We did, however," Munch said, holding a large manila folder packed with dozens of papers, "find something in his sealed records."

Olivia whirled around in her chair. "What'd you find?"

"Kreider was at the tender age of nine years old, when his mother, a Ms. Rosalyn Kreider, noticed a strange odor coming from her basement. When she investigated, she caught her son strangling, not one, not two, but *three* two week-old puppies in the middle of the floor. The odor came from his stockpile of other animals he'd been putting out of their premature misery."

"Puppies?" Olivia said. "He's a complete freak."

"But, we already knew that," Elliot said.

"Oh, it gets better," Munch continued, waving the folder at them. "When the Kreiders took their disturbed son to a psychiatrist, Owen proclaimed that it quote: 'felt nice to control something for once, especially when it was life or death.'"

"Good God," Olivia said. "And this was when he was nine?"

"And there's more. Since the neighbors had been noticing their pets and other woodland creatures disappearing, a judge ordered Kreider to work in an animal shelter for ninety days. Ten days into it, one of the workers found Kreider in a back room doing something God never intended with a dog and a plastic bottle. After that he was in juvenile detention until he was thirteen.

"What about after he turned thirteen?" Olivia asked.

Munch shrugged. "Some fights here and there in high school, though it looks like he was mostly on the receiving end of them, combined with some miserable grades... Bounced from job to job for a bit before getting a spot at Rohlman. He's your perfectly average, standard, run of the mill sociopath."

"Yeah," Fin said. "And no one has the slightest idea what happened to him."

The detectives shook their heads at the thought and Cragen appeared a moment later, ready to deliver his statement.

The public announcement went quickly and all four detectives stood stony faced, but strong beside their captain as the storm of the press took hold. Questions bounced from every angle and each detective remained firm and united.

When it was all over, they returned to the squad room drained and somber. The Whickfields and the Richardsons were both present and they all knew the image of two grieving mothers, one black, one white, embracing one another in a tumult of tears over their lost sons, would be front page material citywide and ignite a second outburst of calls and leads that led nowhere.

Greenwich Village, New York
9:19PM

Olivia's leg banged into her end table as she entered her apartment and she swore loudly, grabbing her leg with her free hand. The pain in her leg was short and left swiftly, yet she realized a moment later that she swore mostly because she had had a drink too many at the bar with Elliot, Munch and Fin.

They had gone to a nearby bar to drown their sorrows in liquor after dealing with the aftermath of the day's statement and one beer quickly turned into five and Olivia was angry only with herself as her head still spun slightly after getting out of the cab.

Elliot had offered to take her home, but she declined with a few half-slurred words in order to keep her dignity. On only one occasion had she become so intoxicated that she *had* to be taken home and, from what she remembered, Elliot had to half carry her into her apartment and put her to bed because she could barely move under her own steam.

Olivia flopped onto the couch in a huff and the moment she did, her telephone rang. She let out a long groan and reached across the sofa to grab the phone from its stand.

"Benson," she said slowly.

"Hey, Olivia," Philip said. "It's me...Philip. How've you been?"

"I've been better."

"You sound tired."

She laughed. "I guess you can say that."

"I'm actually on the way towards your place. Would you mind if I came up to visit for a bit?"

"You came here first and then decided to call?" she said sitting up on the couch. "That's pretty bold, Phil. What if I were entertaining a date or something?"

"You don't sound like you are," he said.

"That's besides the point," she said smiling into the phone.

"Well, I'm actually just bringing something to my mother and figured I'd give you a call to see if you wanted to do something."

"Thanks, but I just dragged my ass in early from the bar and I think I'm in for the night."

“How’s that guy who’s supposedly the one?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she mumbled.

“Oh really,” Philip said slyly. “Are you *sure* I can’t come over? Just for a bit?”

“Philip,” she said. “I know what you’re thinking and no. I don’t know what’s going on with my current relationship, but I’m damn sure I’m not ready to start anything new with anybody.”

Philip sighed. “If you’d just get to know me a little, Olivia...I’d never do anything to make you not want to talk about me.”

“Philip...” she groaned as she squeezed her eyes shut. “We talked about this...”

“I know, I just...”

When his voice trailed off, Olivia knew she had had her fill of the conversation.

“Look, Philip. I’m tired. How ‘bout I talk to you later okay?”

“Yeah, that’s fine,” he said with sigh and Olivia hung up without saying goodbye.

She lounged on her couch and had been asleep for four hours, wrapped in her afghan, when her cell phone’s chirp ripped through the air.

Olivia fished it out of her pocket quickly, dreading the idea of having to go back out to view a new victim.

“Benson,” she said into the phone, but she was only met by the sound of someone breathing and background noises of the city.

“Hello?” she said, sitting up on the couch. “Is anybody there?”

“Yeah,” a voice said quickly.

“Who is this?” Olivia said squinting as she tried to place the voice.

There was a long pause on the other end and Olivia wondered if she should simply end the call.

“It’s Jeff Drover,” he said. “I need to talk to you.”

A hot flash coursed through Olivia, beginning in her abdomen and heating every part of her body as it raced toward her head.

“Why the hell are you calling *me*? I don’t have anything to say to child molesters.”

“Would you...would you just hear me out for a second?”

“No!” she yelled. “Unless you’re calling to confess to molesting Ricky Schrader and Daniel Richardson, there’s nothing for me to hear. *Don’t* call again.”

“Please!” he said. “I just need to talk to you.”

“Why me? Can’t you find solace with some pedophiles on the Internet?”

“Look, I’m not like that!”

“The hell you’re not! I know exactly what you’re like. I’m hanging up now and don’t call ag-”

“Please Olivia. I’m begging you.”

“It’s Detective Benson and I’ve already told you-”

“Look, I know you don’t want to hear it, but I need to talk to someone and you’re the only person I can think of who doesn’t need to be brought up to date on what’s going on in my life and who can’t possibly think any lower of me. *Please*. I need to talk to you.”

Whether it was the liquor still floating in her system or the plead in his voice, Olivia grimaced as she agreed.

“Fine,” she said. “What must you talk about?”

"Not over the phone," Drover said. "Can you meet me?"

"You know what? You're outta your goddamn mind, Drover! I don't want to talk to you and I sure as hell don't want to go traipsing across the city trying to meet you in the middle of the night!"

"Please. I...I can't discuss this on the phone. I'm at a coffee shop on Bleecker at 10th. How far away are you?"

Olivia sighed. "Not far, but I'm still not going out in this snow just for you."

"Please," Drover repeated. "Oliv-...Detective, please. I need help and you're the only one I know who can help me."

Five minutes later, Olivia shivered in her jacket as her feet hit the sidewalk. She walked, shaking her head at the ludicrous idea of meeting Drover and played with the idea of simply leaving him at the coffee shop where she and Elliot and talked less than twenty-four hours earlier. Her stomach gurgled with a splash of undigested beer and she skipped a step to keep herself balanced. She was no longer tipsy, but the slight buzz that tingled throughout her body had yet to dampen.

The street seemed darker and quieter than normal, which she attributed to a broken bulb in the nearby light post and the snow that had begun falling even stronger than it had in several days. She felt annoyed that she had, again, been coaxed into listening to Drover, but if he was willing to admit he had a problem and asked her for real help, it was her duty to listen.

Thinking it might be prudent to call Elliot and have him pop in at the café, she pulled out her phone and brought it to her ear as she crossed the alley next to her building. The moment she opened her mouth to voice dial Elliot, she felt something hit her hard from behind and a second later, she shrieked as she was pulled into the alley.

"Don't say a word," a gruff voice said.

A pair of strong hands held her by her arms and squeezed tight in case she might try to break free. Unable to see her assailant in the dark, Olivia tried to talk her way out of the assault.

"Let me go," she said.

"Now, that sounds like you saying *something*. Didn't I just tell you not to say one fucking word?"

She recognized the voice. "Drover?"

"Shut up!" he hissed.

"Jeff...let me go."

Drover pulled her further down the alley and pressed her into a drain on the building.

"You people screwed me over," he said. "So, I'm going to do the same to you."

As he leaned closer to her, Olivia could feel the hard push of his building erection pressing against her thigh and she winced as he pressed her harder against the building.

"You feel that, *Detective*? Does that feel like a guy who gets off on little boys? Does it!"

"It...it feels like someone who's frustrated about what's been happening to him and is reacting in the wrong way.

He pushed his shoulder into hers to keep her pressed against the wall and freed both of his hands. He put one hand against her throat and the other he used to pull at her thigh. Olivia felt her breath catch as she tried to keep from panicking.

"Jeff, let me go," she repeated.

"No! I'm going to fuck you over just like you did me."

"We didn't do anything to you," she said as his hand began to tighten around her jaw. "You abused Daniel Richardson and it was only a matter of time before you were going to..."

"Shut up!" He pressed her further against the drain pipe and she let out a cry of pain. "I lost my job and they told me they never wanted to see me again at the soccer association. My neighbors heard you and that guy calling me a child molester and now, they're talking about running me out of the building! You ruined every single thing in my life for nothing! Nothing!"

"Jeff, any second now, someone's going to hear you. Someone's going to walk by and see this and then we're going to have problems."

"No, you're the only one who's going to have any problems."

"Just let me go. If you just let me go, we'll part ways and we'll never speak of this again. If someone notices, then I'll have to report this."

"You mean, if I don't screw you hard enough to keep you from talking."

"Do you realize what you're saying? Jeff, if you hurt me...every cop in the city is going to be after you. Raping an SVU detective? You'll be lucky if you're eventually turned over to your lawyer."

"Why?" he said. She could see light reflecting in his large eyes and his grip loosened slightly against her throat.

"If someone from my precinct gets to you first...they'll take you to an interrogation room, and not one of the suites you've been in recently. It'll be the one in the back that we say is being used for storage; the one that's in the corner without any windows and no way for anyone to know what's going on inside. They'll take you back there and then my partner, that guy you say has had it in for you for the past two weeks... he'll be in to...*talk* to you. And after he beats you to within an inch of your life, they'll just leave you there and then for some reason, no one will ever know what happened to you. You'll just have disappeared and we'll write you off as a Missing Person and that'll be the end of it."

"You're lying," he whispered.

"Am I? What do *you* think is going to happen once they find you?"

"You can't just disappear people. You're lying and I'm sick of all your lies."

"When have I ever lied to you?" she said.

"You told me that all I had to do was give you DNA and you'd stop looking at me! You told me if I wrote down all the places I went, you'd pull the heat off! But, you didn't stop looking at me for those murders! You piled *on* the heat! You lied every time!"

He squeezed tighter around her jaw and she felt her breath catch again.

"It wasn't my fault that the case kept coming back to you."

"The hell it's not! You lied to me at every chance you got and I'm sick of it!"

"Jeff, let me go. You can still walk away from this."

"You're not walking away from anything."

"Stop! You make another move on me and I'm gonna have to fight back. I can't guarantee that I'm not going to beat you senseless either."

"You won't be beating anything with my dick against your clit."

"Let me go! Don't make me hurt you, Drover. I've got a lot of rage built up and I'll kill you for sure. And not a jury in this world would convict me for taking out a rapist like you."

"Bull!"

"Jeff...just let me go. We'll...we'll go in separate directions and we won't talk about this. If I have to fight back, you're going to have real problems."

"You're full of shit."

"Do you really think I would just come out to meet you at a café alone?"

"You called your goddamn partner, didn't you?"

She nodded as best she could with Drover's hand at her throat. "What do you think is going to happen if neither one of us shows at that café? Elliot'll start calling me and then my boss, the *captain*, and before you know it, this place is going to be crawling with cops. If they find you like this...nothing I say is going to save you."

Drover glared at her and she could herself in his eyes as if she was staring directly into a mirror. His hand against her leg shuddered and she could feel his grip releasing.

"That's it, Jeff," she said softly. "Just let me go and we'll never discuss this again. Even if we've got you pinned for any other thing, I won't say a word against you."

He pushed away from her and she staggered on her feet for a moment before putting her hand to her hip holster. She could hear the sound of feet running and a moment later, Olivia saw the figure of what looked like a blond boy in his late teens standing at the alley's mouth.

"What's going on?" he said out of breath.

"Everything's fine," she said looking at Drover. "Right, Jeff? We're fine. We were just leaving."

"I-I just wanted to make sure," the boy said.

Drover said nothing, but backed out of the alley and took off down the street.

Olivia let out a deep sigh and leaned against the wall of the building. She winced as she leaned against the side Drover had pushed against the metal drain pipe and she watched as the boy bent down to pick up her cell phone that she dropped when Drover snatched her.

"Is this...um...yours?" he asked handing the phone out to her.

"Yeah," she said now breathing hard. "Thank you."

"I...um...I saw that guy standing out here looking like he was waiting for somebody and then I saw you and I...I just...you know...I figured I'd better make sure you were okay."

"Thank you, sweetie," she said pushing herself away from the wall and walking back toward the sidewalk. "I'm okay, but I'm glad to see that there are people like you still around in this city."

He gave her a weak smile. "Well...um...do you need me to walk you home?"

"Thanks, but no. I live right here."

He nodded at her, but walked her to the building door nonetheless.

The moment Olivia closed the door to her apartment, she sank to the floor against the door, put her face in her hands and cried.

Like mother, like daughter, she thought as the taste of alcohol at the back of her throat brought back a memory from her teens. Thirty-eight years ago, her mother had

been staggering home drunk, when she was set upon by a rapist and Olivia had been paying for the mistake ever since.

Between the alcohol and being overly worked up on the case in general, not to mention her wreck of a relationship with Jonathan, she stepped out of her building without fully thinking through what Drover was suggesting.

After the stunt she had pulled in his apartment the previous day, she was foolish to think that there would not be some kind of repercussions on Drover's end. She had severely underestimated him and it could have cost her life.

He could have been waiting in her alley with friends ready to strike and she would have had real problems. He could have been so filled with rage that he could have strangled her the moment he took hold.

What if he got my weapon away? she thought.

The only reason she remained even remotely calm throughout the ordeal was because she knew that if she felt him making a further move, she could have her gun out in a moment's notice, but the question still rang in her mind as tears ran down her face.

She ran through a list of her normal diatribe for assaulted victims and wondered if she should go see a doctor.

"No," she said aloud.

She was not a victim. Drover tried something, but she prevailed. She was *not* a victim.

Olivia lifted herself off the floor and took a long shower wanting to wash away the smell of Drover from her face and neck. She had half a mind to burn the clothes she was wearing, but she simply opted for doing laundry sooner rather than later in the week.

You're acting just like a victim, she thought.

"No," she said aloud again. She was *not* a victim.

She paced around her apartment for a bit before wrapping herself in all the covers on her bed. Each time she passed her telephone, she wanted nothing more than to call Elliot, but she knew she could not face him in her state. Knowing that she would simply break down on the phone if she called, Olivia shook the thought from mind. She had worked too hard in getting him to see her as his partner who just happened to be a woman rather than just another woman he had to look out for and crying hard, either on the phone or directly in front of him, would undo everything she had built in the past eight years.

As she wiped away the last tear from her eyes, she decided that she would go into the gym at the precinct early in the morning and just work out all of her frustrations on the treadmill or perhaps some light weight lifting. Normally, during the very early morning hours, there were fewer men in the weight room and she could lift without feeling completely inadequate next to the beastly man next to her who would be lifting thirty-pound weights.

You're trying to push it away instead of deal with what happened, she thought.

Her breathing finally back to normal, she shook her head into her pillows.

"He didn't do anything to me," she said. "I'm not a victim. I am *not* a victim."

Friday January 26, 2007
Precinct 16 Weight Room
5:08AM

Elliot rapidly pressed the down arrow on the inclined treadmill and slowed his pace to a brisk walk. The mile warm-up jog turned into a two-mile, winded run and he knew if he did not stop at two-miles, he would continue running all day.

He had intended on stopping by the gym near his apartment the previous night, but with several drinks in his system from a somber night out with Olivia, Munch and Fin and the impending dread of seeing Diana again, he opted for an early morning workout instead.

Stepping off the treadmill and giving it a traditional spray of diluted cleaner, Elliot headed for the second room where the weights were kept. He expected to find the room empty, but instead found Olivia in the corner with a dumbbell in hand. She was standing in the corner doing tricep lifts with her eyes closed and iPod earbuds in place.

He walked across the floor quietly and tapped her on the shoulder, anticipating her shock with a mischievous grin on his face.

"Jesus!" she shouted, dropping the weight and just barely missing Elliot's foot.

"I guess that would've served me right," he said picking up the weight.

"Yeah, it would've."

"So, what are you doing here this early?" he asked.

She started walking toward the bench press. "Same as you, I guess. I've got some frustrations to work out."

"Not the same as me," Elliot said. "I'm avoiding people from my own gym."

"Ah," Olivia said as she wiped down the bench. "Wouldn't be someone by the name of Diana, would it?"

Elliot stood silent for a moment. "Yeah and I meant to ask you about not giving me my messages, anyway."

Olivia slid a 2.5 lb weight onto the bench bar and smirked at him. "I was pissed... more than pissed. I picked up the phone by accident, I heard it was a woman, I knew it wasn't Kathy, Maureen, Lizzie, or Kathleen so I hung up when she stopped talking." He stood silent and she continued. "Sorry, Elliot. Really. Who is she anyway?"

"No one."

"Oh...I see."

"You need a spotter?" Elliot said quickly trying to change the subject.

"It's fifty pounds. I think I'll be okay."

"Just fifty?" he said playfully. "Come on. You gotta push it. You gotta *live*, Liv."

"Fine, fine," she said lying on the bench. "Throw another five."

"Woo-hoo," Elliot said as he stood in preparation to spot for her. "*Fifty-five*. Now, you're *really* pushing it."

Olivia let go of the bar to give him a light punch in the stomach. Elliot laughed and put another five pounds onto the bar.

After twenty minutes of lifting against Elliot's constant verbal pushing, Olivia lied on the bench out of breath and feeling like her arms were about to break. Elliot had piled on another twenty pounds on the bar over the course of her workout and with one hand in the middle of the bar to aid her, he continued pushing her to lift just one more set.

“Come on, Liv,” he said. “Just one more.”

“Can’t...”

“Come on, lift. *Lift*.”

With a kick of her leg to give a last exertion of force, Olivia’s face contorted into an odd angle as she pushed the eighty pounds upward and onto the bar handle.

“All right!” Elliot said clapping his hands.

Olivia shook her head and rolled off the bench, however Elliot could not help but notice the wince on her face as she rolled on her side.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. “Did you pull something?”

“You just made me lift more than half my own weight. I’m glad I’m even able to walk.”

He smiled as he lied down on the bench. “I didn’t *make* you do anything. I was barely lifting with you on that last one.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to wipe that down first?” she asked as she took his place behind the bench press.

Elliot shook his head. “I figure you’re pretty clean, though if I get a rash, I’m coming after you.”

He started with the eighty pounds Olivia had just lifted and they continued until ten minutes to six o’clock when Elliot breathlessly asked her place another five pounds onto the bar giving a total of a hundred and fifteen pounds on top of the bar.

Elliot took a deep breath as he prepared to lift the weight and Olivia peeked over the bar to stare down at him.

“You know, if you can’t lift this one-fifty, you’re screwed right?”

“Fine,” he said laughing. “Take me down to one-twenty-five and I’ll finish out.”

“So,” Olivia said as they were walking toward the locker rooms ten minutes later. “Why are you avoiding this Diana from your gym?”

“No reason,” Elliot said and he quickened his pace to walk in front of her.

She got the message that he did not feel like elaborating on Diana Willex and dropped the issue, though she wondered what it meant for Elliot and Kathy.

When they came to Olivia’s locker, Elliot noticed her bag hanging from her left shoulder instead of her right like normal.

“You’re hanging your bag on the wrong side,” he said. “What gives?”

Olivia shrugged. “I switch it up from time to time.”

“I’ve known you eight years and I’ve never seen you ‘switch it up.’”

“Woman’s prerogative, I guess.”

He frowned as he stared at her, unconvinced by her story. Combined with how she reacted when she left the weight bench and the fact that she appeared to be favoring one side, Elliot factored years of experience and knew immediately that she was hiding something.

Olivia set down her bag to grab something out of her locker that she had forgotten and Elliot took a step toward her. He reached out his hand and gave her a light pinch on her right side. Olivia jumped and screamed and slapped his hand away.

“What’d you do to your side?” he said crossing his arms.

“Nothing. I’m fine,” she said. The lie sounded more ridiculous aloud than it did in her head.

“I barely touch your side and you scream and jump away? I’m not buying that.”

“It’s nothing.”

Elliot stared at her silently with a look that read “You’re full of it.” She sighed and pulled her t-shirt up slightly and turned toward him.

“I can’t really see it in the mirror, but it hurts like crazy,” she said. “Tell me, at least, that it doesn’t look as bad as it hurts?”

He took a step toward her, eyebrows furrowed and bent slightly to look at the vast purple bruise on Olivia’s side, though he did not need to do so. He could have clearly seen the bruise by standing all the way across the room. The large, circular purple and blue patch radiated out of a bright red spot on her side and Elliot frowned longer when he saw it closely.

“Well, I hope it hurts like a bitch because it looks like hell.”

She let go of her shirt and rubbed her hand across the back of her neck.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

“Seriously, what happened?”

“Nothing!”

“Olivia, how many more rounds are we gonna go with this? What happened?”

Olivia slammed her locker door shut. “I’m fine.”

She tried to brush past him, but he stepped in front of her to block her path.

“No way,” he said. “We’re talking about this now.”

“There’s nothing to talk about it. I’m fine.”

She tried going around him on either side twice before turning around to head down another locker aisle. Before she was out from an arm’s length, Elliot brushed her side again and she yelled and dropped her bag.

“Goddamn it, Elliot!”

“Liv, you’ve got a bruise the size of a bowling ball on your side that I’m guessing didn’t just *appear* overnight! Now, you’re obviously in a lot of pain and you know it looks bad. Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing!”

“Is it...is it something with Halloway? Did he do something to you?”

“No,” she said rolling her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Is beating you?”

“Elliot, nothing is wrong. Nothing happened.”

“You didn’t even answer my question. Is Halloway hurting you?”

“No! Nothing happened!”

“Nothing happened...Doesn’t that sound a little like Evelyn Rivers, who keeps insisting that nothing’s wrong when we all know that Diorel’s beating her senseless?”

“For the love of God, Elliot! No! Jonathan isn’t doing anything to me! Christ, I haven’t even seen him since Tuesday!”

“Well, then what the hell happened? Why do you have that bruise on your side?”

Olivia looked toward the ceiling, but said nothing.

“You’re not going to tell me anything? Someone hurt you and you’re just going to let it go, just like that?”

She sighed and finally looked him in the eye. “I’m handling it.”

“What did Holloway do to you?” he said in a deep voice.

“I keep telling you. Jonathan didn’t do anything.”

“Then, *what* happened?”

She stared at him for a moment knowing that he was never going to move. There was no way out of it. She could either lie and risk doing irrevocable harm to their partnership or she could tell the truth and risk Elliot doing harm to both Drover and his career.

“I...” she began.

He stared at her expectantly, brooding eyes burning intensely into hers.

All right, Girl, she thought. *Just keep it together...*

“I got a call last night...”

“From who?”

She took a deep breath. “Drover.” Elliot narrowed his eyes at her and she continued. “He called saying that he needed to talk to someone and that I was the only one who wouldn’t have to be updated on the situation.”

“He wanted to talk to *you*?” Elliot said. “About what?”

“He wouldn’t specify. He just said that he needed to talk to me...so...so I agreed to meet at the Late Cup on Bleeker...”

As Olivia’s voice trailed, Elliot felt every muscle in his body tense. He did not like the way the conversation was going and his mind quickly ran through how long it would take to find Drover’s address in his desk and kick in Drover’s door to drag him back to their precinct.

Olivia was his first woman partner and though he considered her his equal, he could never shake the idea of needing to protect her like he did every other woman in his life. The idea of someone who was not only a suspect, but a child molester, hurting Olivia was almost too much for him to stand.

“Look,” she continued. “I had my phone out to call you about it the second I hit the street, but...”

“But, what?”

“But, he grabbed me from the alley next to my building before I could even dial.”

Elliot stared at her, silently picturing the scenario. “What did he do?” he said in close to a whisper.

“Like I said, nothing. He pushed me against this drain on the building, but I convinced him to let me go.” Elliot only stared at her, saying nothing. “Elliot, the bruise is just from the drain. If I was foot to either side, we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.”

“So, you would’ve just let the fact that he *attacked* you in the alley next to your home go like nothing happened?”

“He didn’t attack me. He might have tried to, but he didn’t do anything.”

“Is this what you’ve been telling yourself all night? Something to convince yourself that you’re not a victim?”

“I’m not a victim,” she said, well-rehearsed.

“Olivia, if someone came off the street and described to you what you just told me, what would you do?”

“This was a unique situation. I knew I was going to be fine.”

"That's bull and you know it. If a woman walked into the house with that story, the first thing you'd do is pull out the card for victim's services."

"Because she wouldn't be privy to this situation. A civilian wouldn't *know* that she could talk her way out of it."

He shook his head. "What did he have to say?"

"That we were screwing him over with this case and that he was going to do the same to me, but I told him what was going to happen if he did and he let go."

"No one saw this happening?" he asked, exasperated.

"Some kid came running by. I guess he saw Drover standing around and he came to make sure I was all right."

"I see."

It was her turn to frown at him. "You sound as if I'm leaving out something significant."

"Liv... Something like this happens to you and you wouldn't even have considered telling me about it. If I hadn't noticed you favoring one side... you said it yourself. We wouldn't be having this conversation."

"Because I knew how you'd react."

"What reaction? I don't even know how to react or what to react to first: the fact that this happened, the fact that he could've murdered you last night or the fact that you weren't even going to *mention* this to me."

"Do you feel any better now that I have?"

Elliot rubbed a hand over his face and sat on the bench that ran in the aisle's middle. "Liv... I don't know what to think. Actually, I feel a little queasy right now."

"Look, we both knew that Drover was off and... I went overboard on Wednesday. I should have known that there'd be some kind of backlash. I guess I just didn't think it would come so soon or like that."

Elliot sighed again. "You know, I'm not going to be able to sleep at night knowing that he's still walking the streets, right?"

"Well," she said sitting beside him. "We could him pick up... press charges, although I'm pretty sure that lawyer of his would have him out quickly based on what happened Wednesday."

"He lured you out of your apartment to do this, Olivia. I doubt this is the first time he's done something like that."

She nodded as she thought about what was said. "You want to speak to the Richardsons again? Maybe we could keep him based on the fact that he abused Daniel."

"We couldn't hold him on that. Not without a complaining witness... Christ..."

He leaned over and rested his face in his hands with his elbows on his knees, but Olivia knew exactly what was bothering him.

"We'll find Kreider, Elliot. There's only so many places he could go. He'll show up at some point and the moment he does, we'll nail him. And, as for Drover... we should keep looking at him because if he abused Daniel Richardson, he probably abused other boys too."

She rubbed his back as he shook his head.

"I don't want him on the streets," he said.

"Neither do I."

"Where are you staying tonight?"

"I'll be fine, Elliot."

He turned toward her and her hand paused in the middle of his back.

"Elliot, seriously," she said. "I'll be fine."

"You'll be fine...Fine, like nothing was wrong? That kind of fine?"

"I let my guard down last night, partly because I had a little too much to drink.

Trust me. I'll be *fine*."

"Fine or not, just know that you're getting a ride home every night until we've got him in lockup or at least until I break his legs."

Olivia nudged him and he leaned to put his arm around her, leaving room between them to keep from hitting her bruised side.

"I've grown attached to you, Liv," he said. "I wouldn't want to lose you to an asshole like Drover."

She allowed him to give her a light squeeze. "You won't."

Fin leaned back in his desk chair as he poured over Owen Kreider's phone records from the past two months. Munch held records from September and October of 2006, while Olivia was combing through the past year's bank records of Kreider, the Lewendales, and anyone Kreider had contacted more than once in the past month.

All four SVU detectives had taken a break from answering phone calls relating to Kreider. According to eye witness accounts, he had been seen everywhere from visiting Ground Zero to being seen on a bus crossing the Mississippi River to jumping off the Golden Gate bridge. They had investigated anything that pertained to the Tri-State area, but recovered nothing.

Elliot had spent most of the day pulling anything he could find on Jeffrey Drover, taking a break midway to call his mother, lest he receive a lecture from his brother. Casey gave him an odd look when he asked for an additional warrant on Drover and said that he should "tone down" his vendetta against Drover before he lodged a complaint, but Elliot did not care.

With Drover in a state where he would chance attacking a cop, he knew it was only a matter of time before Drover did something drastic to a child, over whom he could have more control. By the end of the day, he had conducted his own interviews with people who had coached with Drover and the parents of the children on Drover's teams and he also secured a police detail on Drover. No one had stepped forward to say that Drover had done anything wrong, however, none of the parents had any inclination to say positive things about Drover any longer.

At seven o'clock, Elliot was heading back to the squad room just in time to see Munch and Fin leaving for the night, each carrying their own stack of records to sift through in the comfort of home. Having found nothing significant in anyone's bank records, Olivia sat at her desk trying to plan the next week as best she could. There were court appearances and numerous other open cases that still needed to be dealt with and Helena Fayden's case was still a priority, much to Olivia's dismay.

She had received another phone call from Evelyn Rivers, but when she called back, she only received the machine. Evelyn's message had said only that she wanted to

make sure she had both Olivia's work and cell numbers, just in case. In case of what, Olivia did not know and she made a note to check on Evelyn sometime Saturday.

"We've got the detail on Drover," Elliot said as he approached his desk.

"We?" Olivia said with an eyebrow raised. "Why are *we* detailing him?"

"I'm just having some Unis sit on him for a bit. This is his first weekend unemployed and I want to make sure that if does something else stupid, we can catch him."

"You don't think you're pressing it too hard," she said. "I mean we both know the real reason you're doing this."

"Well, I could renege," he said, sitting on his desk. "'Course they'll be asking questions and I couldn't guarantee that you're little incident with Drover wouldn't come out. Liv, we owe it to these kids to do something now, rather than later."

"I doubt he's going to be doing anything except wallow in self-misery."

"That bruise on your side says different."

Olivia pursed her lips, but did not reply as she continued organizing several files on her desk.

"You ready?" Elliot. "I'm picking up Kathleen tonight."

Olivia shook her head. "You don't have to drive me home. I'll be fine. I don't want you to drive me all the way back Downtown before you get your daughter."

"Too bad," he said. When she shook her head again, he sighed. "Are you really going to make Kathleen wait 'cause you're being stubborn?"

"Fine," Olivia said, rolling her eyes with a groan. "I'm done. I couldn't drum up anything new on Kreider anyway. What's on the agenda with you and Kathleen tonight?"

"We've got *Perfect Crime* tickets at eight at Snapple Theatre."

"Oh come on, Elliot!" she said throwing down her bag. "Eight! You'll never make it to my place, then all the way to Queens and back to Broadway to make that curtain call. Just go! I'll be fine. You don't have to worry about me like this."

Elliot stared at her for a moment. "Fine...just...*please* be careful."

"I am," Olivia said. "I will. You've got a detail on Drover and once I go home, I'll probably be in for the night."

He gave her a small wave and raced for the elevators. Olivia shook her head at the idea of Elliot taking the chance at being late for the Off-Broadway show, but smirked at notion that he cared about her.

An hour later, she was on the phone with Maya reflecting on her first reasonably good day in several weeks.

"Well," Maya said. "It's good to hear that you two are doing better."

"Yeah," Olivia paused on the phone. "I've been thinking that now is a good a time as any to tell Elliot about Kathleen."

"About what? The pills?"

"Yeah. We're in a good place right now...maybe it will soften the blow if I just approach right."

"When?"

"I guess tomorrow. Maybe I'll just show up at his place and just say it."

"You sure you don't want to do it in a restaurant or something?" Maya said. "It might be best for that to go down in a public place."

“Probably,” Olivia said, smiling, “but, I think I’ll be less embarrassed when he starts screaming at me if we’re alone. Well, not alone since Kathleen’ll be there, but at least we wouldn’t be out where *everyone* can hear.”

“I see... Well, just give me a call when you get there. That way I’ll be able to give your squad a timeline to start from when you turn up missing.”

“Har...har.”

“What about Jonathan?” Maya asked quickly.

“What? Take Jonathan with me?”

“No, although that might not be such a bad idea. But, I meant just talking to him. Have you even talked since Tuesday?”

“No, but I suppose I’ll have to eventually.”

“You sound like you don’t want to.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to...it’s just...sometimes he’s so damn smug. He’s so certain that *he* knows what’s best for me. When I say I’m not in the mood, I mean it.”

“So, I trust that means you two aren’t hooking up tonight?”

“Probably not. Do you want to see a movie? I’ve been wanting to see *Dreamgirls*, but I’ve never found the time.”

“Can’t. I’m meeting Mason a little later.”

Olivia scoffed. “You know you’ve got a lot of nerve talking about my love life, when you’re stringing along multiple men at the same time.”

“Yes, but at least I know where I stand with each and every one of them.”

“Of course you do. Let’s see: you’re letting one of them dote on you, thinking you’re going to settle down one day, you’re helping one of them commit adultery on his wife of thirteen years and you’re just sleeping with the other...is it two or three? Maya, you know sometimes I just lose count.”

“It’s just the two and at least none of those are co-workers of mine.”

“I’m not doing anything with Elliot and besides...wouldn’t starting something with a *co-worker* require you to do some work?”

“Okay!” Maya said. “Time to go!”

She hung up the phone and Olivia set down the phone chuckling to herself. With an evening free from friends or work, Olivia drew a bubble bath and tried to relax from the ulcer-causing stress the week had held.

The decision to tell Elliot that she had taken Kathleen to get birth control bills came after a careful consideration over the impending aftermath. Elliot would most likely hit the roof the moment she said it, but hopefully he would calm down quickly and realize she had done it to help his family, however it was the idea of Kathy finding out that had Olivia’s stomach rumbling.

She and Kathy had never really been on the best of terms and learning that Olivia had given her daughter the “freedom” of birth control pills would most likely tilt their relationship from cordial to hateful.

The soft crackle of the candle Olivia had lit in her bathroom lulled her eyes closed as she soaked and she attempted to push away thoughts of Jonathan. In the two years that they had been dating, Olivia had asked him to leave numerous times, but he always called to apologize within three days of any fight. With Friday coming to a close, she wondered whether this past argument was the one that marked the end of their relationship.

Her breath caught and she half sank under the water at idea of losing Jonathan completely. As much as he did seem to annoy her from time to time, he was usually a good person and deep down, she knew she loved him. Of all the relationships she had had throughout her life, Jonathan Halloway was the only person with whom she could see herself growing old.

Olivia dried off and wrapped her hair up in a towel as she flopped onto her couch. From the week she had had, the only other option for her night was watching *To Catch A Thief* hoping that Jonathan would come by for something other than his itching sexual cycle.

Elliot peeked quietly into the second bedroom of his apartment and checked on his sleeping daughter.

The play was wonderful and Kathleen made them stay an hour afterward to get the autograph of the lead. She had said on their way back to Queens that she was completely exhausted and just wanted to sleep. Elliot did not mind and enjoyed the prospect of having breakfast with just the two of them in the morning as he had promised to help her find a dress for the winter formal at her school during the next day.

He stepped into her room and pulled the covers around her, smirking at the fact that she was slightly sucking her thumb just like she did when she was a little girl. He sighed, wondering, not for the first time, where all the time had gone and noticed something shiny glinting in the hallway light.

Elliot squinted in the dark and noticed a long silver and white package lying on the nightstand. He walked back into the room and picked up the package. He could see that it was a package of pills and while most of the pills were white, the ones at the end were red and each pill had a day of the week labeled over it and –

“What the hell?” he whispered.

He turned on the light on the nightstand and snapped his fingers in Kathleen’s direction.

“Kathleen. *Kathleen*. Wake up.”

Kathleen seemed groggy at first, but when she saw Elliot holding her Nordette package, she silently cursed herself for leaving them out as her eyes grew wide.

“What the hell is this?” Elliot said shaking the pills at her.

She jumped out of the bed and looked around the room wildly.

“Kathleen! What are these?” He asked the question knowing the answer, but had no other way of expressing his growing anger at what he had found.

“I-I don’t know,” she said shaking her head quickly.

“You don’t know! That’s the best you can come up with! That you don’t know?”

“They’re not mine,” Kathleen said slightly cowering against the opposite wall of her bedroom.

“You don’t know what they are, but you’re sure they’re not yours!”

Tears began to well in her eyes. “I...I don’t know.” She sank down the wall to the floor and wished she had simply left the pills at home.

“Are these...” Elliot began. “Are you sleeping with someone? With that kid...that Mike!”

"No, Dad," she said as her face scrunched into a sea of tears. "They're not m-"
"They're not yours? Is that really the story you're sticking with? That these aren't yours?"

Elliot glanced at the package in his hand. "Six pills are missing. How long have you been on the pill?"

"Just now!" she yelled. "I just started taking them on Sunday."

"Does your mother?"

"No. No one knows."

"Where did you get them?" he demanded.

"From the doctor," Kathleen said pulling her knees to her chest.

"Come on, Kathleen," he said, trying to regain his calm. "*Which* doctor? When?"

She looked up at him, but remained silent.

"Which doctor?" he repeated with a little more force. "Did you just go to the hospital and get these behind my back?"

She shook her head.

"Look, Kathleen. You can talk to me, okay? I just want to know what's going on. Where did you go to get these?"

She slowly stood, but refused to look at him. "You have to swear you're not going to go crazy when I tell you. You have to promise you won't get mad."

He felt his eye twitch involuntarily. "Okay. I promise. Just tell me what happened."

Kathleen ran her fingers through her hair. "Okay... Well, Mike and me had been talking about it."

"It?"

She gave him a dirty look, so he simply nodded and let her continue.

"We started talking and I decided that I should get some birth control."

"And you did this on your own? You went to our doctor to get these?"

"No. I didn't want you to know about it because I knew you'd react just like this."

"Then, where did you get them?"

She hesitated, bouncing on her toes a bit and looking at every point in the room except her father's eyes. "We just went to the doctor's office and got them."

"We?" He racked his brain for the name of her best friend. "You and Melissa?"

"No... I... I... asked..."

"Yes?"

"Look, Dad," she said as if she were changing the subject. "I asked *her* to take me and I don't want you to be mad."

"Maureen took you?"

She shook her head.

"Kathleen," he said beginning to lose patience. "I already told you I'm not going to be angry. I just want to know what's going on. Now, you got these and from what you're telling me or *not* telling me, you don't know anything about them, how they're going to affect you and what to do if anything goes wrong. And, the fact that neither your mother or Maureen knows about this has me *more* than worried."

"But, she told me to stay on them for a while before I did anything." She blurted out the words, but once they began flowing, she could not stop them. "She and I talked about it for a long time. She told me everything I needed to know. Every *single* thing."

“Who?” Elliot said firmly.

Kathleen sighed and stared at the floor.

They were getting nowhere fast and Elliot crossed his arms as he stared at his daughter, thinking very carefully. He felt his eye twitch again when the answer came to him.

“Olivia...took you to get birth control?”

Kathleen’s eyes finally met his and grew wide. “Dad...I asked her to.”

Elliot stood silently nodding his head as he put some of the events in the past few days together.

“She didn’t *do* anything,” Kathleen continued. “*I* came to her and *I* asked for her help.”

“You couldn’t come to me or your mother?” he whispered.

“Not when I knew you were going to act just like this. Dad, she had a lot to tell me and I’m glad I went to her.”

Elliot glared at his daughter unsure where his anger truly lied.

“I had no idea what I was doing and she told me everything.”

“Everything?” Elliot again whispered.

“Yes, everything. So, I really don’t know why you’re standing there like you’re going to snap, because I got my facts straight before I even did anything. I mean, I *actually* don’t see what the problem is at all. I did the *right* thing going to her.”

“You don’t know what the problem is!” Elliot yelled, causing Kathleen to take a step backward.

“Dad,” she said tears forming in her eyes again. “Look, I know you’re mad that I started taking them, but-”

“I’m angry,” Elliot said through clenched teeth, “that you would go behind my back and do this. You couldn’t even go to your mother. You *had* to go to Olivia.”

“I went to Olivia because I knew she would give me straight answers and she wouldn’t treat me like I was child!”

“You went to Olivia because you knew you could pull something with her you knew you’d never get away with me or your mother!”

“That’s not true, and you know it!”

“Kathleen, if you wanted to...” He could not bring himself to think of his daughter being sexually active. “Why couldn’t you go to your mother? Or your sister?”

“Because you all act like I’m still some little kid who shouldn’t even be thinking about it! Whether or not you want to believe it, I’m mature enough to handle this.”

“*You’re* mature enough to handle this?” he repeated angrily. “When I first asked you about these pills, you said you didn’t know what they were. That you didn’t know *whose* they were! You’re telling me that’s something a *mature* person does?”

“See,” she said crossing her arms. “That’s *why* I had to go to Olivia. I knew she wouldn’t be patronizing.”

“That’s because she’s never seen you dissolve into a mess of tears when confronted with a serious situation! I’m not being patronizing, I’m being honest! You went to my partner because you wanted to get away with something, and it was the only way you knew how.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“*Don’t* lie to me, Kathleen!”

"I'm not lying! I went to Olivia because Mom wouldn't even talk about it and I knew if I even brought it up, *you* were gonna act just like this!"

He slammed the package of pills on the nightstand.

"Did you beg her to take you to her doctor?" he said through clenched teeth.

"No," Kathleen said softly. "We went to the free clinic."

"Why there?"

"Olivia said that way you wouldn't find out about it."

A chord snapped within Elliot and he felt his temperature rise several degrees in one second.

Kathleen, noticing her father's skin tone change from normal to red, took a step backward. "I mean I *asked* her to take me somewhere like that, because I knew you'd flip if you found out. It's not like she suggested it."

Elliot shook his head and Kathleen opened her mouth to say something else, but he interrupted.

"You," he said pointing at her. "Don't move from that spot. Do you hear me?"

She nodded her head furiously and Elliot left the apartment, grabbing his jacket and slamming the door shut as he left.

Olivia jumped at the sound of her door lock shaking in conjunction with the music of the DVD growing louder. The apartment door opened and hit the chain lock.

"Jonathan?" she said, rising from the couch.

"Yeah, Olivia, it's me," he said from the other side of the door. "Can I come in?"

She opened the door and stepped aside to let him by her. They stared at one another for a moment before Olivia finally broke the silence.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

She scoffed. "You tell me. You're the one who came over here."

"And you're the one who threw me out a few days ago."

"Were you expecting some kind of apology?"

Jonathan sighed. "Olivia...I'm sorry. I'm sorry about Tuesday, but I didn't do anything wrong."

Olivia glared at him and crossed her arms in front of her, but he continued. "In fact, I think you were just being a little too high and mighty to come down off your exalted position in the SVU to realize that maybe you overreacted. You should really be apologizing to me."

"What?" she said raising her voice. "You came all the way from the East Side to say *this* to me?"

"I have given you everything I've got, Olivia! I treat you like a queen, but you keep treating me like you're doing me a favor by allowing me to breathe in your goddamn presence and I'm sick of it!"

"You have nothing to be sick about! Every day, I see--"

"I know already! Molested kids and women raped to the point that they'll never be the same. I get it! I know! But rather than come home and allow yourself to escape

from all that, just for one second, you keep pushing me away! You're not the only one in the world with a difficult job."

"Don't even pretend like your *tough day* is even comparable to mine!"

"You know what? It doesn't even matter, because when *I* leave the office, I *leave* the office! I leave all that shit there because I know it'll be there for me tomorrow. All I want to is you, and all you give me is your bullshit!"

"You're so full of it, Jonathan! You *don't* get it! I can't leave 'all that shit' at the office because my job doesn't end at five o'clock or even when the sun goes down. I care about every single victim that walks through our doors and even when their case is over, even when justice has been served, I still have to be there for them. I'm the one they call when they hear a noise at night, and when they start reliving what's happened to them! What's been done to them! You don't know my job and if you can't figure out that I when I say no, I mean no, then you need to get the hell out and stay out!"

"Fine," he said through his teeth. "You're right, Olivia. You get paid nothing to deal with society's filth and I respect that. Trust me, I do. But if you can't step outside yourself for one goddamn minute and see how someone who doesn't know every single detail of your job could make an honest mistake, then you can't possibly be as good at your job as you think you are! So, I touched you when you didn't feel like being touched. So what! It's the first time it has ever happened and instead of being the understanding person you claim to be, you throw me the hell out! It's like you're doing everything possible to keep me from loving you and that's sick!"

"I don't need this Jonathan. I really don't."

"No, you *need* to hear this! You're a good person and a beautiful woman, but you're still alone and I know exactly why. Every time someone gets too close to you, every time a guy acts like he'd give up everything just to be with you, you lose your goddamn mind and you start pushing him away as hard as you can. You just can't allow someone to love you! Why? Is it because of your mother? Was there someone else who hurt you when you were younger? Someone you won't ever tell me about because you refuse to let me in! What! What is it? Why won't you let me love you!"

Olivia stood silent, eyes burning with tears she refused to shed.

"You know what?" he continued. "I don't need this shit. I don't need it, Olivia. This too much goddamn work to chase after you, when the best I can ever hope for is a fight like this at least once a week."

"Well, then leave!" she screamed. "Get the hell out! Go find yourself a little gold-digging whore who you can shower with gifts and who'll do exactly what you want her to do without question!"

"Goddamn it, Olivia! I don't want that! I just want you and I just want you to be happy! Is that asking too much! I just want to love you! I want to marry you! I want to wake up next to you everyday for the rest of my life! I want to travel the world with you! I want to grow old with you! I want to give you everything, but you refuse to let me. Why?"

Her vision completely blurred and overwhelmed with emotion, Olivia took a step backward. "Just go," she whispered. "Please, just go. You're screaming at me and all I wanted from you was one simple apology for being a jackass. Just go."

"Why do you keep throwing me out like this? What does this prove? I'm giving you everything and you just want to drop kick me out the door. Why?"

“Because if you want to tell me all that, you can do it when you’re calm and when you mean it. Not when you’re just trying to get laid.”

“Olivia...I’m sorry.”

“Sorry, for what? You don’t even know what you’re supposed to be sorry about.”

Jonathan stared at her for a long time. “I’m *frustrated*, Olivia. You want me to apologize for Tuesday, but you’re not even willing to meet me halfway...but I *am* sorry. I promise you, in the future, I’ll be more understanding.”

“That’s what you said the last time when you were being completely insensitive about Elliot’s daughter. I have no reason to believe you when you say it.”

“Then why even ask for the goddamn apology! My God! You’re the most difficult person I’ve ever met!”

“Why? Because I don’t let you get away with all the shit your family does? Look, Jonathan, I don’t care what you do, or what your father does or what your great-grandfather did. All I know is I’m not going to put up with your smug bullshit, just because everyone else in the city sees fit to kiss your ass. You were being a complete dick a week ago, you were last Tuesday and you’re acting the same way tonight. I’m not going to be swayed just because you think you know everything. You don’t know my job and you don’t know my life!”

“And whose fault is that? If I didn’t struggle to drag things out of you, I wouldn’t know the bits and pieces that I do!”

“This is absolutely ridiculous and I’m sick of arguing with you. Go home and come back when you’re ready to talk to me like normal adult.”

“A normal adult? Tell me Olivia: is it normal for a woman to go apeshit over someone reading her the wrong way? Is it *normal* for someone to not accept gifts and make a man work like a dog just to get a little closer to her? Was it *normal* that you barely knew a thing about me and you didn’t even know my last name when you were ready to spread your legs for me?”

Olivia took three steps toward and slapped him across the face.

“FUCK YOU!”

Jonathan staggered backwards in a combination of pain and surprise having never hit been in his entire life, and through her own blurry haze, Olivia could see tears forming in his eyes.

“Why do you make everything so hard?” he asked softly, holding a hand to his face.

“Get out! Now!”

“All I want to do is love you.”

“So help me God, if you don’t leave right now, I’m going to shoot you in the head. Get out!”

Jonathan slowly grabbed his coat and walked to the door. “Why are you doing this to me? I just made a mistake.”

“And you’re making another one by standing there when I’ve already told you to leave. If you want to call a woman a whore, you go right ahead, but it’s not going to be me. I already told you...I’m not putting up with your shit and I mean it.”

“Why are you so incapable of allowing yourself to be happy?”

“I’ll be perfectly happy the second you’re out of my sight. Leave...now.”

He glared at her a moment more before shaking his head and leaving the apartment.

Olivia felt her heart catch the moment the door clicked softly in its latched and she stood shaking her own head knowing the only thing that kept her from after him in the corridor was her own stubbornness and pride.

She locked the door and pulled the door chain across the door, but held her hand on its base, listening for footsteps in the hallway. The sounds of someone pacing just behind the door echoed through the door and she wiped at her eyes as she glanced out her peephole.

Jonathan paced back and forth in front of her door, continuously running a hand through jet black hair that appeared curiously blue in the corridor light. Her hand shook violently on the door chain, her mind longing to open the door and allow their tears to speak for themselves, but she stood firm.

He had no right to say that to her and in combination with the week she had had, no amount make up sex would shake away those words.

She stepped away from the door and poured herself a scotch in her kitchen as her mind raced. The drink shook in her hand and Olivia jumped a moment later at the sound of her telephone ringing. She stared at it for a moment wondering if Jonathan would be on the other end ready to scream her before she answered.

“Hello...?”

“Livia...” Maya said softly. She sounded like she was crying. “Livia, his wife is banging on my door right now. She found out, Livia. She found out.”

“Maya,” she began. “I’ve just had one of the worst fights of my relationship with Jonathan and I don’t think I can handle you right now.”

“Livia! She’s screaming at my door right now!”

“Then call the police.”

“I did! I called you!”

“Maya! I can *not* deal with you right now!” She hung up the phone and swallowed the rest of her drink in one gulp.

As if fate was testing her, the telephone rang again.

“What!” she answered.

“Uh...yeah, Olivia? It’s Philip. Look, I’m not sure if you’re free tomorrow or not, but since you’re home tonight...I know of this really nice restaurant that just opened and-”

Olivia hung up the phone without saying another word and promptly unhooked her phone from the wall as she poured herself another drink. The harsh alcohol hit her throat and she felt the urge to simply finish off the bottle as she had watched her mother do so many times throughout her childhood.

Instead of pouring her third Scotch of the night, Olivia slid to the floor against her cabinets and rested her head on her knees as she pulled them to her chest. The tears that had been shed for Jonathan had long since dried, staining her face and she squeezed her eyes shut to keep any others from escaping.

I’ve shed enough tears for one night, she thought.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

“OLIVIA!”

Olivia woke with a start from her position on the floor. She had been asleep, wrapped in her own arms, for barely thirty minutes when the banging on her door ripped her from her sleep.

“Olivia! Open the door or I’m kicking it in!”

She rose quickly at the sound of Elliot’s voice, her bones and muscles aching from her nap on the floor. She quickly crossed the apartment, puzzled at what he could want so late at night and at her apartment.

As she pulled the door chain across its slide, she froze.

He knows, she thought.

Olivia opened the door and took a step backward as Elliot barged into the apartment, a light dusting of snow still in his hair and on his jacket.

“You...” he began. She could see he was shaking with anger and he paced back and forth in front of her. “You took...my daughter...to get the pill.

Olivia took a deep breath. *Here we go.*

“She said she didn’t have anyone else to turn to,” Olivia said in a small voice.

“YOU TOOK...my-MY DAUGHTER...TO GET THE PILL!”

He was yelling so loud her ears began to ring.

“Elliot, she came to me asking for birth control and-”

“And you gave it to her!”

“I didn’t give her anything! She came to me with questions and I gave her information.”

“You went with her to get it!”

She took a step away from him. “Yes, I volunteered to take her to a doctor so that she could get checked out and then to the pharmacist.”

“You had no...*no* right to do that! She’s *my* daughter! I can’t even believe you!”

Olivia took another step backward, but Elliot took another one forward. “Look, I tried to talk her into going to you and Kathy, but-”

“You should have tried to talk her out of it! Not take her to the damn clinic!”

“Elliot, she already had her mind made up about it! If I didn’t talk to her about-”

“You should have come to me first! You should have told me what was going on! I’ve been worried for weeks about what was going on with her and you knew all the time! You should’ve told me!”

“I wanted to,” Olivia said, her voice pleading with him. “But, I couldn’t figure out a way to tell you without you turning into this.” She motioned to his figure now so close that he was standing over her instead of in front of her. “I didn’t want you to be angry, least of all with Kathleen.”

“You’re damn right I’m angry! You! You sat down and had some long heart-felt discussion about birth control with my daughter! My kid! Like you’re some great confidante!”

“She had nowhere else to go!” Olivia had backed all the across the living room and now had her back pressed firmly against the wall of her bedroom.

“She should’ve come to me!”

“Why! So you could blow up at her just like this?”

Elliot was silent for the first time since he had set foot in her apartment that night. "She could have gone to Kathy or Maureen or..."

"Or who?" she said now attempting to stand her ground. "Who, Elliot? She didn't want you to know. Kathleen looked me in the eye and said she could not go to her mother or her sister about this and that she had no one else to turn to. It was either me or just winging it!"

"Nothing...nothing gave you the right to talk to my daughter without telling me," Elliot said, his voice scathing.

"Elliot, it's not like I picked her up from school one day and said, 'Hey, let's have a talk about sex.' She called me. She asked me to talk to her about this...and, I'm glad I did."

Elliot glared at Olivia feeling an intense rage running through his body. She swallowed and continued. "You wouldn't have believed all the stuff she didn't know. And-"

"She shouldn't have to know about it!" he blurted out without thinking.

"Why the hell not?"

"She just barely eighteen years old."

"And, you know what?" Olivia said now taking the offensive. "In a few months she'll be out there on her own. Do you really want *your* daughter away at college not knowing the least bit about birth control? Do you really want your kid repeating your mistakes?"

Elliot simply shook his head and glowered at her.

"Elliot, I hate to break it to you, but by the time she came to me, she'd already made up her mind about it. She was going to have sex, whether she got any information on birth control or not. All I did was-"

"All you did was give her the green light to do whatever the hell she wants and the means to do it! Why do you think she came to you? Because she knew that you weren't going to try to talk her out of it!"

"She came to me because she'd already made up her mind and she was just trying to not get pregnant in the process!"

"You...you should've done...*something*!"

"I did! I told her they should both get tested before anything. I told her-"

"*You* shouldn't be any conversations about sex with *my* daughter!"

"Well, which is it, Elliot? Should I have done something or should I have just let her go off on her own to figure it out by trial and error?"

"You should've told her to come to me!"

"So you could act like this when you found out! Tell me, Elliot: exactly what would you have said to Kathleen if she came to you asking about birth control? Or more appropriately, what would you have done?"

He stormed away from her, taking a few steps across the room.

"You would've tracked her boyfriend down," she continued, "and threatened him too and the next time she needed to come to you, she would know for certain that she couldn't."

"That still didn't give you the right to talk to her without telling me first," Elliot said calmly, though the anger still flowed in his veins.

“What would you have wanted me to do, Elliot? She asks me to meet her for breakfast...she already has a list of questions...Was I supposed to tell her I’d think about whether or not I could talk to her about birth control? She had her mind already made up. She knew exactly what she was going to do and I knew that if I didn’t tell her something right then and there, I knew that you would be dealing with becoming a grandfather at a young age.”

Elliot sighed and closed his eyes and some of the animosity for his partner began to subside. Sensing that most of the initial danger had passed, Olivia reached out and touched his arm.

“Elliot-”

“Don’t!” he said recoiling from her. “Don’t touch me. I...I don’t even want to look at you.”

He glared at her a moment more before, shaking his head in disgust and storming out of her apartment, slamming the door shut in the process.

Olivia stared at the closed door, feeling tears burning in her eyes once again. He had never been that angry with her and she had no idea how she could even begin to remedy the problem.

As she crossed the room to lock her door, she heard two knocks on the door. She hesitated at first, wondering why, if it was Elliot, would he bother knocking.

She opened the door slowly to see Mark standing in her doorway.

“Sorry, to bother you,” he said softly. “But...uh, I know you’ve got the same Internet as me, and mine hasn’t been working. Is yours all right, ‘cause I’m trying to see if it’s just me or if it’s our building.”

Olivia shook her head as she attempted to quell the tears that were blurring her vision.

“Are...are you okay?” he asked. “I mean...I thought I heard shouting...”

Before he could say another word, Olivia had thrown her arms around him. Tears steadily trailed down her face as she allowed Mark’s arms to envelope her and she just let out everything. Her knees began to buckle and they both sank to the floor, Mark never letting go.

She had tried so hard to remain strong, but with back to back arguments with the two men she loved most in the world, Olivia could do nothing but sob on Mark’s shoulder, crying even harder at the irony of the man she considered small and weak, being strong enough to hold her when she was at her most vulnerable.

Chapter Twelve

Saturday January 27, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York

Olivia shivered under the blanket on her bed and she shifted around momentarily, before finally opening her eyes. She had awakened cold in her bed for the first time in months, and it was not until she looked around her bedroom that the events of the previous night came flooding back to her.

Sighing as she leaned back into her pillows, she wondered how so many things could go wrong in just four hours. She had all but ruined her relationships with both Elliot and Jonathan and there did not seem to be any sort of resolution. Things were said and actions taken; no amount of wit could smooth things over with either man.

She turned onto her side to stare at the alarm clock that read just past seven in the morning and wondered if it was too early to call either one, but shook away the thought. Not enough time had elapsed for Elliot to stop fuming and Jonathan would probably refuse to take her calls.

“Aw, crap,” she said aloud and she sprang up in the bed.

Olivia snatched her cell phone off the nightstand and nearly yelled “M-J” into the phone.

“Yes.” Maya said in a solemn voice.

“Maya? It’s me.”

Olivia was met only with silence.

“Maya...? Are you okay?” She could hear Maya sniff into the phone, but she said nothing.

“Maya?” Olivia said again. “Talk to me. What’s wrong?”

“Are you serious?” Maya finally spat. “I had that crazy bitch banging on my door for half the night and you’re asking me what’s wrong?”

“Maya...”

“*Olivia*, I thought she was going to break down the damn door,” Maya continued. “She was screaming at me and-and...she was yelling out racial slurs that didn’t even fit me. She kept calling me a wetback or something and there are marks all over the door where she was kicking and scratching all over the place!”

“I told you to call the police.”

“I don’t have to call the police. I call *you*. Why go through a bunch of people when I knew you could help me? I’d have helped you! Anytime you want some legal advice on something *else* you’ve done, I give it to you any time, day or night, but the one time I ever call on you in a real emergency...”

“Maya, I’m sorry.”

“You should be! You said you couldn’t *handle* me...God, Livia. Am I that big burden on everyone?”

“No,” Olivia said guilt weighing on her in every direction. “Maya, no. You’re not a burden. It’s just that Jonathan had just left the second you called and I was just...losing it. But, are you okay? Is his wife still there?”

“No,” Maya said, her voice sounding as if she was still crying. “She left around two in the morning.”

“How she even find out?”

“I don’t know. Through all her ramblings, I think she found a picture or something.”

“But, how did she find your address?”

“I guess Mason must’ve given it to her. *Ha Ishvara*...How do I get myself in these situations?”

“Maya...I’m sure she’ll calm down. Do you need me to come over?”

“No...” Maya said after a long pause. “But...what happened to you last night? What do you mean by ‘Jonathan just left?’”

Olivia sighed and launched into what had transpired the previous night regarding Jonathan and even mentioned that she had collapsed into Mark's stubby arms, but made certain to leave out any word concerning Elliot.

"Wow," Maya said once Olivia had enfolded all the details. "No wonder you couldn't *handle* me."

"Maya, I'm sorry," Olivia said. "I really am, Hon. I didn't mean that."

"Livia, if it had been me, I probably would have screamed out something worse. Do you need *me* to come over?"

"No," Olivia said smiling. "I'm fine. I was just such a bitch to everyone I knew last night, that I figured I'd start out calling you first."

"Yeah, you figured I'd be the quick fix," Maya said sardonically.

"Well, no...I just knew it would take a lot more than that to pull the plug on thirty years."

They ended the conversation amicably and Olivia sighed as she prepared herself for the precinct. If Elliot was there, she might have a chance to talk to him and smooth things over a bit. If he was not, it would mean that he was far more infuriated with her than she had originally thought.

When Olivia entered the squad room and saw Elliot's empty chair, she wanted to sink through the floor and the only thought that uplifted her was the memory that Kathleen was staying with Elliot from the previous night and that he would probably be spending the day with his second child.

As she settled herself into incoming reports of Kreider sightings, Olivia could see an officer pointing a middle-aged woman in the direction of Olivia's desk. Olivia sat up a bit straighter at her desk as the woman approached her.

"The officers downstairs told me I need to talk to Special Victims," the woman said. "Is this where I am?"

"Yes," Olivia said standing as she spoke. "I'm Detective Benson. How can I help?"

The woman sat in the chair next to the desk pair Olivia shared with Elliot. "My name is Maura Davies and I think my neighbor might've been attacked last night."

"What makes you think that?"

"There was just a lot of yelling and screaming and banging around all through the night and...I know she's had a fair amount of men going in and out of there, but when I knocked on her door just a little while ago there was no answer, but her car is in her space. I tried calling too and she isn't answering."

"Do you expect any specific foul play?" Olivia asked wondering why the woman was directed to the SVU.

"Well...Mary, that's her name. Last year I know one of those men...raped her in her apartment. The last time no one looked in on her and she was hurt very badly. I just don't want the same thing to happen again."

"Her name was Mary?" Olivia said taking notes.

"Yes, Mary Duschene. It's 512 Greene."

Olivia nodded as she wrote and Mrs. Davies continued. "I don't mean to be a bother, but I just want to make sure that everything's okay."

"It's no bother, Mrs. Davies," Olivia said. She glanced at Fin sitting at the other desk pair who nodded back that he had heard the conversation and within ten minutes, they were knocking on the apartment door of Mary Duschene.

"Wish my neighbors were like this?" Fin said as they waited for an answer.

"Mine too," Olivia said.

Even throughout two lengthy and heated arguments in her apartment, Mark was the only one of several neighbors who even bothered to see what the problem was and he knocked on her door constantly. Olivia stifled a sigh when she considered that Mrs. Fitzgivens, even though she desperately wanted Olivia to date her son, had not called or inquired if Olivia was all right after Elliot had left.

She and Fin waited a moment longer before the door flew open to display a smiling petite face.

"Yes?" she said glancing back and forth between the detectives.

"Mary Duschene?" Olivia asked showing her badge. "I'm Detective Benson and this is Detective Tutuola. We were notified of a disturbance by one of your neighbors and we just wanted to make sure that everything was okay."

Mary nodded. "Oh...yeah, I, uh, just had a really bad fight with my boyfriend last night. I can't believe they'd send detectives just to check on me."

"Your neighbors were concerned," Fin said. "After what happened last year..."

Mary's pale face turned red and her gaze dropped to the floor. "Yeah...well, I'm glad they even worried. But, I'm fine. We just argued and we even made up this morning, so everything's really cool."

Olivia nodded wishing her own morning had gone as swimmingly.

Sorry," she said once they were back in the car. "I figured it might've been a waste of time, but you never know."

"S'all right," Fin said. "Besides, I needed a break from Kreider."

"Anything look promising yet?"

"Naw, but I think we should press a littler harder on some of his co-workers at Rohlman-Hayworth."

"Why? You think they're hiding him after what he's done?"

"They may not be hiding him, but some of them gotta know something. You can't work next to somebody for years and not have a little idea about who they know and how they spend their time."

She smirked at him. "Well...that's not always true. Besides, how long did *we* work together before I even knew you had a son?"

Fin simply shook his head at her as they returned to the precinct.

Woodside, New York
9:53AM

Perfectly browned toast jumped from the red toaster in Elliot's kitchen and he grabbed the slices to add a light spread of butter to them. He had awakened earlier and had intended to take Kathleen out for a breakfast meal, but once he realized that a deep

conversation was needed considering the events of the previous night, he decided it would be prudent for them to have breakfast alone.

Kathleen treaded softly into the kitchen while he finished with the eggs and sat silently as he set a plate in front of her. She pushed the eggs around a bit before taking a small bite of toast.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Elliot said after a full minute's silence between them.

"There's nothing to talk about."

"I think there is," he continued. "Obviously something's wrong since you've just decided that you can't go to either me or your mother about your problems."

"It's not a problem, Dad," she said, looking him in the eye for the first time that morning. "I had questions that I...just couldn't ask you and Mom refused to answer. Olivia was the only one I could count on."

"Maureen lives twenty minutes away. You couldn't talk to her?"

Kathleen rolled her eyes. "Dad...you have an older brother. When was the last time you went to Uncle Bryce about something going on in *your* life?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything! You're telling me that you're fine when he gives you those 'holier than thou' looks when you're trying to explain something to him?"

"Maureen doesn't do that."

"Yes, she does. She looks at me like she's supposed to be my role model or something and I'm just supposed to follow her example. I mean, I *tried*, I really did try to talk to her about Mike and me and she told me that I shouldn't even worry about it because I didn't need any other distractions in my life right now."

"And she's right. You don't like her giving you advice because you know she's right. You went to Olivia because you know she didn't know the whole story so she *couldn't* give you the best advice."

"What whole story?" Kathleen yelled. "All I wanted was to know a little about the pill and everybody was acting like I was trying to find some tricky way to have a goddamn abortion! Olivia was the only one who talked to me like a normal person."

Elliot sat back in his chair and Kathleen continued. "You know, in some families, this sort of thing would barely even matter. In a *normal* family, I could've gone to Mom or Maureen and we would have this heart-to-heart talk about it and be closer in the end because of it. But not ours. We have to pretend like I'm not supposed to want to have sex with my boyfriend or even want to know anything about birth control. It's just ridiculous."

Elliot sighed, knowing that each of his daughter's words were true and guilt washed over him for the way he treated his partner the previous night. When his daughter thought she had nowhere else to turn, Olivia stepped in and quite possibly saved his daughter from even further downward spiral.

"What'd you do last night, Dad?" Kathleen asked breaking the silence that had descended over the table.

"What?"

"*What?*" she repeated sardonically. "I heard you come back last night and you didn't even come in to check if I was still here. What'd you do to her?"

"Who?"

“Olivia! I know you went storming off to her place, so what’d you do to her?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. We just talked about it.” She simply glared at him and he corrected himself. “We argued about it because...because whether or not you came to her in confidence, you’re still *my* kid and she no right to keep that from me.”

“I told her not to say anything, Dad. I asked her to keep quiet about it.”

“And regardless, she still should have told me.”

“So you could yell at her earlier rather than later?” Her voice began to rise in intensity. “You know, I think the fact that she didn’t say anything says a lot more about you than it does about her.”

“How?” he said crossing his arms.

“She knows how you like to blow up over nothing and she knew that this...” She pulled out the Nordette package out of her robe pocket and dropped it on the table. “... was really not that big a deal. She knew I just needed a little help and it was just common sense not to tell you.”

“You should’ve come to me or your mother about it!” he yelled, frustrated once again.

“Why? It’s just the pill!”

“It’s not just the pill! It’s hormones, it’s sex, it’s babies, it’s life! It’s not just about the pill! Only someone in the family would be able to talk to you about all that and know whether you were ready for this!”

Kathleen shook her head. “You just want to keep thinking I’m eight for the rest of my life. I’m eighteen, Dad, but you don’t even want me out past eleven on Friday and I wouldn’t be if you had your way.”

“Because I’m your father and I know you.”

“You don’t know everything. I haven’t even been going out that much lately, not that you’d know anything about that.”

“How would I know if you refuse to talk to me?”

“Because I know you keep looking at me like I’m a little kid.”

“Because I’ve known you since you were a little kid and behavior-wise, not much has changed.”

“And that’s why I went to Olivia. She’s the only person who could look at the situation as-is and help me based on what I had to say. Not looking at me as if I was still a little girl. Mom couldn’t do that, Maureen couldn’t do that and you sure as hell couldn’t do that. I had to talk to somebody and if it wasn’t her, then who?”

Elliot fell silent and sighed again. Truthful words aside, he could just barely hide the pain of knowing his child did not think she could come to him with her problems. As he looked at her, he remembered viewing her not yet fully-formed body on an ultrasound with Kathy, the first time she looked at him and said “Dah-dee,” the wave goodbye she gave him when she left for her first day of kindergarten, the feeling when he let go of her bicycle seat and she took off down the sidewalk without training wheels for the first time, her squarely telling him that she was a virgin a twelve, the first time she brought home a boy she called her boyfriend, and the way she looked at that moment as he realized that she was nearly grown.

He felt the burn of tears growing in his eyes, but he took a deep breath to keep them from appearing. Somewhere between her very first word and Kathleen asking him “Who,” he had lost his daughter to the world. In between all the criminals caught and

arguments with Kathy, Kathleen and grown up and his bond with her felt weaker than it had throughout all the time she had been alive. His little blue-eyed angel had to find solace in his friend because she felt she could not confide in her own father. Instead of being the one she came to first with everything from fights with Maureen to questions about homework, he was now dead last on her list of advisors and friends.

Elliot sat a little straighter in his chair, determined not to allow his relationship with his daughter to deteriorate any further.

“You could’ve at least tried,” he said.

“I did and I told you how Mom and Maureen reacted.”

“You never once came to me.”

Kathleen rolled her eyes. “You wanted me to come to *you* about birth control?”

“I didn’t get to forty-three without learning a few things about life. You can talk to me.”

“So, you really want me to talk to you about sex?”

His eye twitched as his daughter said that last word, but his resolve strengthened. “Yeah...yes. I mean, I plan on telling your mother about all this because she’s worried out of her mind about what’s been bugging you lately, but you can talk to me...about anything. You can *always* talk to me.”

A smirk spread across Kathleen’s face as she stared at him. “Anything? And you promise you won’t treat me like a child?”

“I promise. You can talk to me about anything you and...I’ll try to listen as best I can and if I can’t help for some reason, then we’ll figure out something together.”

“So, anything?”

“Anything and everything.”

“Okay...so, when I decide to sleep with Mike...,” Kathleen paused and stared at her father who had taken the moment to pile eggs in his mouth. “And, we’ve been tested and say we’re talking after the formal...alone and we’re getting ready to-”

“You know what?” Elliot interrupted. “I think...I’m thinking...this idea about you talking to Olivia about this is...um...is a good idea. In fact...yeah, I think it’s a *great* idea.”

Kathleen grinned at her father and shook her head. “If she’ll even want to after you’re *talk* last night.”

“Well...I’ll talk to her again. Give it my blessing or something. If you’re gonna talk to someone, I’d rather it be someone I trust.”

“I know, Dad,” she said pushing her plate away from her. “That’s why I went to her. I didn’t get to eighteen without learning a couple things about life either.”

He chuckled and grabbed her last bit of toast. “Little girl, I’ll forget more than you’ll ever know about life.”

“Sure, Dad,” she said rolling her eyes. “Whatever you say.”

New York Hilton
11:21AM

The drive to the West 50s was silent save for Fin's music in the car, but Olivia's mind was a torrent of thought.

She and Fin received a call as they were leaving the Mary Duschene's apartment regarding Helena Fayden's still open case. Representative Fayden had appeared in the city and was demanding a status report in person. While Olivia was simply annoyed that they were being summoned at Fayden's insistence, Fin was livid as they approached the hotel.

"Can't even believe we gotta show up like this," he said as they were driving up 6th Avenue. "Like the NYPD is at Fayden's disposal."

"Trust me," Olivia said. "I don't like it anymore than you do."

"We tell people that everybody's treated the same, but this is proof that we don't. We could be tracking down Kreider's birth mom, but instead we're busy kissing ass. Ridiculous."

Olivia only nodded in reply.

"Where's Elliot in all this?" he asked and Olivia felt herself go tense.

"He...uh, has Kathleen with him. I think he's spending the day with her."

"Okay...Is that all that's up, 'cause I know you two've been arguing more than usual."

"What do you mean 'more than usual?'" Olivia said. "We hardly ever argue."

"Like, I said...more than usual."

She sighed and began her story of how Kathleen had come to her for help and how Elliot lost it when he found out about it.

"He'll probably never want me to even look at his kids again."

"Naw," Fin said. "He'll realize she's better off having you to talk to and he'll come around."

"Yeah..." Olivia said not quite believing Fin's words.

When they arrived at the hotel, Helena was sitting at the table in one of the suites, looking very distressed. Her eyes were red and her hair was standing on end in several places.

"Is there anything else you can remember about that night?" Olivia asked after she and Fin had informed Mr. Fayden that while they were still on the case, they had very little on which to proceed since Helena had so few details.

"No," she said softly. "I don't remember anything."

Fin sighed and Mr. Fayden walked out of the room. Olivia was about to follow when Helena burst into tears at the table.

"What is it?" Olivia asked.

"I can't," Helena said. "I...I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"*This*. I can't do this anymore. I'm sorry."

"What do you have to be sorry for?" Fin said. "It's not your fault you were raped. Lots of people black out what happened to th-"

"I wasn't!" Helena shouted and Fin and Olivia glanced at each other, both resisting the urge to roll their eyes.

"You weren't raped?" Olivia said.

Helena shook her head. Fin stood up and began pacing by the table, but Olivia tried to get Helena to look her in the eye. Too often had she seen rape victims renege

because there was too much pressure coming on them from all sides, but the longer she stared at Helena, the more obvious it became that she had lied about the rape.

"I'm sorry," Helena said. "I didn't mean for it to go this far."

"Why did you lie?" Olivia asked.

"I...I didn't mean to. I just...I brought these guys back with me and I didn't want people to think I was some kind of whore."

Olivia felt every muscle in her body tense as she resisted the urge to tear into Helena.

"I thought it was just...just a little white lie. I didn't think anybody would really look into it," Helena continued.

"Of course, we'd look into it!" Fin said. "We take every rape case seriously. Especially with *your* father. What did you think was gonna happen?"

"I'm sorry," Helena said. "I just didn't think..."

"No, you didn't," Olivia said. "You *didn't* think. You didn't think about the hours we've spent combing the city for your phantom rapists or you didn't think about how your lie made each man on hotel staff give up DNA or how your lie makes it that much harder for any other girl who comes to us with this same story. If you're lucky, your father will take on the cost and burdens of having wasted so much of our time."

"Please don't tell my father," Helena pleaded

"What do you want us to do?" Fin said. "Keep your case open just for the hell of it!"

"I'm sorry. I'm *sorry*! Just...please don't tell my father."

"We're not," Olivia said. "*You're* going to tell him. I'm sure he'll be happy to hear that his own daughter wasted *hundreds* of the city's man hours on a lie."

"And just so you know," Fin said. "The murders of six kids had to hang on hold just for you. Think about that the next time you feel like telling one of those 'white lies' to keep your ass outta trouble."

They left Helena crying at the table and headed for the door.

"What's going on?" Mr. Fayden said, seeing Helena in tears.

"You're daughter's got something to tell you," Fin said as he brushed past the congressman.

Without another pause they left the hotel and drove back to the precinct each sharing stories about all the so-called victims they had seen who not only wasted their time, but hardened them just enough when it came to any real victim who shared the same story.

Woodside, New York
6:16PM

Elliot took in his old neighborhood a moment as Kathleen raced into the house with the new dress he just bought for her.

He had spent the better part of the day with her going from shop to shop as she looked for a dress for the upcoming formal dance at her school on the weekend before

Valentine's Day, and with the "perfect" one finally found, he indulged her even though it was far too expensive.

Originally, he had picked out a dress for her that only showed her neck and forearms and to retaliate, she picked out a second dress that was so revealing, that he mocked passing out on the floor of the boutique. Eventually, they settled on something Kathleen liked and Elliot was only slightly disturbed about her wearing.

Kathleen had openly told him her plans for that night and she promised that had not made up her mind about spending the night with her boyfriend, but if she did, she would tell him. While he was not sure he believed her, Elliot was comforted just to hear her say it.

Once inside his former home, he sighed and looked about the living room trying to see if there was any sign that he was missed. Everything, however, seemed to be in place and he resisted the urge to pull off his shoes and watch television with Lizzie, who was spread across the couch speaking rapidly in the phone next to him.

He nodded at her when she caught sight of him and she pulled herself from the phone.

"Hang on a sec. Hey, Dad," she said. "Dickie's at that Jessica's teaching her to play Final Fantasy XII and Mom's downstairs doing laundry."

Elliot wanted to ask her whether how her Friday had gone, but as she had quickly returned to her conversation, he walked down the hall toward the basement.

Kathy had the dryer going and the radio on loud and he smiled at the scene of his wife folding laundry as she hummed along with one of Lizzie's pop music stations.

"Hey," he half-shouted and she jumped at the sound of his voice.

She turned down the radio and pulled open the dryer. "God, you scared me. Did Kathleen find a dress she liked?"

"It took six stores and most of the day, but we found something."

"How much was it?"

He shrugged. "Too much." She stared at him and he smiled. "It's only money. Won't be able to take it with me when I die. Might as well spend it now."

She rolled her eyes and pulled some towels out of her clean clothes pile to fold. As she began to fold the laundry, Elliot stared, feeling a pang of longing in his chest. He wanted nothing more than to wrap his arms around her waist and bury his face in her, but he knew with the stroke of the "R" in his name on the divorce papers, all hope for a special moment of that sort was lost.

"So," Kathy said, knowing he stood behind, watching her. "How's *Diana*?" Her tone said that words that she would not: *Are you sleeping with that woman?*

"Fine, I suppose," Elliot said, knowing their game well enough to use the homologous tone: *I haven't seen her in days and it didn't mean anything.*

"Oh, okay." *You can say what you want, but I know you, Elliot and no woman would look at you that pissed off if something wasn't going on.*

"How are you doing?" *Please tell me you're over whatever mid-life crisis that made you leave me and that I can come home now.*

"Everything's fine." *How can I let you back when I know nothing's changed with you; a fact reiterated from when we spoke on Wednesday?*

"Okay." *I don't know what else you want from me, Kath, but I'm trying as hard as I can right now.*

"How's Olivia?" *Why won't you ever give me a solid answer on whatever's been going on with the two of you because every time I think of her getting to spend every minute with you, it makes me sick and I need to know that she's not what's causing all this distance between us.*

"Same old, same old." *It's the same thing I've been telling you since the day she became my partner: nothing is going on between us and nothing ever will.*

"That's good." *I want to believe you, but I've heard this same story from other cops' wives and I know there's no way could spend all your time with that leggy brunette without some off thoughts running through your head.*

Elliot sighed knowing that he was getting nowhere quickly through small talk with Kathy and turned to go back upstairs.

"Oh," he said, pausing on the bottom step knowing exactly what would get Kathy to speak normally to him. "I found birth control pills in Kathleen's room last night. I'll see you later."

"Whoa-whoa, what!"

She had dropped the towel she was folding and had closed the gap between them in two steps.

"Oh, you didn't know?" he asked innocently.

"No, I didn't know. When did she get the pill?"

"Well, I figured she would've come and talked to you about it."

"She said that she and Mike were *talking* about it, but that was it. I told her she should wait it out a little, when she had known Mike a little longer."

"Looks, like they're doing more than just talking."

"Is that what's been wrong? She's been trying to hide birth control from her own mother?"

"Not the birth control. How she was getting them."

"How was she getting them?" Kathy asked eyes wide.

Elliot paused wondering how best to phrase the next words. If he did not do it right, Kathy would revert to short phrases filled with meaningful tone and he just got her speaking to him again.

"Apparently...she didn't feel comfortable coming to me or you or even Maureen, so...she went to Olivia."

"Olivia, you're partner?" *You mean Olivia, as in the partner that I don't even feel comfortable having around my ex-husband has now, not only infiltrated my children, but done so to the point that they feel more comfortable talking to her about their problems instead of family. That Olivia?*

"Yeah. I guess she gave Kathleen whatever advice she needed.

"I see." *That fucking bitch!*

"I know what you're thinking, Kath, and I was pissed at first too."

"Uh-huh." *So, you'll understand when I turn around and knock her front teeth in?*

"Kathy," Elliot said, hoping to get her to open up to him again. "Kathleen said she tried to talk to you about it and you told her to wait. She tried to talk to Maureen and she said the same thing. She didn't even *bother* trying to come to me. Isn't it better that she went to Olivia, someone she knew she could trust, rather than just going it alone?"

Kathy turned to pull another towel out of the basket. "She's got aunts, she's got friends..."

“But, she only felt comfortable going to Olivia.”

“When did this even happen?” Kathy said shaking her head. “I don’t even remember Olivia being here enough for them to even get that close.”

He shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. All I know is that I’m probably never going to be able to have an in-depth conversation with our *child* about sex and I doubt you will either. I trust Olivia and I’m glad our kids know that they have someone other than Mom and Dad that they *know* they can trust.”

“God, El,” she said sighing. “I don’t remember having these problems with Maureen...I mean it’s like one second I’m holding on for my life while I’m teaching her to drive and now she’s all grown up the next.”

“Tell me about,” Elliot said.

Kathy put her hand to her forehead and he could see she was starting to look sickly. He closed the gap between them and a moment later, he had Kathy wrapped in his arms. They embraced for a moment and he felt her sob just once into his shoulder, shedding the quick tears that he could not.

When she released him, they stared at one another for an awkward moment before he spoke.

“I better go.”

“Yeah,” she said returning to the laundry.

As he went back upstairs, he heard Lizzie’s feet pounding across the stairs as she raced to get back to the couch from her vantage point by the basement door. When he got upstairs, she sat lounged on the couch again, pretending as if she had not moved from the spot. Elliot rustled her hair, causing her shriek from the disturbance of her ponytail, and yelled a goodbye to Kathleen on his way out the door.

Once back in his car, he let out a long sigh while he pulled out his phone. He needed to talk to Olivia, but he did not want to see her that day and he could not talk to her on the phone. He only wanted to leave a message and meet her some time later; any time but following when he just left his family to return to the loneliness of his apartment.

As the phone rang, he felt his nerves tingle.

Please don’t answer, he thought. *Please don’t answer, please don’t answer, please don’t answer...*

“Right here?” the cab driver said as he slammed on his brakes.

“Yes!” Olivia said catching herself from sliding into the plastic partition in the cab.

She paid the driver and paused on the sidewalk as she noticed a figure leaning against her building near the front door. Her hand slid on her waist toward her holster as she stepped toward the building, unable to make out the man’s face, but knowing for certain that the lanky frame did not belong to her Jonathan.

“Olivia!” he said, when she had come nearer to him.

“Philip?” she said, relaxing a bit. “Why are you standing out here in the snow?”

“I didn’t want to miss you when you came home.”

She rolled her eyes. "Your mother lives directly next door to me. Why didn't you just wait inside?"

"Don't know," he said. "I thought it would seem kind of...romantic or something...with the snow and everything. Besides, I'd really like to just remove my mother from our situation."

"What situation, Philip?" she said sighing. "We don't have a situation."

"But, see I think we do. I just want to get to know you a little better and you just hung up on me last night."

Olivia paused, wondering if news about her recent argument with Jonathan would elicit the kind of new hope in Philip that she was attempting to squash. "I'd just had a huge fight with my Jonathan when you called and I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone."

"A fight, eh?"

"Yes, a fight. Not a relationship-ending fight, but just an argument where...I know time will cool it over. So, like I said, we don't have a situation. Okay?"

She brushed past him and headed for the door, but he reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Let go," she said immediately.

"Please, Olivia," he said. "Just give me a chance. I just want to talk to you."

"Philip. We have nothing in common to sustain a relationship and even if we did, I'm dating someone else. This..." She pointed between them. "...is not going to happen."

Turning on her heel, she jammed her key into the building door, but Philip followed after her.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm coming in to see my mother. I can still do that, can't I?"

"Fine, whatever. I'm taking the stairs."

Eight flights of stairs and an aching back later, Olivia walked through her apartment door aggravated that no matter how she tried, it seemed that she could never make her relationships with men work.

She noticed her phone blinking when she took off her shoes and she sighed as she ran down a list of who might have called. It was either Maya, calling to schedule a night out, Jillian, insisting that Olivia come to Connecticut to see her son play basketball, Jonathan, calling to say that he was returning her key and never wanted to see her again, or Elliot saying that he did not want her anywhere near his children.

She ignored the blinking orange light on the phone for an hour as she put her feet up to relax from a day of rogue criminals and general liars, but her curiosity got the better of her and quickly dialed into her voicemail.

"Liv, it's me," Elliot's voice said through the message. "Look...I, uh...I need to talk to you, but I don't want to just talk over the phone. How 'bout you meet me at The Sixth Cup tomorrow about eight or so and...we'll talk? Okay? I'll see you."

A smirk slid across Olivia's face as she deleted the message and she wrapped herself in the afghan on her couch, feeling contented for the first and only time that day.

Sunday January 28, 2007

The Sixth Cup
8:36AM

Olivia's foot tapped under the table in the coffee shop as she looked at her watch for the third time in twenty-eight minutes. At first she thought that she was just early, then she began wondering if she had the right restaurant. When eight-thirty came and went, she realized there was possibility that Elliot had had a change of heart overnight and would not show for their breakfast meeting.

She had tossed and turned all night in her bed, partly because she found herself extremely cold and missing the heat Jonathan had supplied to her bed, but mostly because she could not think how she could further explain her actions to her partner. The message he had left sounded as if he wanted to resolve things between them, but as her watch hit eight-forty, she sighed and prepared to leave.

As she reached for her wallet, the door to the restaurant opened and Elliot stepped through, looking very red from the cold. He approached her table quickly and waited for the owner to bring him a coffee before he even looked her in the eye.

Olivia took a long sip from her cup. "I thought you'd stood me up."

"Yeah...I thought about it," Elliot said. "But, I figured only an ass would do that."

"Very true. So..." she said hoping she could keep him talking.

"Kathy and I talked," he said without any emotion.

She nodded. "So, is she coming to cut my throat now, or do I have time to pick up my dry cleaning first?"

"Olivia," he said exasperated. "I'm sorry about Friday. I should've picked a fight with you like that, but you don't understand. I-"

"Elliot, I do understand. Kathleen is your daughter, your baby, and I know that no parent wants to think that their kids are growing up too quickly, but-"

"No, that's not it," he said, his voice drawing attention from the couple sitting several tables away from them. "To learn that your kid can't come to you when they need help...Liv, it hurts. I always thought we had a relationship where she could come to me or Kathy with any problem. And now...I feel like I've screwed up with her."

"You didn't do anything wrong. Most girls think it's hard to talk to their parents about sex and birth control because they think they can envision what the conversation would be like. Half the time, we go to our friends who know less about it than we do. And if there's no one to talk to, girls just wing it and hope for the best."

"I know," Elliot said. "And, I'm glad she went to you. I mean...when Kathleen and I talked yesterday, just hearing her say the word sex bothers me. She told me I'll never see her as anything other than an eight-year-old girl and she's probably right. And, I *want* her to talk to you about this kind of stuff because she apparently trusts you a lot and since Kathy and I can't seem to get ourselves together...that is, if you want to."

"I do. I will. But...you still wish she'd gone to you or Kathy first?"

"Maybe Maureen. I don't know."

"Listen, Elliot. I'm sorry. I should have told you. I was *going* to tell you, but I couldn't figure out the best way to say it without you..."

He smirked at her as he picked up a menu. "Without me flying into a rage like Friday?"

"Yeah," she said sighing.

Silence settled between them, interrupted only by the bustle of the nearby kitchen.

“Liv, will you just promise me one thing?” he asked from behind his menu.

“Anything.”

“If any of my kids confides in you again will you...at least drop me or Kathy a hint that something’s going on? Please?”

“Consider it done.”

Olivia picked up her own menu, though she was not hungry in the least.

“There’s nothing I need to be talking to Dickie or Lizzie about right now, is there?” he added.

“Not to my knowledge.”

“Well, all right then.”

The shop owner came by offering biscotti and the three argued for a bit as Elliot and Olivia insisted on paying, but the owner refused to accept their money. His case won, the owner left them each a biscotti and a blueberry scone and soon stood arguing with a customer who had a deep southern drawl at his counter as Elliot and Olivia sat in silence.

“So,” Olivia said, the silence eating away at her, “this...um, Diana. Will I ever get to meet her?”

“Not unless I’ve lost my goddamn mind.”

She raised her eyebrows with a smile. “Swearing on a Sunday morning, Elliot? Tsk, tsk.”

He smiled in return. “Fine. Not unless I take complete leave of my senses.”

“You can’t leave a woman out to dry, Elliot.”

“What makes you think I did anything like that?”

“Because you always look so guilty each time I bring her up.”

He rolled his eyes and quickly changed the subject to Kreider’s whereabouts until it was time for him to join his family for church. Olivia could not help but notice that this week, Elliot did not invite her to church with him. Instead of worrying about it further, she chalked it up to not being Catholic and took the train to the precinct to catch up on case paperwork for the week.

As she planned to return phone calls and file relevant paperwork on open cases, she found an older note on her desk to check on Evelyn Rivers again. Olivia sighed as she stared at the note written in her own haphazard script knowing that Evelyn was most likely a lost cause and short of an actual murder on his hands, Micah Diorel would be free to walk around beating women until the end of his days.

Olivia rolled her eyes as she approached the East 101st Street apartment several hours later, annoyed that a week later the outer door lock was still broken, but as she approached Evelyn’s door, she paused in the corridor. The door to the apartment slightly ajar and her hand slid toward her holster when she tapped on the door.

“Evelyn?” she asked as the door squeaked.

She entered the darkened apartment, eyes darting toward every corner.

“Evelyn?” she repeated. “It’s Detective Benson. Are you okay?”

Olivia heard a gasp from the corner behind her and she pulled out her weapon as she turned to the sound. On the floor in the corner, Evelyn sat, knees pulled to her chest, hair matted, and covered in a shower of her own blood as she bled from open sores on her face neck and down her legs.

“Oh my God, Evelyn,” Olivia said.

"He...he ch-changed," Evelyn stammered as she shook in the corner. "He said he was going to change.

"What happened Evelyn?" Olivia said, taking off her coat to cover Evelyn who sat in just a cami and pajama shorts. "Who did this to you?"

Evelyn rubbed a bloody hand over her face, smearing red across her cheeks and forehead. "He said he was s-sorry. He didn't mean it before."

"Was Micah here? Did he do this?"

"He said he was gonna change..."

"Okay," Olivia said softly taking Evelyn by the arm. "I've got to get you to a hospital. Can you stand, Evelyn?"

"No!" she yelled grabbing hold of Olivia and pulling her toward the floor. "You can't. He'll kill me!"

"Not if I'm with you at the hospital."

"Please! I can't leave! He said to stay here."

"Evelyn, you're hurt. I need to call an ambulance. You *need* medical attention."

"What about Micah? He'll come for me."

"And this time we'll get him and you can press charges."

Evelyn shook her head. "He said to stay here. *Right* here. He said he'd know if I moved from this spot. He said to stay right here."

Olivia glanced around the room again. "Did he leave? Evelyn, is Micah still here?"

Evelyn let go of Olivia, shaking her head and pulled her knees closer to her chest.

Olivia pulled out her phone and pressed 9 on her speed dial. When the 911 operator came through the line, Olivia gave her badge number and announced that she needed an ambulance at Evelyn's address as soon as possible. She shivered slightly in the cold, dark room somewhat missing her coat as she wrapped Evelyn tight in it.

"The ambulance is going to be here soon, okay Evelyn?"

Evelyn said nothing and continued to rock in her corner.

"It's okay," Olivia said softly. "It's over. I'm gonna take you somewhere he won't find you. I promise."

Evelyn shook her head and Olivia heard a creak from behind her. She stood quickly pulling out her gun again and stared into the darkness.

She stepped further into the apartment towards the kitchen with eyes wide, hoping to grasp the slightest vestige of movement. Gun in hand, her arm stretched forward at the sound of another creaking floorboard and she steadied herself on her feet.

"Dio-"

Olivia had barely brushed his name past her lips, when Diorel's shadow jumped from the kitchen's murk wielding something long in his hand.

"You bitch!" he yelled as he swung at her head.

Olivia fell to floor just as object in Diorel's hand made a metallic clang against the kitchen archway. Evelyn screamed on the other side of the room and Diorel took a second swing at Olivia. She rolled away, again, just in time and cocked her weapon upward and pulled the safety with a click.

"Don't make me do it!" she shouted. "*Don't* make me kill you!"

The single sliver of light that glinted in through the nearby window highlighted Diorel's heaving figure as he held the long pipe in his hand.

“Just step back,” she said. “Face the wall.”

He only stared at her and she steadied herself with an exaggerated spread of her feet.

“Do it!” she yelled.

Diorel narrowed his eyes at her, but dropped the pipe, which clanged loudly on the floor enticing another yelp from Evelyn in the corner. He slowly turned to face the far wall and Olivia took a step toward him.

“Put your hands on the back of your head!” she said.

He placed both arms in the air and pulled them toward the back of his head with an annoyed expression on his face. Olivia stepped directly in back of Diorel, cool metallic handcuffs taken from her back pocket in her hand catching the only light in the room. She opened one of the cuffs, but Diorel quickly pulled his leg and kicked backwards, hitting Olivia in the stomach.

“No! Don’t kill her!” Evelyn screamed as Olivia lost her balance.

The kick took Olivia by surprise and she took several steps backward trying to keep herself from falling, but hit the fridge on the opposite wall instead. The door handle slammed directly into the large, round bruise on her back and she dropped her gun in conjunction with the pain.

Diorel, hearing the gun hit the floor, whirled around and kicked his leg out toward Olivia’s stomach again. She caught his foot as it made contact with her stomach and she pulled him upward bringing both feet out from under him. A crack rang through the apartment as Diorel’s head hit the floor with Olivia holding his struggling leg in the air.

He struggled a moment for a moment, dazed from the knock, and Olivia took the second to handcuff him before he regained his sight. Her breath was coming in haggard gasps both from the pain Diorel had inflicted in her stomach to the throbbing from her back, and Olivia let loose her anger and frustration on the violent felon by kicking him repeatedly as he writhed on the floor. She would have kicked him the rest of the day and through the night if the sounds of sirens and EMT footsteps down the corridor had not halted her in mid-kick.

Evelyn cried for both herself and Diorel the entire time she was loaded into the ambulance and Olivia rode to the hospital with her, reassuring her that “it” was all over for her, while refusing any medical treatment herself. At the hospital, Evelyn finally gave a statement claiming that Diorel had assaulted her and Olivia called Elliot to include charges of rape and assault to Diorel’s current charge of assaulting an officer.

Elliot arrived at the hospital just after eight announcing that Diorel had said he was going to butcher Olivia, but she shrugged off the statement with a laugh.

“He’s an arrogant sonovabitch, isn’t he?” Olivia said as they sat next Evelyn’s sleeping form in the hospital room.

Diorel had broken Evelyn’s arm and inflicted a mass of wounds on her aside from raping her again and when it was suggested that she spend the night in the hospital, she wept openly until Olivia guaranteed not to leave her side until she fell asleep.

“Well, he came at you even with a gun on his head,” Elliot said. “So I’d say yes.”

“Diorel is an idiot,” Olivia said. “And anyways, at least he won’t be beating on her anymore.”

Elliot sighed. “They took the detail off Drover. The higher-ups felt it was a waste of manpower.”

“Well, it’s not your fault,” she said. “He’ll screw up soon enough and then we’ll have him.”

“You could file charges against him and we could get him off the street today.”

“That’s two in forty-eight hours. With that, I’d have you, Cragen, Munch, Fin and the rest of the whole damn department driving me home. And if I thought that would bring any comfort to Veronica Schrader, I would.”

Evelyn stirred for a few moments and then bolted upright in the hospital.

“Hello? Where I am?” she said.

“You’re at Mercy East Hospital,” Olivia said.

“Is Micah here?”

“No. He’s in jail and he won’t be hurting you anymore.”

“Are you leaving?”

“I have to leave eventually, but I’ll wait ‘til you fall asleep again. Tomorrow, I’m taking you to the All Saints House. It’s a halfway house and they’ll make sure you can get back on your feet.”

Evelyn nodded and rested back into her pillows. Five minutes later, she was asleep and Elliot offered to drive Olivia home, but she wanted to go back the precinct first to speak to Diorel. Throughout the drive to the 1-6, Elliot tried to talk Olivia out of it, stating that seemed to have a lot of anger directed at her, but she insisted.

“So, Micah,” Olivia said sitting across from Diorel in an interrogation room twenty minutes later. “Would you like to give a statement and cop to this now?”

“I’m not copping to nothing!” He sat with one arm cuffed to the table and visibly shaking with rage.

“You sure? You could save the city a *lot* of money.”

“You don’t have nothing on me.”

“Except for the word of a seasoned officer against that of repeated felon. And, I’m sure Evelyn’s testimony will be able to nail your ass just fine.”

Diorel leapt up from his chair and managed to slightly pull the table with him as he dove for Olivia.

“I’ll get you, you stupid bitch! You make my girl lie on me! When I get outta here, I’m gonna rip you in half! I swear to God! I’m gonna work you over three times from Sunday!”

Olivia stepped out of the room, with Diorel still tethered to the table, a smirk on her face. She had hoped that he would say something incriminating, but he, as women-hating abuser, remained vigilant.

Elliot invited Olivia out for a celebratory drink, but she declined. With the day going as it had, she had told herself the only thing she wanted to do was take a long bath and roll up in her afghan. She knew deep down, however, that she held the deep desire that Jonathan would call or simply appear at her apartment and spending the evening with Elliot would make any prospect of reconciling with Jonathan a severe problem.

Hair still wet from her bath and Jonathan’s favorite movie, *Primal Fear*, ready in her DVD player just in case he came by, Olivia lounged on her couch watching the ten o’clock news when she heard a knock at her door.

Without even glancing through the peephole, she flung open the door to find Mrs. Fitzgivens standing in her doorway with a very cross expression on her face.

“Yes?” Olivia said, trying to hide her dismay.

“Philip’s told me what you’ve been saying to him,” Mrs. Fitzgivens said. Olivia sighed. “Then, I’m sure you’ll realize why I’m about to close the door.” “Just talk to him once more,” she pleaded. “He’s a nice boy and he likes you a lot.”

“Mrs. Fitzgivens,” Olivia said wondering how best to make the woman before her understand her own frustration. “I’m sorry, but Philip and I...we don’t have anything in common. He’s too young and too weird for me and it’s just not going to work out. And besides all that, I’m in a relationship right now.”

“Well, these walls aren’t exactly thick, Miss Benson. I know what goes on in this building.”

“Look, I went to dinner with him because you asked me to, I’ve let him down as easy as I could and now, I think I’m done with this whole situation.”

“Would you please just-”

“No,” Olivia said cutting her off in mid-sentence. “I’m done. Goodbye.”

She closed the door and sighed, annoyed that she had probably made an enemy of the woman who lived directly next to her and also that there was no sign of Jonathan. He called after she threw him out following their first argument when she returned to the SVU. He called after she threw him out while she was working on the recent Sennet case. He had even called after she had been spirited out to Oregon.

Surely by now, she thought as she pulled out her cello bow instead of returning to the television, he can tell when I’m just having a bad week.

Monday January 29, 2007
SVU Squad Room
11:31PM

Olivia sighed as she tossed away a report of sighting Owen Kreider on a plane to Vietnam and pushed back from her desk.

The majority of Monday had been spent catching up on paperwork and chasing down leads on Kreider. While some of the public outcry had died down since Thursday past, reports on his whereabouts still poured into the SVU. After spending most of the day chasing down any trace of Kreider in all five boroughs, Elliot and Olivia remained in the squad room following anything available that might lead them to Kreider’s birth mother, who seemed to be the only link not followed.

Olivia was also brought with the unsettling news that Micah Diorel had been released on bail during his arraignment. He apparently had a very large family that helped post his \$100,000 bail by the end of the business day. Casey had called immediately apologizing and insisting that if there was any evidence that Diorel could have raised that amount so quickly, she would have pressed harder for remand. Olivia told her not to worry about it, but her senses were on high alert for the rest of the day.

“I’ll be by to see how you’re doing on Wednesday,” Olivia had said when she visited Evelyn at the halfway house that day.

“Okay,” Evelyn had said looking very small in the large white room. “Just...don’t forget about me.”

"I won't," Olivia had said. "I promise. Anything you want me to bring you when I come?"

Evelyn shook her head, but gave Olivia a long "thank-you" hug before she left. She refused to tell Evelyn about Diorel's bail, but made sure that all the staff had a picture of Diorel and knew that he was not to be admitted under any circumstance.

By eleven-thirty, only she and Elliot remained in the squad room and while she still felt some residual jubilation from getting Evelyn out of Diorel's immediate clutches, an overwhelming depression, which she had been attempting to stave off at every turn, bore down on her minute after minute.

Elliot yawned on his side of the desk pair and Olivia smirked at him from her own stack of records.

"Go home," she said. "You've done enough for one day."

"*You* go home," he said. "I've got another six pages to comb through."

"It'll be here tomorrow morning."

"*Those* 'll be here tomorrow morning, too."

She threw a crumpled up piece of paper at him, which he batted away with the stack of papers in his hand.

After another twenty minutes, he sighed as he set down his stack and stretched.

"Come on," he said. "Let me drive you home."

"No, I've..." she paused for a moment unable to come up with a valid excuse. "... I've got some more things to catch up on. Need to make sure Evelyn Rivers will be okay and I've got to sign off on this report Fin just finished on the Fayden case."

"What can I do to help?"

"Look, Elliot. I know you're worried about Micah Diorel, but I'll be fine, okay? He's not the first perp to shout idle threats at us."

"There's Diorel...and Drover...and Kreider...and that kid, Philip, you've been telling me about..."

She sighed. "I just need to look over a few more things and I'm done. I'm actually right behind you. Probably by the time you get to your car, I'll be heading for the elevators."

He nodded. "Okay. Well...call if you need something."

Olivia wanted to say "I will" but she could not manage to form the words in her mouth.

As he walked toward the elevators, she reached for a file folder that teetered on the edge of her desk, but before she could catch it, the folder slid to the floor, spraying its contents across the hard tiles.

She bent down and started laughing at the minor predicament, yet as she picked up sheet after sheet, her laughter began to well in her chest and a moment later, she was sitting on the floor with her back against her desk, crying.

Elliot, having seen the entire situation from his vantage at the elevator, walked back into the squad room and sat down next to Olivia.

"What's going on, Liv?" he said softly as she sat with her hands covering her face.

Olivia shook her head and spoke through her hands. "Nothing."

"Nothing? That's always the answer, isn't it? Any time I ask what's going on, it's always nothing." When Olivia did not respond, he continued. "You're sitting here all alone on the floor crying and you're telling me *nothing's* wrong? Come on, Olivia."

She took a deep breath and pulled her hands from her face. "It's so stupid."

"What?"

"It's...I mean, I can't believe I'm actually *crying* over it."

"Tell me."

"Jonathan...it's Jonathan."

"You two have a fight?"

"Yep."

"A big one?"

"Oh yeah."

"And, I take it he didn't come by?"

She shook her head. "Didn't even call."

"It's not the first time you've had a fight."

"But, not like this, Elliot. This was for real."

"That was Tuesday. He's probably been just as busy as you have."

"No, see, I threw him out the first time on Tuesday and then he came by this past Friday right before..."

"Right before I nearly brought down the walls of your apartment," he finished staring at the floor.

"Yeah."

Explains why she didn't fight back as hard as I figured she was going to, he thought.

"He came by to make up, but he was being a complete ass about it and I told him to get out. And now...I don't think he's coming back."

"Olivia, he'll call you."

She laughed out loud. "I can't believe we're even having this conversation."

"Liv, you're allowed to be upset about him. You've been together for a while and when you fight, it affects you. Trust me, I know."

"I just...I just keep playing Friday night over and over in my head and I don't know what's wrong with me."

"There's nothing wrong with you."

"No, Elliot, there is. And, Jonathan pointed it out."

"What could he have said?"

"He said I push people away. He called me a whore."

"Liv..."

"He said...he told me that I was incapable of allowing myself to be happy."

"Liv, you *know* that's not true."

"It is. It makes perfect sense...when I look back on my life...it just fits."

Elliot put his arm around her and rubbed her back as she pulled her knees up to her chest. "C'mon, Liv. He was just angry. There's no truth to that."

"I told Andy to go...I could've been happy with him..."

"He was in Virginia, Liv. It wasn't meant to be anyways, right?"

She shook her head. "Cassidy and I had a lot in common..."

"You worked together. You knew that wasn't going to work out."

"We could've made it work...hell, he even as much as said the same thing as Jonathan."

"Cassidy said you won't let yourself be happy?"

"Just about."

"Olivia, it would've been a flash in the pan romance and then it would've been over. Cassidy wasn't the one."

"I guess so...Christ, I *fought* for Matthew and he was a complete ass. I didn't let him go until it got really bad."

"You never seemed too happy with him, anyway."

"Exactly! I wasn't happy, but I kept on trucking with that relationship until it became absolutely unbearable. God, Elliot...I am so fucked! Jonathan...he was the one, wasn't he?"

"There's no way to know that. You've been together for just two years."

"He was just screaming so loud on Friday. He said he wanted to marry me...grow old with me and now he's not calling."

Elliot pulled her closer. "Liv, he seems like a good guy. If he's worth a damn, he'll call. If he doesn't, you move on."

She put her head on her knees. "I don't want to move on again. Moving on is hard. I'm tired of it. When is this supposed to get easy?"

"It doesn't. Look, at me, Liv. I was married for twenty years and it never once got easy. Now, I'm divorced and it's even harder."

"But at least you've got twenty years of happy memories under your belt."

"It's easier to remember the bad times more than the good."

"And, you've got your kids..."

"Who are growing up so fast I can't even think straight. Next time I turn around, Dickie'll be telling me he's asked this Jessica Barrow to marry him."

Olivia smiled at him, but the smile faded quickly. "Elliot...I..."

"What? What is it?"

"I was just getting used to not being so...alone."

"You're not alone, Liv."

"I know. I know I have people in my life. Maya calls every other day and I know *her* family better than I know the little that *I* have. God, her grandmother calls me her pale granddaughter. And then there's Jillian and so on and, of course, I've got you, but at the end of the day...I've got no one."

Elliot gave his watch an exaggerated glance. "Look, it's eleven fifty-eight. It's the end of the day, and I'm right here."

She smiled at him again and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm a cop, I'm a leader and I'm thirty-seven years old and I'm sitting here crying about my boyfriend. What's wrong with me?"

"Nothing. You're human. You're allowed to let your guard down every once in a while. Besides, I'll make sure no one knows about it...for a small fee, of course."

She nudged him. "Take me home, Elliot. This floor is too damn hard and cold and if I'm going to feel sorry for myself, I might as well do it in the comfort of my own home."

Elliot made the slow and steady drive to Olivia's apartment through the torrent of snow that had descended upon the city and by the time he parked in an empty space by Olivia's building, she had fallen asleep in the passenger seat next to him.

"Wake up, Sleepy," he said as she jumped in the seat and looked around a moment as she tried to get her bearings.

They sat in silence for a moment watching the snow fall on the car windshield.

"Come up with me," Olivia said finally. "We'll watch old movies, eat ice cream and Mallomars and we'll both feel sorry for ourselves. It'll be fun."

He hesitated before replying, alarm bells ringing in his head, telling him that going to Olivia's apartment so late at night could lead to disaster, but when she nudged him with a smile as she urged him again, he could not resist.

Shoes at the door and feet propped up on Olivia's coffee table, they sat on her couch, a box of Mallomars in Elliot's hand and a bag of Milano's in Olivia's as Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire danced "cheek to cheek" on the television. They laughed about old times and teased one another about how neither one could ever move as gracefully as Rogers or Astaire.

Elliot felt his eyes droop as Helen Broderick entered the film and a smile spread across his face as he glanced at Olivia who had fallen fast asleep next to him. He turned off the television and pulled the Milano bag out of Olivia's hand, wondering if he should leave. Two choices lay before him: he could either wrap a blanket around her and make sure she was comfortable before locking her door with the key she had given years earlier and leave for his own apartment or stay the night.

A spray of snow hit the nearby window and Elliot sighed dreading the idea of having to face the cold again. Instead of easing off the couch, he pulled her closer and wrapped Olivia's blanket over the two of them, allowing himself to fall asleep next to her.

Chapter Thirteen

Tuesday January 30, 2007
4:49AM

The department-issued cell phone vibrated across the coffee table and Elliot's eyes flew open at the sound. His heartbeat jumped as he tried to find some familiarity in the darkened room, but none came. He moved toward the sound of the vibrating phone and felt the weight of something on top of him.

Elliot's eyes scanned through the darkness and, finally remembering where he was, realized that at some point during the night, he had not only shifted on Olivia's couch so that he lied length-wise, but also brought her with him so that she slept directly on top of him as well. Her face was buried into his neck and her hair half covered his face as she slept soundly.

He reached for his phone, trying to move as little as possible to keep from waking Olivia, and stared at the number in the display. He did not recognize it, but he was certain it was an NYPD call.

"Stabler," he said softly into the phone.

Elliot sighed as the officer on the other end informed him that a young boy had been found sodomized, beaten and nude on the east side of Tompkins Square Park.

He stared at the ceiling wanting nothing more than to throw the phone across the room and lie on Olivia's couch until the sun rose. Lying there just a moment more, he shook the arm that held the majority of Olivia's weight.

"Liv," he said into her hair. "Wake up. We gotta go."

She moaned into his neck and he shook her again, unsure what he would do with another vibration of her mouth against his neck.

"C'mon," he said. "We need to go."

Olivia shifted on top of him for a moment in a daze of sleep and fatigue. The moment she realized on who she was lying, she leapt off of him as if she had touched something hot.

"God, I'm sorry," she said. "I fell asleep."

"I gathered that... They found another one."

"Another boy? Where?"

"Tompkins Square all over again," Elliot said rising from the couch.

Olivia shook her head. "He's been in the city this whole time? I can't believe it."

"Yeah, Munch and Fin are on their way. C'mon, I'll drive us."

After ten minutes of awkwardly fumbling around Olivia's apartment gathering shoes and downing mouthwash, they arrived at the crime scene, flagged down by Melinda.

"Is it him?" Elliot asked Melinda, already knowing the answer.

"Yeah," she said after a deep sigh. "And, there's something else..."

She lifted a small wet piece of paper set in an evidence bag into the air so that Elliot and Olivia could see it.

"He left a note in the boy's mouth. It says, 'For an even seven.'"

Olivia closed her eyes for a moment, wanting to strike out at anything close to her.

"We got some info on Kreider's mother," Fin said when he saw Elliot and Olivia standing by the body.

"What'd you find?" Elliot asked.

"Her name. Just found it this morning. Emme Donough. She lives up on the east side, but she's got a so-called empty apartment on Rivington Street."

"Has anyone checked up on the place yet?" Olivia said.

Fin shook his head. "Just got the word now."

Elliot began heading toward the car. "Let's go. The bastard might even still be there."

Lights on and sirens roaring, the detectives arrived at Emme Donough's residence on Rivington Street, roused the building superintendent from a deep sleep and had entered the quiet apartment, all within nine minutes.

The loft was barren with out any semblance of decoration aside from the thick shades that covered the large window of the loft. There was also no sign of Kreider anywhere in the apartment.

"Do you hear that?" Olivia said as they walked throughout the apartment. "This place has been sound-proofed."

“Donaugh probably had it done to keep out city noise,” Fin said. “I think she mighta had the windows done, too.”

“Look at this,” Elliot said shouting from his corner of the loft. “He’s got boxes piled up all over here.”

“There’s blood all over the bathroom!” Munch shouted. “It looks kind of old too.”

Elliot swore loudly and kicked at an empty pail that sat against a pole, each detective and officer feeling every bit of his same anger.

“What about Donaugh?” Olivia said. “What’s she saying?”

“Nothing,” Fin said. “She wouldn’t even give up the info on the place. We had to grab it through public records.”

Olivia nodded at Fin and Elliot was halfway out the door by the time she turned to follow, brushing past CSU as they entered the loft.

Emme Donaugh stood at just over five feet tall in her East Side home, held her bobbed, black hair in tight curls and had cold blue eyes that seemed vacant and spiteful at the same time while the detectives questioned her. She proclaimed complete ignorance regarding Kreider and the loft, but everything in her tone told them that though she appeared a bit daft as she continually changed directions mid-way through conversations, she was a liar nonetheless.

She dodged their questions about being confronted by Kreider about her adoption records by providing off-handed comments about the snow and when Elliot and Olivia asked her about her whereabouts in the past few weeks, she only replied that they looked like they would make cute babies together.

After spending an hour trying to grapple with information from Donaugh, Elliot and Olivia began questioning the household help. They started with the kitchen and through Olivia’s broken Spanish and Elliot’s half-French, they managed to sift through the Puerto Ricans and the Haitians to find an Elisa, whom they were all certain spoke English.

“Elisa?” Olivia said as they approached her mopping floors in the grand hall that led to outer grounds. “¿Hablas inglés, si?”

Elisa stared at her a moment, but shook her head.

“Everybody here told us that you do,” Elliot said. “You can talk to us.”

“No hablo.”

“Elisa,” Olivia said. “We just talked to all the staff and they pointed us to you. We need to talk to you.”

“Fine,” Elisa said sighing, “but I still don’t have anything to say.”

“Seven young boys are dead,” Olivia said standing directly in front of her. “What you know might send their killer to prison.”

“And, if I lose my job? Mrs. Donaugh will know if I spoke to you people and I’ll be outta here and I *need* this job.”

“Do you think she’ll let you keep your job once we book you for Obstruction of Justice?” Elliot asked.

“She might.”

“You’re going to let a murderer go free just to keep your job?”

Elisa sighed and Olivia pressed further.

"Tell us where *he* is," she said, holding an image of Kreider.

"I don't...I don't know. I really don't."

"*Was* he here?" Elliot said.

"Yeah, but he hasn't been by in a while."

"You've see the news lately and you still didn't say anything?"

Elisa set her mop handle against the wall. "Look, what am I supposed to do? Mrs. Donaugh's been walking around here, crazier than usual, saying that she's *finally* found her baby. Do you think *I* was gonna be the one to put him away?"

"He killed seven people."

"And what makes you think me opening my mouth is gonna keep him from coming back to kill me? If I been hearing the news right, you people already lost him once. You really think I'm gonna say something so that when he gets out again he can come after me, or *my* family? You're crazy!"

"Fine," Olivia said. "When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday," Elisa said after a long pause. "I heard him say to her that she wouldn't see him for a while, but that's it. I don't know where he went or if he's even coming back."

"Do you know if Mrs. Donaugh owns any other properties in the city? Anywhere you can think of that he might try to hide?"

"No! I already told you. I don't know anything! Now please, just leave me alone."

With nothing else on which to focus, they tried again to pull something from Donaugh. After three hours, Elliot got sick of Donaugh's clouded phrases and expressions and both he and Olivia arrested her for aiding a felon, yet by the time they had arrived at their precinct, the Donaugh family attorney was waiting ready to take his client back to the east side.

"Detectives," a balding lawyer said as they brought in a struggling Emme Donaugh. "Jerrold Lohraman, Esquire. Thank you for bringing Ms. Donaugh into my care. I'll be taking her home now."

"The hell you will," Elliot said. "She's been aiding a felon for a week now."

"And that's an argument you and your unit's DA are more than welcome to argue during a trial, but as for today, everyone standing here knows that Ms. Donaugh is in no mental shape to handle this ordeal and I'm here to look out for her well-being."

"She boarded a murderer," Olivia said unwilling to let go of Donaugh who had been shaking as if having a seizure. "And she owns the loft where these murders have been committed. She's not going anywhere."

"Like I said," Lohraman continued. "You're welcome to attempt to prove that she even knew a loft existed in her name, but as for tonight...come on, Emme. She's going home to rest."

Cragen nodded at Olivia and Elliot, and begrudgingly, they allowed Donaugh to leave with Lohraman.

"She's our only link to Kreider," Olivia said.

"Well," he said. "Lohraman contacted Casey the second someone at Donaugh's house caught word that you two were bringing her in. We don't have enough to hold her."

Olivia shook her head. "We had enough to hold her overnight. Some wealthy spinster gets to fake crazy when she feels like it to keep from testifying? It's absolutely incredulous."

"Look!" he said. "We've got Unis sitting on her and we've shut down Kreider's last hold out. It's only a matter a time before we find him."

"I'm sure that'll be a great condolence to this last victim's family." Elliot said as he walked toward his desk.

As he sat in his chair with a spiteful huff, his phone chirped from his jacket pocket.

"Stabler," he said into the phone.

"Elliot, I need to talk to you."

He sighed. "Yeah, Kath, this is a real bad time."

"I know," she said. "It always is. I just wanted you to know that something happened with Dickie last night and now he's locked himself in his room."

Elliot glanced at the clock on his desk, which now read a little after nine o'clock in the morning. "What do you mean something happened?"

"He came home last night looking like something bad had happened and just ran upstairs and hasn't been out of his room since."

"Are you sure he's even there? He might've snuck out again."

"Every time I start banging on the door, he just turns up his music. Elliot, *something* happened to him last night and I'm worried."

He looked around the busy squad room for a moment. "Kath, I..."

"Look, I'm not leaving the house until he comes out and I just thought you needed to know. If you give a damn about your children, you'll come over now to see what's wrong!"

She hung up before he could respond and he sighed, shaking his head.

"Liv..." he said, "I gotta go. Something's up with Dickie."

From her desk, Olivia nodded that she understood and Elliot was soon racing across the bridge to his former home.

"Dickie," he said twenty minutes later as he knocked on his son's bedroom door. "It's Dad. Open up."

"Go away."

"Dickie, open the door." Elliot was met with silence. "Now!"

"I said, go away!"

"Richard! Open the door now before I take it off the hinges!"

Elliot heard stomping footsteps and the door opened a moment to reveal Dickie's angry face and bloodshot eyes.

"What?"

"What the hell are you talking about, 'what?'" Elliot said. "It's nine-thirty on a Tuesday and you're still home. Your mother's worried out of her mind and I'm standing here trying to figure out why you're making everyone crazy. What's going on?"

"I'm not going to school today," Dickie said, turning his back on Elliot and sitting on his bed. "Just leave me alone."

"Look, Dickie. I don't have time to argue with you about this. I don't know what's going on, but you need to spill. *Now.*"

Dickie shook his head and stared out his window.

"I'm going to ask you one more time," Elliot said, growing angrier by the minute. "What's going on?"

Dickie crossed his arms, but said nothing.

"Is this about this Jessica girl?"

"No! It's got nothing to do with Jessica."

"Then, what the hell is it!"

A solemn expression waved over Dickie's face and the whites of his eyes turned red once more.

"What?" Elliot said, pleading with his son.

Dickie stood, coming only to Elliot's shoulder and sighed.

"Last night...I'm walking home and..."

"And what? What happened?"

"...and this...this guy gets out of this car on the other side of the street and starts walking toward me."

Elliot felt his eye twitch, but he let Dickie continue.

"And I start walking faster, but he kind of catches up to me and asks me if I wanted to go to his place to play video games."

"What'd you say?"

"I said no and I kept walking, but he kept following me and when I tried to get away from him, he grabbed my arm." Dickie pulled his shirt sleeve up to show a red bruise that appeared to be subsiding. "And, I got scared, so I told him to let go. He kept saying that he just wanted to talk to me, but he wouldn't let go. So, I kicked him in the balls and took off down the street. And I didn't stop 'til I got home."

Elliot ran a hand over his face, standing speechless.

"Look, I didn't want Mom to worry about it, but I didn't want to talk about it last night...and I just want to stay here for a bit, okay?"

"It's not okay," Elliot said through clenched teeth. "It's *not* okay. What did this guy look like?"

Dickie sat on his bed again. "He looked kind of like that guy that's been on the news."

"It was *him*?" Elliot took a step toward his son. "Are you sure?"

"No, but it wasn't him, Dad," Dickie said. "It kind of looked like him, but it wasn't the guy."

"I don't understand."

"He looked a lot like the guy on the news, but it wasn't him. I know it. If it was the guy on the news, I'd've started running the second I saw him, but it wasn't him. He just *looked* a lot like him."

Elliot started at Dickie for a moment with a furrowed brow, knowing there were two options: Dickie was either lying because Kreider actually did something to him or he was taken so off guard that he did not realize who he saw.

"Did he do-" Elliot began, but paused mid-sentence when he made the connection.

"Did he do what?" Dickie asked.

Elliot suppressed the shaking throughout his body and pursed his lips. "Did he hurt you at all?"

"No. He just grabbed my arm."

“Okay,” Elliot said, nodding with severe strain. “You just...uh, you stay put. I’ll have Mom call you in sick and we’ll talk about this more tonight, all right?”

Dickie nodded and Elliot headed downstairs to see Kathy pacing back and forth in their living room.

“What’s going on?” she asked the second he reached the bottom step.

“Kath...He’s fine. I told him he could stay home today, but I have to go.”

“No, Elliot!” she shouted. “You’re not giving me that. What’s going on?”

“He’s fine,” Elliot said. “Trust me. We’ll all talk about this tonight, but I’ve got to go. Just let him be for now and we’ll talk when I get back.”

“This is crap,” Kathy said shaking her head.

“Trust me, Kathy. We’d all talk now, but I need to do something first. I swear to you, I’ll be back by seven, but I just have to go.”

Kathy nodded her head as he left, worry never leaving her face. By the time, Elliot had come to the river, rage coursed through him, his breath became ragged and an irrepressible shaking nearly caused the car to careen out of control.

My son, he thought as he drove. *That rat bastard went after my son.*

SVU Squad Room

11:11AM

Olivia let loose another sigh as she tried to reduce the nervous tapping in her feet and hands. She glanced at the clock on her desk and shook her head. Kreider was within their grasp and she knew she could only wait for Elliot so much longer before her ambitions would drive her from the squad room, guns blazing, in search of Kreider.

When the doors to the elevators opened, Elliot’s brooding form stormed out and Olivia leapt up the moment she saw him.

“Hey! I’ve been going through all the sightings of Kreider in the past few days that pertained to Donagh’s area. I found three. Fin and Munch are talking to two of them right now and I’m about to-”

“Where’s Drover’s file?”

“What?” she said squinting at him. “Why do you need his file?”

Elliot brushed past her and started sifting through all the folders on his desk. “I *need* his file.”

“Why? Elliot...we need to find Kreider.”

“Screw Kreider!” he said as he slammed one of his desk drawers shut. “I want Drover’s file. Where is it?”

“Elliot, what’s wrong?”

“I need to know what’s in his detail report. I *need* his file.”

“I have it, but I’m-”

“Give it to me,” Elliot said taking a step toward her. “Now.”

“No,” she said taking a step backward, alarmed by the amount of rage being suddenly directed toward her. “Not ‘til you tell me what’s going on.”

“He came after Dickie!” Elliot shouted. “Last night! Right after the detail was pulled! Now, give me the file!”

"Is Dickie oka-"

"Give me the file, Olivia!"

The squad room had grown quiet at the sound of Elliot's voice and Olivia looked around the room as if asking for help.

"We'll tell Cragen and we'll bring him in, but-"

"I don't care what you do," Elliot said, "but, I want his file. I want to know where he's been staying because he hasn't been at that apartment of his and everything's in the detail report. Give me the file."

"No," she said taking another step backward, nearing her own desk. "Not when you're like this. If we're going to get him, we'll do it right. I'll take this to Cragen-"

"You had your chance to do this right!" he shouted. "We could've had him on his way to Rikers on Friday, but you wanted to keep quiet and now he's going after my children! Give me the god-damn file!"

His eyes bore an intense blaze into Olivia's and whatever nerve she had been amassing to hunt Kreider shrank under Elliot's glower.

Detective Maddox, who had been watching the entire scene unfold, approached Elliot softly. "Elliot..."

"Stay out of this!" Elliot yelled at him. "This doesn't concern you."

"Just calm down," Maddox said.

"What part of 'this doesn't concern you,' don't you get!"

"Elliot," Olivia said. "You need to calm down."

He closed the gap between them and glared directly into her eyes. "Give me the file. I want Drover and I want him now."

"We'll get him," Cragen said, having finally approached their desk pair. "But you need to step down."

"The hell I will!"

"You're too close to the case, Detective!" Cragen said. "We'll handle Drover, but you're off the case."

"I don't care," Elliot said. "You can have my badge, you can have my gun. I'll go after him as a civilian."

"Elliot, stop," Cragen said. "Just calm down."

"I want the file!"

"And you're not getting it!"

Elliot felt his hands clench and he shook his head at his superior, but Cragen took a step closer to him.

"Go home," Cragen whispered. "Take the day and talk to Dickie."

"My son is fine. I want Drover."

"And, we'll get him, but you're not going to handle this case. Go home."

The guise of rage set on Elliot's face bounced back and forth between Cragen and Olivia for a moment before he moved past Olivia, giving her one last scowl as he made his way back to the elevators.

Olivia let out a deep breath and put a hand to her forehead. Cragen stared at her. The second half of the most dynamic partnership in the SVU stood before him clearly shaken by her partner's disposition, yet his eyes narrowed at her, any semblance of empathy washing away with the recollection that he had had every intention of

commenting on the fact that she and Elliot had left the precinct and arrived back together wearing the same clothes as the previous day.

"My office, Detective," Cragen said.

Olivia wanted to protest, but only nodded, acknowledging that though she was not responsible for Elliot's actions, she had done plenty to botch the case on Drover and Cragen could see it in her eyes as she set down her notes on Kreider to march sternly toward the captain's office.

SVU Squad Room

10:54PM

Munch removed darkened glasses from his ears and brought his hands forward to rub at tired eyes. The majority of his day had been spent combing through reports and his hands, covered in paper cuts, were as hardened and dry as his eyes felt.

"Kreider, it seemed, had disappeared yet again as none of Emme Donaugh's records provided them with anything with which to track down the murderer. Lohraman had made certain that they have a specific warrant each time they tried to look through anything pertaining to Donaugh and much of the day had been wasted waiting for Casey to obtain judge signatures as they dug further into Donaugh's history. All of her family's hiding places had been searched, but still, there was no sign of Kreider.

The most recent victim had been quickly identified as thirteen-year-old Tyler MacFarland and he and Fin were forced to deliver the news to his mother who refused to believe it even after she had seen the body. Mrs. MacFarland gave continuous pleading to he and Fin, begging them to show her where Tyler "really" was because she was certain there was no way he could be dead. All they could do was sympathize with her and hold her hand when the reality of the situation finally hit.

Frustrated and wondering if this would be the case that would cause him to retire, Munch had returned to the nearly empty squad room to gain perspective on Drover's case. With no concrete facts in regards to Drover, Munch had no reason to expect that much would come from the case in the end.

Olivia, apparently, had been nearly attacked by Drover as had Elliot's son, but near attacks in the city were not the same as actual assaults and even with Olivia and Dickie's future testimony, nothing either could say would bring any solace to those whom Drover had abused. There were no complaining witnesses to attribute to Drover's alleged pedophilia and as no conviction based on Olivia and Dickie's word would warrant any substantial prison time, Munch had the sinking feeling that the case was a wash as the miniature grandfather clock on his desk rang in the eleventh hour.

Rubbing a hand over his face, he returned his glasses and had decided to call it a night when the doors to the elevators opened slowly and an intense figure made his way quickly toward the center of the squad room.

Elliot glanced at Munch as he made his way toward the desk pair he shared with Olivia, but barely acknowledged his presence, the wild desire that still streamed in his veins during his drive across the bridge ever present.

Spending the day with his son, Elliot had just come from a long, heated discussion about safety with Kathy and he was in no mood to say or do anything except beat the life out of anything that kept him from following Drover.

Dickie continually said that everything was fine and that he was not hurt, but Elliot never had to perform a quick SVU analysis on his own child and though he wanted to believe that Dickie was fine when he said it, a combination of rage and pain riveted through his chest each moment he remembered that Drover was walking the city streets.

"What are you doing back?" Munch asked from his own desk. "Cragen said you needed to take some time. Well, actually he screamed it, but we all got the gist of it."

Elliot remained silent as he leafed through files on his desk.

"In case you're interested," Munch continued, "we dug up everything there was to know about Emme Donough and I've still got a stack that's higher than she is tall to go through on psychiatric history in general. Somehow, the word crazy doesn't begin to sum up a person when it takes a whole tree to describe just how certifiable they are."

Elliot glanced up at Munch a moment, but silently began combing through files on Olivia's desk.

"Elliot," Munch said. "Whatever you're looking for, it's not worth it. Take some time and get out of your head for a few days."

Elliot rifled through several more of Olivia's drawers before slamming his hands on the top of her desk, causing her framed photo of Jordan and Jeremy Harfort to slide onto its back.

"She took it," he hissed. "She took it, didn't she? She fucking took it!"

"Took what?" Munch said.

"The goddamn Drover file!" Elliot screamed. "I want his address! I want his information!"

"For what? So you can beat a confession out of him?"

"He came after *my* son."

"Drover went after a kid he saw at night-"

"Don't give me that bullshit! He came after Dickie because he couldn't get Olivia like he wanted to last week, so he came after me the only way his sick mind could. Drover came after my kid...And, Olivia took his damn file with her."

"Because she knows you. She knew you'd be back here trying to track him down."

"He came after my son. My family!"

"Elliot," Munch said. "We're booking him from assaulting Olivia and she's the one who's looking for him hardest."

"The second the police detail is off him, he pulls this move. On my kid!"

"Elliot, I'm telling you. You've got to lay off Drover. We'll bring him in as soon as we have him, but you've got to calm down."

"I'm so sick of everyone telling me to calm down! Why the hell can't anyone put themselves right where I'm standing?"

"We can, but-"

"But nothing!" he shouted. "If this were your kid, you'd be doing the same thing I am in trying to find Drover! Olivia's my partner. She knows exactly what this is doing to me...and she fucking took it with her."

“Forget about it tonight, Elliot,” Munch tried to argue, but he doubted Elliot heard him as he shook his head, making his way for the elevators.

Greenwich Village, New York
9:06PM

The click of Olivia’s shoes on the sidewalk echoed against the brick and stone buildings of the Village as she quickened her pace toward the corner store at the end of the street.

I just need one, she thought. *Just one.*

She opened the store’s door and nodded at the familiar owner who stood reading a newspaper at the counter. Her gaze flitted toward the assortment behind him, but a wave of guilt pushed her down the juice and cereal aisle instead. She had not felt this contrite since she had bought condoms for the first time.

Stopping first for cranberry juice and then again for a pint of butter pecan ice cream, she approached the counter, eyebrows furrowed with anxiety.

“This it?” the Korean man asked, but her gaze was fixed on the lines of cigarettes behind him.

He looked at the cartons and packs behind him and turned to her with raised eyebrows.

“I thought you quit,” he said.

“I have,” she said quickly. “I am. I just... You can’t just sell me one, can you? I just need one.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. Package deal. How ‘bout some Nicorette instead?”

She smiled briefly, but bit her lip as she stared at the white Camel boxes lined neatly in rows behind the counter.

“Just give me a pack of the Camel Ultra Lights,” she said sighing. “Just one, though. I only need one.”

“Okay...,” he said taking the package from the set. “I don’t expect to see you in here buying these every week again. I haven’t seen you buy these in years.”

“Five years actually,” Olivia said as she handed him a wad of bills. “And you won’t. Like I said, I just need the one.”

“Okay,” he repeated. “Just remember, I run a sale on the gum *and* the patch every other month.”

Ten minutes later, Olivia leaned against her window while she stood on her fire escape, and she cupped her hand around the lit match she was bringing closer to the white cigarette hanging precariously out of her mouth.

The cigarette lit, she waved the match out and took a long drag on the stick, closing her eyes to allow the smoke to fill her lungs and nicotine to infiltrate her blood. Halfway through the second drag, Olivia felt an instant ease to her nerves and wondered if she could keep the promise she had made to herself of smoking just one.

She closed her eyes against a painful wind that swept across the face of the building, causing the fire escape to slightly sway and a faint memory of her sixteen-year-old self taking her first cigarette puff came to mind.

Maya had been “party smoking” for months before Olivia had wrapped her lips around her first one, and although she knew the dangers and knew the cosmetic risks, she took the chance, not being able to withstand the idea of being seen as the “little girl” who did not smoke in the eyes of her twenty-one-year-old boyfriend at the time. The first intake felt like someone had ignited a fire in her chest and she coughed up the single puff for the rest of the night. It was only after several other nights out with Maya and Maya’s friends that she finally got the hang of it and managed to finish her cigarettes without Maya or another friend having to finish them off for her.

The calming effect that came with the nicotine, however, did not hit her system until she was met with college stress, where she thought she had only two choices to help calm her nerves: nicotine or alcohol. Insistent that she was not going to fall into her mother’s drunken footsteps, Olivia opted for cigarettes and she spent fifteen years on and off the smoking bandwagon, telling herself each time she caved into stress that she “only needed just one.”

The only excuse that she had managed to give herself over the years was that her body only craved the tranquility of smoking when she was under severe stress. She had fallen back after the first time she killed someone, she fell when a criminal used her to commit suicide and she nearly fell back after her first major tiff with Elliot the previous year. After the day she had had, only the serenity of a cigarette could calm her.

Munch and Fin had arrived in the squad room that day, just in time to watch Elliot storm out of the precinct and had given the news that they were not able to come up with anything from tracking down the people who claimed to see Kreider in Donough’s area.

In his office, Cragen made her give a full account of what had happened between her and Drover which led to an explanation of what had incited the incident. He told her that he would leave out Drover’s motives for attacking her Thursday night, but in order to hold him, he was filing a report on Drover whether or not she liked it. Cragen had also called her willful and irresponsible for not taking the steps to ensure that Drover was in a jail cell rather than loose to attack anyone else he chose.

Before her reprimand had ended, he had given her a once over and frowned.

“Olivia,” he had said. “I’m not going to insist on details because, quite frankly, I don’t want to know, but I’m sure I’m not the only one who noticed that you and Elliot left here together last night and arrived at the newest crime scene *together*, this morning. Whatever is-” He held up a hand when Olivia opened her mouth to protest. “...I don’t want to know about it. Just fix it. Sooner rather than later.”

“Captain...”

“Look, if there’s nothing, fine, but otherwise, I don’t want that to be the cause of these argument between the two of you.”

The tone of his suggested that the conversation had ended regardless if Olivia had anything to add and she turned to leave.

“Olivia,” he said, just before she headed out the door. “This is a report on Micah Diorel’s known-hangouts, including a list of all the people who helped post his bail...” He sighed, his expression changing from a superior looking down upon a rogue subordinate to that of a father apprehensive of his only daughter’s recent actions. “Take a look over them and...just keep an eye out for the time being.”

The wind blew a dusting of snow off the roof of her building and layer of it fell onto Olivia's head. She shook the snow from her hair and sighed before taking another drag on the cigarette.

Kreider was on the loose and had taken to mocking them with his victims, Drover had completely fallen off the deep end and was going after Elliot instead of her and now, Diorel was free to walk the city streets to go after anyone he pleased.

"Shoulda shot the bastard," she said aloud as she approached the end of the stick.

Olivia put the cigarette out in the cup she had brought out the escape with her and looked at the gleaming pack that sat on her window sill. She stared at it for a full minute before reaching for another one. Pulling out the long white stick, she ripped another match from the small book in her pocket, yet as she prepared to strike a flame, a flash of white light from the across the street caught her eye.

She focused on each of the windows in the building across from hers, unsure from where the light had come. Individual New Yorkers sat reading, watching television or sharing conversations with one another in their own apartments, but nothing caught her eye again.

The wind blew again and she let out another sigh, taking the cigarette from her mouth and stuffing it back in the box with its brethren. A moment later, she had climbed through her living room window and had stashed the box of Camels under her sink next to bottles of drain cleaner and cans of bug spray. If she was going to go for another one, she would have to willingly sift through all the other poisons under the kitchen sink to get to them.

She rubbed her hands, still cold from the winter air, and sat on the floor of her kitchen for a moment, wishing she had not slapped Jonathan across the face four nights earlier. His expression of pain blended with confusion from that night had never left her thoughts and she wondered if he would ever forgive her, if they even had chance to see one another again.

Every male relationship in her life was either lying in ruin or teetering near the edge. From her co-workers who gave her sideways glances to her beau who proclaimed that she could not allow herself to be happy to her partner who looked like he might have ripped her in half when she refused to give him what he wanted.

Olivia shuddered at the memory of the intense fury Elliot had directed at her that morning and she looked at the pile of folders she had brought home with a sigh. As loneliness began to settle back into her psyche, she reached for her phone in hopes that Maya was in for the evening.

"Hey, how are you?" Maya asked solemnly, though she already knew the answer.

News stations had been blaring information about Kreider throughout the day and while Maya was never told the specifics of any case on which Olivia worked, she could tell from her tone if one of Olivia's cases had hit mass media.

"Alone," Olivia said softly. "It's just hard to come to that realization."

Maya sighed. "The five o'clock news showed you and Elliot at the crime scene of that Boxing Strangler today. He looked really pissed, though...I'm sure I can imagine why."

"Oh God, Maya," she said. "That was nothing. His true colours were in full force later in the day."

"He was angry with you?"

Olivia hesitated for a moment before recounting the day's events regarding Elliot to Maya. She left out any mention of Drover or Diorel because, while Maya always liked to look at the lighter side of any situation, Olivia knew that Maya and Jillian talked and if Maya did not come to any impetuous decisions about Olivia's life, Jillian would.

"He was just so angry, Maya," she said. "And...I did something else and when he finds out...I don't even know what I'm going to do when he finds out."

"Well, I doubt he'll do anything too rash, Livia," Maya said. "I mean this is *Elliot* we're talking about."

"You don't know him like I do," Olivia said. "I'll be happy if he's just angry with me, especially considering what's been happening with us lately."

Maya noted a change in Olivia's tone; one that she had not heard since Olivia had appeared at her home one night when they were teenagers, insisting that she had done something terrible and impulsively suggesting that she had to get out of the city.

"But...", Maya began, "you're not actually...*scared* of him, are you?"

"No," Olivia sighed. "But I am afraid of what this might do to us. We've been on this downward spiral since I came back to the SVU. This just isn't going to make it any better."

"What about Jonathan?" Maya asked after a moment's pause. "Have you talked to him?"

"Why?" Olivia spat. "Do you wanna know if he's available?"

Maya sighed into the phone. "Livia, you know me far better than that. I just want to know if he's called."

"No. He hasn't called and I really don't think he's going to."

"He's just mad right now. He's always come back to you, singing songs, bearing gifts--"

"No, it was never like this before. He was really angry with me on Friday and it's almost Wednesday and I still haven't heard from him."

"Olivia," Maya said softly. "What happened with Elliot...and his daughter?"

She was silent for a very long time and all the while, Maya allowed the silence to continue.

"He...he came over on Friday because he found out about it and...he was not happy."

"Wait...was this before or after Jonathan?"

"After."

"What the hell, Olivia? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't know what to say."

Olivia could imagine Maya's brows furrowing from the just the tone in her voice.

"Well, what happened?"

"He was...angry."

"Just angry?"

"Livid," she continued. "He was so mad at me. I thought he really was going to lose it."

"Did something happen?"

"No...no, I just...He just yelled."

Maya immediately felt that her friend was lying, but she knew not to press the issue and she allowed Olivia to continue.

“Maya, he was so angry and that was just over Kathleen. Something he more or less got over after a day. This thing today...something happened with Dickie. He’s is only son *and* it has to do with one of our cases. We’ve been battling over this Drover guy for weeks now and after what’s just happened with his son...this is just not going to be good.” Olivia wiped away an errant tear that had escaped from her lashes. “God, Maya. It’s like everything in life is just spinning out of control.”

“Well...if it’s any consolation,” Maya said. “I’ll always be here to catch if you fall.”

Olivia smiled into the receiver and felt tears spilling over to run down her face. “I know you will, Sweetie. Thank you.”

After she had ended her conversation with Maya, Olivia took a shower, taking extra care to get the cigarette smoke out of her hair, and made notes at her desk of all the things she needed to accomplish for the next day: check on Evelyn Rivers, hunt down Drover’s friends identified in the detail report, entice more information regarding Kreider from Emme Donagh, go over Tyler MacFarland’s autopsy report with Melinda.

Notes made, she pulled out Boccherini’s second concerto, but as she played, her kept eyes catching the manila folders on her desk. Eventually, she gave up playing and set her bow down on her desk to pick up one of the witness reports on Kreider. From what she had gathered from Elliot’s earlier screaming, Dickie had identified Drover or someone who looked just like him as a would-be attacker. There was just as strong a possibility that Dickie had seen Kreider on the news and assumed his attacker looked similar as there was that Drover had tracked down Elliot and would be stupid enough to try something on one of his children.

Olivia shook her head, deciding that she had had enough for one day and went to bed. She had just drifted off to sleep when she heard banging on her door; very reminiscent to Friday past. Padding softly across her apartment, she opened the door to Elliot who barged past her, looking wildly around the living room.

“Give it to me, Olivia,” he said.

“What Elliot?” she lied in an innocent voice. “I don’t know what you’re talking about?”

“Give me the damn file!”

“Which file?”

“Don’t play games with me, Olivia,” he said with an intensity Olivia had seen on rare occasion and even then, always reserved for a suspect. “I want that file and I want it now!”

Olivia moved toward her desk.

“Which file?” she said again calmly. “I’ve got a half a dozen of them here.”

Elliot grabbed her arm, hard.

“Give me the Drover file! I know you took it from the squad room and I want it.”

She snatched her arm out of his grasp. “You *know* I can’t give it to you.”

“That’s bullshit. Give me the damn file!”

“No, Elliot,” she said getting back some of her nerve. “It isn’t going to do anyone any good if you find Drover and beat him senseless...or worse.”

“Worse?”

“Elliot,” she said softly. “Cragen’s already taken you off this case, and everyone saw how you reacted this morning over him. I don’t know whether this is what’s been

happening between you and the kids lately or just this case in general, but you are not thinking clearly. How's this going to look when Drover lands a suit against you, the department and the city, especially if he didn't do anything?"

"He's the guy," Elliot said through clenched teeth. "You're calling Dickie a liar?"

"Of course not! But, if he's seen Kreider on the news, there's just as strong a possibility that he just saw Kreider in the guy talking to him.

"He's the guy, Olivia. I know it."

"Did you show Dickie Drover's picture? We both know you didn't. You heard Dickie tell you about someone who looked like Kreider and you immediately went after Drover."

"Because he's the guy. Just hand his file over to me and I'll keep it between us."

"What, do you think I'm stupid! No!"

"Give me the file, Olivia!"

"No, I ca-"

"GIVE ME THE GODDAMN FILE!"

He slammed his hand on her and the faux-Tiffany's lamp she had found on sale years earlier leapt off the desk, taking her cello bow with it. The lamp shattered on the floor and the bow snapped in half under the crash of the lamp. Elliot's gaze did not register that anything had happened.

"I think you should leave," she said softly.

"I'm not leaving without that file."

"I don't have it here," she lied.

"Like hell, you don't. It's not at the precinct. It's gotta be here with you!"

"You went *looking* through my desk for it!"

Elliot said nothing, but continued glaring at her.

She took a step toward him. "Do you realize how you sound? You are losing it, Elliot. For the love of God, take some time. Get some clarity. You are letting this case affect you too much. Please, Elliot. *Please*. Just back away from Drover right now. We have dozens of cases still open. Pick one and focus on it, but please just...just let this thing you have against Drover alone."

Elliot sighed. "Liv...I just want the file."

"You just want the file," she repeated shaking her head.

"Give me the file for tonight."

Olivia scoffed and shook her head again.

"Just for tonight. Let me look at it and see if I can pull anything else from it. If I can't, I'll let the whole thing go."

"You must think I'm a real idiot Elliot, if you think I'm handing Drover's file over to you. Besides the fact that I'd be more than responsible for anything that you'd end up doing to him, I can't. I don't have it here."

"You're lying."

"And *you're* losing it!"

"I want his file."

"I don't have it!"

"Olivia, I can't take you looking me straight in the eye and lying to me. First, you give my daughter the okay to go sleeping around with whoever she wants, and now

you're keeping me from investigating the guy who propositioned my son. I want his file! You owe me that!"

"What?" Olivia took an angry, calculated step toward him. "I owe you that! Who the hell do you think you are, coming to *my* apartment, breaking *my* things and demanding I give you something you don't have a right to? You've got some balls telling me that I owe you a damn thing because of Kathleen!"

"You told my little girl—"

"You know what, Elliot? You're little girl isn't so little anymore and it's about time you faced that. But, I'm not going to apologize anymore for what I did. I did it to help *your* family. To keep your kids from falling apart anymore!"

"Don't," Elliot said pushing a finger into Olivia's shoulder. "Don't think for a second that you're some kind of great confidante, helping my kids out! They don't need you for that! That's why they have a mother and a father. Neither of whom are you!"

"Then, why the hell did she feel she had to come to me?" Olivia said and she then gave Elliot a shove backward. "And don't fucking *push* me in my own goddamn house! I don't care how angry you are about Kathleen or Drover! I was right about Kathleen, just like I know I'm right about Drover!"

A fire lit behind Elliot's eyes and he pushed her backward with each intensified word. "Oh, I'll *push* you when I need to. I'll *push* you when you're screwing with my kids and I'll push you when you're lying to my face. You're the reason Drover's out walking the streets and *you're* the reason he even had the chance to come after Dickie. Now, give me the damn' file!"

Olivia felt ready to slap him in the face, but she settled for giving him a hard shove backward. "I don't *have* it! I already told you!"

He barely moved under her pressure and by this point, Elliot had pushed her across the apartment and against a wall. He grabbed both of her arms above the elbow and pressed her against the wall.

"Stop lying," he said in a low voice. "I need that file and I know you have it."

Olivia rolled her forearms backward and broke his grasp. Several of her picture frames which had hung on the wall behind her came crashing down, spraying glass in every direction. An image of she and her mother from ten years earlier tore in its right corner, the frame itself cracked in disarray.

"Get out, Elliot," she said slowly. "I'm not giving you the Drover file, so you might as well just go home. Just go home, get some sleep and maybe take some time off."

"I can't do that. Not right now."

"Elliot," she said a little more at ease, "you're off the case. This isn't your problem anymore."

"Dickie—"

"I know, Elliot. I don't doubt that he's lying, but we can't say for sure that it's Drover. C'mon, you know better than this. We can't just railroad him on a hunch. That's what got us in trouble with him in the first place."

Elliot took a step back from her and ran a hand across his face and neck. He sighed, guilt washing over him as he heard glass crinkle under his shoes and he felt his anger begin to subside.

"Please," she continued. "Just go home. I swear to you, I will let you know the second we get anything solid leading to Drover."

“And you won’t give me that file?”

“No, I don’t have it for you.”

He started to walk away, but paused. “Look, me in the eye and give me the real reason you won’t give it up.”

Olivia stared at Elliot unsure of what to say. She wanted to tell him that she feared for what he might do to Drover if he found him. She wanted to tell him he needed therapy. She wanted to tell him that she was specifically instructed not to give him the file and that she was afraid for his job, his family and his life. She did not, however, want to lie to him.

“Elliot, I-I just don’t have it.” She immediately focused on his jacket pocket and then the floor; anywhere, but his eyes.

Elliot narrowed his eyes at her and nodded his head. He walked across the hardwood floor, feeling glass from Olivia’s shattered frames grinding into the floorboards as he left. He glanced back at her standing still against the far wall, before turning the doorknob and heading out into her hallway.

The second he was gone, Olivia jumped over the broken glass in bare feet and headed for her desk. She quickly shifted through a sea of files, found a thick manila file folder with the name “Jeffrey Christopher Drover” printed clearly on the label, and shoved it into the top side drawer. She opened her top middle drawer and sifted through errant Post-It pads, pens and binder clips, before finding a set of two small, golden keys bound together by a black string.

It was not that she distrusted Elliot in any way, but he had gone through her desk in the squad room and he was clearly in a state where he was prepared to do anything. They had exchanged keys for each other’s respective homes years ago, completing the exchange again when Elliot had to leave his house. She knew if Elliot really wanted the Drover file, nothing would stop him from coming back when she was asleep or out to go through the files on and in her desk.

She set one of the keys in the lock above the drawer holding the newly-found manila folder and turned the key.

Elliot had made it all the way to the elevators on Olivia’s floor and had even pushed the “Down” button, before his anger began to rise again.

She had the file and she looked me in eye and lied about it.

At this point, it was not solely the issue of the Drover, but the principle of the thing. If she was not going to trust him enough to just give him the file, she, at the very least, could have been an adult about it and given him a legitimate reason.

As the thoughts played in Elliot’s mind again and again, he grew angrier.

Who was he to come to her apartment demanding things? Who was she to lie to him? Him. Her partner.

Elliot shook his head and walked back to her apartment door he had left slightly ajar on his exit. He pushed the door open and had taken a breath, prepared to demand that she apologize for not having the nerve to give him a real reason for not giving up the file.

A moment passed when it seemed all the air had been sucked from the room and Elliot and Olivia simply stared at one another. Elliot, his hand still on her apartment door; Olivia, her hand still turning the desk key in its lock. Another moment went by and Olivia jerked away from the desk, taking the key with her. Elliot, realizing what she had just done, felt a nerve snap somewhere near the back of his neck and simply lunged for her.

Part Two: Flight from Fear
Chapter Fourteen

Wednesday January 31, 2007
SVU Squad Room

Sunlight peered through the windows of the Special Victims Unit, spreading a warm glow across the series of desks and the floors.

Elliot Stabler's footsteps beat a dark shadow against the bright floors as he parted through the numerous officers and detectives to cut the path to his desk. In place of his normal confident and dauntless stride was a pace marred by a slight limp in his right side. His eyes, inquisitive and bright, were outlined by a swell of purple and deep blue and a blotch of red ran down the left side of his face. The looks received from various passersby were ignored as Elliot walked, though it took great strength to suppress his disconcertion.

"Welcome back," Fin said passively, focused on his monitor, but catching Elliot out of the corner of his eye.

Elliot gave a nod in Fin's direction as he set down his things.

"Elliot!" Fin said turning toward him. "What's up with your face?"

Elliot rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You know...I don't really want to talk about it."

"You got a black eye! You get in a fight or something last night?"

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

Fin shook his head and returned to his online file searching, as Munch walked by to grab documents from his desk he needed to prepare for a trial that day.

"You feeling any better this morning?" Munch asked Elliot.

He looked up to answer him, Munch cut him off before he could speak. "Whoa! What the hell happened?"

"That's what I asked him," Fin said, "and he says he doesn't want to talk about it."

"I don't," Elliot said.

"Talk about what?" Munch yelled. "You look like you were hit by a car!"

Elliot simply shook his head and pulled out the remaining notes he had made days earlier on Kreider.

"Did you find Drover?" Munch said. "I can't believe Olivia gave you that file!"

"She didn't give me the damn file," Elliot said. "I didn't find Drover and I don't want to talk about it!"

"Well, I can see a day away did you a lot of good." Munch picked up a folder from his desk. "Anyway...I'm due in court."

Elliot returned his attention to his notes and glanced toward Olivia's desk for the first time that morning. Her chair was missing the sweater she brought back and forth from the precinct, the light on her desk was not on and the coffee cup that sat at the right corner of her desk was clearly cold.

"Where's Liv?" he asked noting the clock on his own desk that read just half past eight.

Fin shrugged. "Hasn't come in yet? Figured you mighta talked to her."

Elliot was about to reply, but Cragen waved him down to call him into his office. *Here we go*, he thought dreading the impending ass-chewing from his actions the previous day.

"Is that clear?" Cragen said, thirty minutes later, hands in his pockets as he leaned against his desk.

He was incensed from the previous day over both Elliot and Olivia and hated the fact that he was forced to reprimand his top detectives in such a way, but from his perspective, he had no other choice. He was certain their handling of Kreider's case could have gone much smoother if they had not been bickering non-stop over several weeks.

Cragen's superiors had received word of his subordinates' actions and the full heat of the NYPD was coming down him in spades. He had seen Elliot and Olivia solve cases in record time and accomplish more than any other partnership throughout all his years in command. All accommodations notwithstanding, Elliot and Olivia had been partnered together longer than any other detectives in the unit and had also been in the SVU the longest. So much time together had the same ability to drive people apart as it did to bring them together.

"I got it," Elliot said solemnly.

"Good," Cragen said as he walked behind his desk. "I'm gonna need you to talk to some of Kreider's co-workers. Find out if he said anything before leaving Rohlman-Hayworth. They might know where else he might be."

Elliot nodded and stood to leave, but paused. "You haven't heard from Liv?"

Cragen glanced outside the window of his office in the direction of Olivia's desk. "No, I haven't heard anything from her." He paused when he saw the concern that quickly spread across Elliot's face. "Give her a call and if she doesn't answer, drop by her place. She might just be sick. I know you both've been under a lot more stress the past few days."

Elliot nodded again, but a knot in his stomach began to twist as he left. The moment he came back to his desk, he reached for his phone to call Olivia, but heard a commotion behind him the second he pressed the star key.

"What tha hell is wrong with you people!"

Veronica Schrader stumbled into the precinct opening, red-faced and eyes glazed. "No one is doin' *anythin'* about my Ricky! And he's dead! He's all dead and I'm nevah gonna see 'im again!"

"Veronica," Fin said. "You gotta calm down."

"No!" she screamed. "You calm down! If Ricky was some snot nose rich kid, you people'd have a ton 'o officers tryin' ta figah out wha happened, but cuz he's *my* kid, you're jus' lettin' it all go!"

"Veronica," Elliot said. "We are still working your sons' case. We're tracking down the guy who hurt Ricky. You just need to give it some time."

"If you're trackin' 'im down, how come I jus' saw Jeffy Drover at a bodega on Nelson?"

"You saw Drover in Brooklyn?" Fin asked.

"Yeah, and you people are trackin' 'im down, how come I gotta tell you where he is?"

Elliot took a step toward her. "Veronica. Jeffrey Drover did not kill your son, but we know who did and we're *going* to find him."

“That’s not good enough!” she screamed and shoved Elliot in the chest.

Fin stood up and cornered Veronica from behind her. Elliot nodded to let him know he still had control of the situation.

“I know you’re upset,” Elliot said to a now weeping Veronica. “But you have to go home. As soon as we have him, you’ll be the first to know.”

Veronica continued crying and Fin called an officer to take her home.

“You think she really saw him in Brooklyn?” Fin asked Elliot once Veronica had been escorted from the squad room.

“No way to be sure, but I’m not allowed to know anything concerning Drover, so...”

“A’ight,” Fin said making a note on the long list on his desk.

“Cap wants us to interview Donough again and Kreider’s co-workers,” Elliot said. “And, I don’t know where Liv is...”

“I’m coming,” Fin said, bringing his last notes on Kreider with him as he rose.

“Hang on a sec,” Cragen said before Elliot and Fin hit the elevators. “We just got word on Micah Diorel. He just arrested this morning trying to break into the halfway house Evelyn Rivers is staying at.”

Elliot and Fin glanced at one another.

“How’d he even know where she was?” Elliot said. “Olivia had Evelyn in there before Drover got out on bail.”

Cragen shrugged. “Well, he’s on his way back Rikers. He jumped one of the officers from the house and pulled a knife on them, so the judge revoked his bail. Let Liv know once you see her.”

“Will do.”

SVU Squad Room

10:10AM

John Munch’s eyes narrowed at the empty desk across from him, noting that one of his fellow detectives had still not arrived at the precinct as he sent another e-mail requesting the specifics on Drover’s whereabouts during the police detail. Olivia held most of the information they had at hand, but in her absence, he was forced to rely on some friends of friends to get the job done.

He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Olivia’s number twice, getting her voicemail each time. Leaving a message the second time, he started to call Elliot, but Cragen interrupted.

“John,” Cragen said. “We got some word on Drover. Ricky Schrader’s mother came in here a couple hours ago screaming that we weren’t working her case. Now, I know she was coming down off of something, but she mentioned seeing Drover in Brooklyn just yesterday.”

“Yeah,” Munch said. “I found most of the info on his detail from some of the cops working him and apparently he’s been staying with a cousin on her side of Brooklyn since last Friday. I guess he’s been getting threats at his old building.”

Cragen nodded. "Look into it. I wanna know if he's been trying this same thing he did with Elliot's son with any other kids."

When Munch arrived at Nelson Street forty minutes later, he was surprised to find Drover's cousin, Meredith Lynch, completely unphased by the raucous her cousin had been causing.

"Well, Jeff's always been kind of weird since that thing with his dad," Meredith said.

"Weird how?" Munch asked.

The brown-haired woman shrugged. "Just...weird. I know he likes kids, but I wouldn't let him near mine. They're with their dad in Georgia right now, otherwise I wouldn't've let him stay."

"We need to talk to him. When was the last time you spoke to him?"

"Last night, he said he was going for more booze. That's all he's been doing lately is drinking. I mean he lost his job, lost his soccer thing, his neighbors about ran him out of his building... You guys really did a number on him."

"Mrs. Lynch," Munch said. "We have evidence that he abused two kids and we know for fact that he tried to attack a detective and a detective's kid. Do you really think we're bringing all this on him for nothing?"

Meredith stared at Munch with Drover's same grey eyes. "Look...I don't know what to tell you. He left last night around ten to get some liquor and he never came back. And I don't know where he is, so maybe you should just go."

"You're going to hide him even though you wouldn't let him near your kids?"

"His father raped him, so I know he's probably still nuts from that, but he's still family, you know? You can't turn away family and Jeff needed a place to go."

"Do you have any idea where he was Monday night?" Meredith shook her head and Munch continued. "From what I've heard, he tried to attack a detective's son...Like I said, the sooner we find him, the sooner we can get a statement from him and clear all this up."

Meredith simply shook her head.

"Well, what time did he leave here last night to start killing himself with liquor?"

She rolled her eyes. "About six or seven, I guess. I don't know. It was already dark out, so it was sometime around then."

Munch handed her his card. "Make sure the second you see him, he calls me. The faster we find him, the quicker this will all be over."

"Duly noted," she said and closed the door on him.

On his way back to the island, Munch stopped for a coffee and biscotti at a restaurant he used to frequent before he had moved from New York and was struck with inspiration on Drover. He called the precinct to have the officers run lists of anyone matching Drover's description and within twenty minutes, Munch stood in front of the jail cell at Precinct 27, watching Drover sleep in a drunken stupor.

"Hey!" Munch said. "Drover! Get up, we need to talk."

Drover slowly opened his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"What the hell do you want?" he asked once he saw Munch.

"I want to know where you've been lately," Munch said. "The word on the street is that you've been trying to attack some of the people who've been hunting you down."

"Screw you," Drover said. "Screw all of you."

"I've been talking to your cousin," Munch continued. "Looks like you're the one who's been getting screwed."

Drover crossed the cage and glared at Munch, several inches away from him. "That's because you people started telling everyone I know that I'm some kind of child molester and now my life's turned to shit."

Munch waved a hand over his face. "Does that mean you've started eating it too? You smell like you've been rolling in your own vomit for days."

"Guess that's what I was doing when you're people came and picked me up off the streets." He stumbled as he tried to make his way back to the bench in the cage. "They say I'm being charged with public drunkenness...like I need that right now."

"Well, what you need to do right now is to give me a statement on where you were Monday night. I might be able to get you out of here, if you give me the right answers."

"Go ta hell," Drover mumbled.

"You weren't in Queens on Monday were you?"

"You know what! You can all kiss my ass! That lady cop, Olivia, said she'd help me out every single, goddamn time I talked to her and look where I am."

"You're here because you drank yourself into a stupor and they picked you up at about eight this morning to save you from getting hit by a car in morning traffic."

"That stupid bitch opened her mouth, didn't she?"

"If you're talking about Detective Benson," Munch said softly. "Yeah, she did tell us what you tried on her. Not that you'd've been able to get away with anything, but it was an amusing story."

Drover nodded once, but rolled toward his side and vomited in the corner of the cage.

Munch rolled his eyes and turned to leave as Drover passed out in a pool of his own sick.

"You need to let her speak," Fin said to Lohraman, his eyes narrowing as he spoke. "She *has* to talk to us."

"Not until I know what she's being charged with," Lohraman said. His beady eyes darted back and forth between Elliot and Fin with the beginnings of a smirk curling at his thin lips. "Now, you people don't have a leg to stand on and Mrs. Donaugh isn't going to answer any questions in her current state."

"What state?" Fin yelled. "She comes in and out of the crazies anytime she feels like it."

Lohraman glared at him. "Mrs. Donaugh's state is not under question here."

"You're right," Elliot said. "We just want to know what she's hiding about Kreider."

"Owen," Donaugh said, speaking for the first time since Elliot and Fin had arrived. "I've...done enough to him. I gave him up because I didn't think I could raise a child at my age and look what's happened to him. He's had a miserable life and it's all because of me."

"You can spare us the sentimentality," Elliot said. "We just want to know where he is. Regardless of what your lawyer says, you can't stall forever. We have every ability to haul you to jail on obstruction of justice charges."

"Idle threats, Detective," Lohraman said.

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I've wronged that boy enough already and I'll be damned if I'm going to do it again."

Realizing that they were not going to get any further with Emme Donaugh, Elliot and Fin left the house frustrated and annoyed. They both knew she had information on Kreider, but her family lawyer held on retainer seemed to exempt her from any responsibility.

They arrived back at the precinct at the same time Munch was announcing to Cragen what Drover had been doing.

"...and he looks like he's been drinking all night and into today. He was giving it all up when I started leaving and he's probably got alcohol poisoning."

Cragen shook his head as Elliot and Fin approached. "What'd Donaugh tell you?"

"Nothing," Fin said. "She came out of her...issues...long enough to tell us that she wasn't going to saying anything against Kreider."

"We're just about to shake down Kreider's co-workers though," Elliot said.

Munch and Fin each hovered around the coffee stand to pour themselves black coffee, but Cragen frowned as he looked at Elliot.

He had not wanted to comment on it earlier, but standing so close to the detective, Cragen could clearly see all of Elliot's injuries and could see that he was favoring one side.

"Have you heard from Olivia yet?" Cragen asked.

Elliot shook his head.

"When was the last time you talked to her?"

Elliot visibly tensed. "Last night, about midnight."

"Did she say she wasn't coming in?"

"Not to me."

Cragen frowned. "Well, you and Fin continue on with Kreider's people...let me know if Olivia ever calls. Munch." He turned toward Munch who was drowning the last bit of his coffee. "Splash some water on Drover and make him talk."

Elliot walked by his desk, but stopped as the phone on Olivia's desk rang.

"Detective Stabler, SVU," he answered.

"Uh...yes. This is Evelyn Rivers," the voice on the other end said. "May I please speak to Detective Olivia Benson?"

"She's not in right now, Evelyn," Elliot said. "This is her partner. Can I help you out with anything?"

"Well...no...I just really wanted to talk to her 'cause...see she said she was going to come see me today...but, she still hasn't come by and the day's half over."

"Evelyn, I haven't seen her yet, but I know she wouldn't let you down. I'm sure she just got busy, but I know she'll be to see you today for sure."

"Okay," Evelyn sighed. "I guess...I'll just have to wait."

"I'm sure she'll be by soon," Elliot said.

Two hours later, Elliot and Fin found themselves in an office meeting room in front of one Lucas Roy, the last of three people who were closely associated with Owen

Kreider. Like with Kreider's other associates, Roy appeared apprehensive in speaking to them, but Roy continuously looked toward the door when a question was asked.

"When was the last time you spoke to Kreider?" Elliot asked his stern gaze never leaving Roy's shifty stance.

"Uh...it's been like weeks. I mean I haven't talked to him...especially since all this with these kids...I mean he seemed like such a normal guy and then this, you know?"

Fin's eyes narrowed in Roy's direction. "Everyone else we've been talking to always describe him as a little off-balanced. What made you think he seemed normal?"

"Well...you know...I mean you'd talk to him and talked about sports and stuff just like any other guy. He talked about settling down one day and having kids...guess that can be a little strange for a guy his age, but I mean, he seemed perfectly...you know, normal."

"You ever go out with him?" Fin asked. "Did he ever talk about kids in a way that seemed strange to you?"

"No. Like I said he was a normal guy."

"How 'bout visiting his place? Did you ever notice anything out of the ordinary in his apartment?"

"No."

"Did you ever let him stay at your place? Maybe after a night out, he slept on your couch or something?"

"No, never."

"You seem a little nervous," Elliot said, still staring.

"I-I'm not nervous."

"Well, you're sweating a little and you keep looking at the door like you expect someone to come barging through it."

"And you keep tapping your feet," Fin said. "You got rhythm in your soul or something?"

"Well, yeah okay. I am a little nervous, but you've got to see this from my point. I've been hearing all this stuff on the news about a guy that I sat next to and worked next to everyday for two years. For two years, we'd talk about baseball and hot girls and then the next thing I know, he's some fricken' psycho who's murdering kids. I mean, come on! You people don't know where he is and for all I know, he's lurking in some alley outside my apartment waiting to strangle *me*. I think I've got the right to be a little nervous."

Elliot and Fin glanced at one another and let Roy sit, feet tapping and eyes shifting, for a few silent minutes.

"Don't leave town, Mr. Roy," Elliot finally said, standing.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Roy called out to Elliot and Fin as they left the room, but neither turned to answer him.

SVU Squad Room
10:46PM

Munch sighed as he closed the file he had re-made on Drover that day. The suspect had turned much worse after Munch had left him and had to be taken to Mercy General Hospital to keep his blood-alcohol level from killing him. Drover's doctors notified Munch that it would be at least a full day before they could question him, but they made sure that he was handcuffed to the bed regardless.

He was about ready to call it night when short, dark-haired man approached the squad room entrance with a brown package in his hand. The man looked around the unit precariously, as if worried that he might be caught in the police precinct.

"Can I help you?" Munch said from his desk.

"Yeah...the cop downstairs said I should probably talk to SVU...Is this SVU?"

"Yes, this is," Munch said. "Do you need to report a rape?"

"No, no," the man said quickly. "I...uh..."

Munch stood and closed the gap between himself and the man. "Do you want to talk somewhere a little quieter?"

"Yeah," he said, immediately relieved. "Yeah, I would."

"What's your name?" Munch asked a moment later in one of the less austere interrogation rooms.

"Peter Wheeler," he said.

"What's going on Peter?"

"Well," he said pulling out the postal package. "Some friends of mine like to give...um, gag gifts and stuff. And for my last birthday, they gave this random...um, adult video. Now, I don't watch this stuff. It's gag gift."

"Fully understood," Munch said.

"But, they gave me this...so I watched it."

"Okay...Was there something on there that bothered you?"

"Well, it seemed like a normal porno at first."

"Normal in the sense that you don't watch that stuff?"

"But, then it turned weird," Peter continued as if Munch had not commented.

"This guy...I'm still not sure what happened, but it looked like this guy killed this girl on the video."

"Sounds like a normal, not-so-normal porn to me."

"That's what I thought too, it's just that...It didn't look like some low budget porno death. It looked really real. The girl really looked like she was dead."

Munch stared at Peter for a moment suppressing the sigh that was building in his chest.

"Anyway," Peter said sliding the package across the table. "I just thought you people should watch it. I don't know...You're cops. Maybe you can tell for sure if she really got killed on the DVD or not."

"Well, thanks Peter," Munch said. "We'll look into it."

He shook his head as he ushered Peter out of the room and tossed the packaged DVD onto his desk, knowing it would be at the bottom of a very big pile for a while. With Drover and Kreider on his plate, not to mention all of their other open cases, there did not seem to be time for small concerns such as a well-made adult video.

By the time, Elliot and Fin returned to the precinct, Munch was about to walk out of the squad room.

“Everybody so far seems clean,” Fin said, commenting on Kreider’s close friends and co-workers.

“A guy like Kreider?” Munch said. “You’ve got to be kidding?”

“There was one guy,” Elliot said. “Lucas Roy. He seemed a little nervous talking to us, but he turned out clean. No one looks like they’re having any interaction with Kreider.”

Munch released his pent up sigh. “Where the hell can this guy be hiding?”

“I’m beginning to think he’s not even in the city anymore,” Elliot said. “I mean we’ve tracked down everyone who’s had some kind of contact with him and he’s gone.”

“And even if Donaugh was helping him,” Fin added, “we’ve been checking her out from every angle. She’s not giving him a dime.”

“I can’t believe it,” Munch said. “I’m calling it a night.”

“Same here,” Fin said at his desk. “I’m out the door right after you.”

Cragen motioned for Elliot to come toward his office. “Any word on Olivia yet?”

“No,” Elliot said through furrowed eyebrows. “She hasn’t called or anything?”

Cragen ran a hand over his face, looking more than exhausted. “I can’t believe she’d just vanish like this, especially after yesterday.” His voice began to rise in intensity. “I gave her full reign back on Kreider and on Drover and now, she’s nowhere to be found.”

“I’ll check on her tonight,” Elliot said trying to diffuse some of his boss’s resentment. “Just to make sure she’s okay.”

“Well, when you see her, make sure she knows what’s she’s missed all day. Evelyn Rivers has called every hour, on the hour since you and Fin left here at two.”

“Liv?” Elliot said as he knocked on Olivia’s door. “Olivia? Liv, it’s me.”

He poked his head through her door and opened it a bit, hoping that she would simply be on her couch, ignoring him. Stepping into the apartment, he scanned the room in search of her.

Across the apartment, Olivia’s walls were bare in spots where her framed pictures, now shattered in several places all over her floors, once hung. The hope chest that sat in the middle of the room as a coffee table was overturned and lay open with its contents, two blankets, a violin case and sheet music, spilling toward her television. The television sat askew on its stand while the DVDs, which normally stood neatly on their shelf beside the television, were falling in all directions, some hanging haphazard on the edge of the shelf. Accent pillows and couch cushions lay in several orientations, each pointing toward the long brown afghan, that had covered both he and Olivia not forty-eight hours earlier and now lay strewn across the sofa and onto the floor, fuzz from its woolen strands still reaching upward as if pulled by the electricity left in the air. Her beige oriental rugs that stretched across the living room were covered with bits of broken glass that glinted in the moonlight, and the various files, notepads and pens on her desk sat in complete disarray, many of them overflowing onto the floor and spraying an arch that swept toward the room’s center. The chair that usually stood next to her desk lay on its side, one of its legs bent at an odd angle from the rest of its brothers toward the floor and its back appeared severely scratched. On the room’s other side, her cello case lied flat

on its back, as if having slid from its precarious position by her bookcase and the dust that had been interrupted from the floor behind it upon its fall had settled into a fine grey layer on the black hardened plastic of the case. In the middle of the floor and nearing the coffee table rested a small red-brown smudge that lied amidst all the broken glass catching one's eye immediately and tying together every facet of the room's state. Everything looked exactly the way it did before he had left Tuesday night.

Elliot sighed as he checked Olivia's bedroom and bathroom, just in case she had fallen or was completely indisposed, with no luck. Frustrated, he pulled out his cell phone and called her phone again. He jumped when it rang from the nightstand in her bedroom, as it sat directly next to her badge and her gun. He then checked her top dresser drawer for her backup weapon and noticed that her spare keys were gone, but the gun still remained, and looked toward her closet to see that her running shoes were still in place.

As he approached her door, he sighed again wondering if she had simply stepped out of her apartment altogether. He knew that sometimes she visited her neighbor two floor above her and there was always the possibility that she had made up with Holloway some time in the night and she was holed up with him somewhere.

Elliot paused once more before locking Olivia's apartment, concern spreading over his bruised face. Her keys were glistening in the moonlight that shone through her apartment while they hung from their normal hook and her cell phone beeped in the distance, full with dozens of the day's messages. He simply shook his head and locked the door as he left, wondering briefly if she had simply taken flight from him again like she had eight months earlier.

Chapter Fifteen

Thursday February 1, 2007
East 75th Street and York Avenue

Maya Shah's dark eyes stared at the door to her narrow office as she sighed over her paperwork. When she grew bored over her cases, she enjoyed looking at the words "Esquire" printed beneath her name on the door, always remembering the hours spent buried beneath the books of New York University's law library.

Since she had nothing but time on her hands after her affair with Mason Garriston had ended so dramatically, Maya had decided to spend the early morning hours in her office to get some work done.

The case before her was for a Luis Cordoval who had been caught robbing a bodega on 110th Street and unfortunately for Luis, the case was a wash. He was filmed by the security cameras sticking a gun in the face of the storeowner and in his haste, had left the gun that held in his fingerprints at the scene of the crime. Her hopes for the case at this point were in getting Luis off with just three years at Sing Sing instead of the nine he had coming to him.

She took only one or two cases every few months and most of those were for people who were attempting to keep driving privileges after multiple tickets or drunk driving charges. The Cordovals had received her name from friends of friends and once she heard the general facts of the case, Maya did not have the heart to tell them they

could have saved the money for her retainer fees and used a public defender. With the DAs holding the gun, the security tapes and several witnesses placing Luis at the scene, she would be dependent solely on the litigating strengths she normally reserved until the moment was dire.

Maya stood and placed several of her notes on Luis's case into her Coach leather briefcase. That morning, she had scheduled a manicure and pedicure and knew she would be spending most of her relaxation time thinking of what she would say to ADA Sean Kendall to plead Luis down a few years.

Heading for the door, she made a mental note to comb West Law throughout the latter part of the day for any loophole possible for giving the Cordovals the slightest glimmer of hope for Luis.

Her cell phone rang from her coat pocket as she put her hand on the door and she frowned as she stared at the unrecognized number in the display.

"Hello?"

"Yeah! Hey, Maya," a voice said quickly. "This is Elliot Stabler. Olivia's partner."

"Oh hi," Maya said breaking into a smile. "What's going on?"

Elliot sighed. "Have you, uh...have you talked to Olivia recently?"

"No...Last time I talked to her was Tuesday. She, um, said you were angry with her and she was worried about you."

At the desk in his apartment, Elliot ran a hand over his head. "But, you haven't seen or heard from her since then?"

"No," Maya repeated, now becoming suspicious. "But, then again, I don't talk to her every single day. I mean, we're not sixteen anymore. Why though? Is she not talking to you or something?"

Elliot paused not knowing what to say. The last thing he wanted to do was worry Maya, but as she was the only person who knew Olivia better than he did, Elliot had nowhere else to turn.

"Elliot?" Maya said. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here...I, uh...we just haven't heard from her and I figured that she might've told you something. Maybe about where she was going?"

Maya shrugged though she knew Elliot could not see her. "Well, no. She didn't tell me anything about leaving. Like I said, the last time I talked to her was Tuesday."

Maya paused. "The last thing we talked about was that you were upset with her over something with your son...Is he okay?"

"Yeah," Elliot said. "He's fine. Thanks for asking."

"Livia also told me about...that you found out that she helped your daughter..."

Elliot let out a frustrated sigh, however, his frustration did not lie with Maya. Clearly, Maya knew everything there was to know about Olivia, but she did not seem to have to slightest idea where Olivia was.

He had awakened from a nightmare early that morning and had been calling Olivia's home and cell numbers every thirty minutes. Each time her answering machine picked up, he closed his eyes to the memory of the expression on her face when he finally left her apartment Tuesday night. Things had gone far out of control between them and he allowed his every raw emotion to be unleashed at the same time. To make matters worse,

the moment was quickly approaching when he would be forced to tell someone what had happened that night.

"We're fine," Elliot said after a moment. "We *did* talk about that, but...we're fine."

"Okay," Maya said sounding upbeat again. "Well...if Livia calls me, I'll definitely let her know that you've been trying to track her down."

"Thanks, Maya," he said trying to keep the dejection out of his voice.

He closed his phone and resisted the urge to throw it across the floor as he readied himself for the day.

Where the hell could she be?

On the drive to the 1-6, he continuously shook his head as he ran through a set of people he needed to call to see if they had seen Olivia. He would need to talk to Halloway, but he would save him for dead last. The less interaction he had with the man, the better their relationship would be. He remembered the picture of the two boys on Olivia's desk and tried to remember their mother's name.

Jessica...Janice...Joanna...Jillian!

The moment he stepped onto SVU's floor, Elliot made a beeline for Olivia's desk, searching for an address book or a list of phone numbers.

"Any word from Olivia?" Cragen asked the moment he saw Elliot.

"No," Elliot said. "And, I just talked to her best friend who didn't sound like she even thought Liv might be...gone."

"Who else are you are thinking to call?"

"Well, I'm trying to find a number for her friend...Jillian something. I've never met her, but I've heard Liv talk about her a lot, and there's that Halloway she's been dating..., but from what Olivia told me the last time we talked, I should probably save him for last."

Elliot opened another drawer in Olivia's desk and shook away the sudden sensation of déjà vu unable to find so much as a rolodex containing a number for someone named "Jillian."

"I'm gonna go back to Liv's place," Elliot said letting out an exasperated sigh. "Maybe...she'll be back or I can at least find her address book."

Cragen nodded at Elliot, a worried crease resting in his forehead and a frown set on his mouth.

When Elliot opened the door to Olivia's apartment, he felt his shoulders hang at the sight of the apartment in the same state it was the last time he had left it. He approached her desk and saw that her lamp had fallen and had taken her bow with it. Guilt washing over him, he picked up the bow to view the full damage that the lamp had made. He had only heard Olivia play her cello once, but the experience was awe-inspiring and as he held the broken shards of his partner's beloved instrument, every bruise on his body ached and tingled.

He set down the bow, noting its maker, and sifted through the desk drawers, rolling his eyes at the top drawer which was still locked, to find Olivia's day planner. After flipping through each letter of her address book for a few minutes, Elliot gave up and went through the Js on Olivia's cell phone.

"Olivia?" a woman's voice answered. "Lemme call you back. I'm rushing to get the boys to school."

Elliot cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah, this is Elliot Stabler, Olivia's partner. Am I speaking to...Jillian?"

He was met with a moment's silence before she answered. "Yes...this is Jillian. Why are *you* calling *me* from *Olivia's* phone?"

"Well, I..." he began, caught off guard by Jillian's harsh tone. "We're trying to get a hold of Olivia and...I mean, her phone is still here at her apartment, but she's not..."

Silence swam over the phone and Elliot hoped that Jillian would put the pieces together without him having to actually ask her the question.

"I haven't talked to Olivia since last Wednesday...when she told me how you almost got her fired."

Elliot's eyebrows furrowed for a moment as he tried to recall the last week through the absurdity of Jillian's statement.

"We don't talk as often as we should," Jillian continued as if she had not said anything significant. "Have you tried speaking to Maya Shah? They talk all the time."

"Yeah, I've talked to Maya and she hasn't seen her."

"Well, I haven't seen her either...Should I be worried here? I mean is there a reason you're calling *us* trying to find out where Liv is?"

"No," Elliot said quickly. "I'm just...I'm just trying to make sure she's okay because she's not answering any calls or anything."

"Oh," Jillian said sounding extremely unconvinced. "Well, call me if you need anything. I guess you have my number now."

"Yes. Will do."

He ended the call and sighed as he called the "J" beneath Jillian in Olivia's phone. When he received no answer, Elliot tried calling the same number from his own phone.

"Jonathan Halloway," a male voice answered in a low voice.

"Yes, this is Detective Elliot Stabler. Olivia Benson's partner. Do you have a second?"

"Why the hell are *you* calling *me*?"

"I'm looking for Olivia," Elliot said. "Have you seen her?"

"I haven't seen Olivia since she threw me out of her apartment a week ago," Jonathan seethed. "And, as far as I'm concerned, you, Olivia and all those other people she's got in her life that come before me, can just kiss my ass!"

Elliot stared at the phone for a moment once Jonathan hung up, wondering what could have been said during his fight with Olivia. Sighing, he left the apartment and knocked on her neighbor's door.

"Yes?" Mrs. Fitzgivens said, eyeing Elliot suspiciously.

"Hi," Elliot said, flashing his badge. "Detective Elliot Stabler. I'm looking for your neighbor, Olivia. Do you know if she's been by lately?"

Mrs. Fitzgivens looked Elliot up and down and frowned at him before answering. "No. I haven't spoken to her and I don't want to."

"Well, did you notice anyone coming by here lately? Anyone you didn't recognize on your floor?"

"All I know is that there's been a lot of screaming and yelling over there going on this past week and thankfully, it's all quieted down."

"When was the last time you heard all this screaming and yelling?"

“Tuesday, I think. Lots of commotion. Kept me up half the night.”

Elliot nodded and suppressed a sigh.

“If you do see her,” Mrs. Fitzgivens said crossing her arms. “Tell her she turned her nose up on a very nice young man and if that *man* she’s been seeing didn’t know that he could come here at all times of the night, he wouldn’t be with her. Just tell her she missed a real opportunity with my son.”

He sighed again as Mrs. Fitzgivens slammed the door in his face, wondering how much digging he would have to do into Olivia’s private life before she appeared again. Allowing the shock of hearing such scorn come from such a small woman, Elliot knocked on the doors of the other six apartments on Olivia’s floor, but with little luck. Only two neighbors were home: Sam Lauper who had been too in depth with his own work to notice anything and Mark Landon who announced that he had not heard from Olivia since Tuesday night as well.

As morning reached midday, a nervous prickling developed at the base of Elliot’s spine and he headed back to the precinct without any further knowledge on his partner’s whereabouts.

“Nothing?” Cragen said, when Elliot returned to the squad room. Elliot shook his head and Cragen continued. “Well, I don’t want to panic about this too quickly. Do we know if she had any court appearances or anything else? Did you talk to anyone who might know where she could be?”

“Called friends, talked to neighbors; nothing. No one knows where she is. And, her gun, badge and phone are all sitting on her nightstand, and her keys were on their hook.”

Cragen swore and Elliot opened up the planner that he took from Olivia’s apartment. “I grabbed her day planner and took her phone. I’m gonna start talking to anyone I can think of.”

“Her place?” Cragen said. “When you went there, it was locked?”

“Yeah, from the outside. The bottom lock and door chain weren’t on.”

They stared at one another for a moment, each one fearing the worst.

“I’ll call Munch and Fin,” Cragen said. “After what Liv told me about last week, I want know exactly where Drover was Tuesday night. You know of any more of Liv’s friends who might know if she just needed some time away?”

Elliot shrugged. “I think there was a Sarah...maybe an Adam somewhere in there. I don’t know. That’s why I’ve got her phone. I’ll see what I can find...I’m sure she’s fine, just...”

“Yeah,” Cragen said, nodding and turning to walk back to his office. “Well, if you find that she’s in the Hamptons or something, tell her I’m driving up there myself to throw her ass into a sling.”

The yellow police tape in Fin’s hands brushed with punctuated friction against the latex gloves that covered his hands as he pulled the tape toward him. He pulled out the small silver pocket knife he had carried on his person since he was twelve years old and cut against the tape that was stripped across Jeffrey Drover’s apartment door.

A white warrant crinkled in Munch's hand as Fin pushed open Drover's door. Munch was aggravated that they were forced to get another one from Casey before they entered the premises again, but it was necessary to ensure that Drover's lawyer was not given any ammunition to protect him, especially if they were able to expose any other reprobate acts.

A redolent odor wafted passed both detectives as they entered the apartment to which the NYPD had laid waste on their initial intrusion into Drover's life. Tables were overturned, books falling off their shelves and old garbage sat in the cramped kitchen begging to be taken to the dumpster.

"Can you imagine him even trying to come back to this place?" Fin asked his nose crinkled at the general state of the flat. "I mean, CSU didn't have anything to do with what's going on in that kitchen."

Munch shook his head and stepped in the direction of Drover's computer.

"All right," he said sitting in Drover's chair. "Let's see what the pedophile has been searching for recently."

"Hopefully, it's something incriminating and we can keep him," Fin said. "The stuff that went down with Liv last week isn't gonna keep him long, especially since *she's* the one who let it slide."

Munch pulled up Drover's Internet Explorer and sighed. "I'd be happy if she'd just show up. All this worrying about her is going to give my youthful face, premature wrinkles. Here we go!"

"What'd you find?"

"He's been definitely doing some searches on Liv...and Elliot."

"He find any addresses?"

Munch pulled several more searches on Drover's computer and frowned. "He's been to one of those people search sites, and he found addresses for both and where Stabler's kids go to school."

"Aw, Christ," Fin said. "Pull the thing out. We'll take it to Morales and let him work on it. And, I wanna know where Drover was on Tuesday. If he was looking for their addresses, he's been planning something."

Thirty minutes later, the detectives stood with another officer in Precinct 2-7 pouring over the notes on Drover's arrest report to see what previous officers had been told while throwing him into the drunk tank, their primary visit to the suspect stymied by his languor.

"Well, he said," Officer Langbrone began, "that he was buying drinks at a bunch of different liquor stores in Brooklyn...then he hopped the train back Downtown where he got thrown out of a few bars and we've got a report of him being asked to move along that night from some doorstep in the Village...then, he just disappears off the radar."

"Disappears?" Fin said.

"He doesn't remember where he went and we don't have any other reports matching up to him between about two and eight when he was picked up for screaming obscenities at children walking to school Wednesday morning."

"That's all we've got on him?" Munch asked.

"Hey," Langbrone said. "The guy's a loser drunk. We can't keep tabs on all of them. We're lucky we know this much about what he was doing that night. If you wanna know details, shake him awake and ask him."

Both detectives rolled their eyes at the officer and made their way back to their car.

“What are you thinking?” Fin asked noting the concern reflecting on his partner’s face.

Munch stared at Fin through dark glasses over the roof of their car. “Drover attacked Olivia in an alley near her place...He was kicked out of bars Downtown and they roused him from a doorstep in the Village. Now, Olivia lives on 10th and we still haven’t heard from her yet.”

“You think Drover woulda tried something else Tuesday night?”

Munch shrugged and shook his head, but his facial expression spoke for him.

Elliot winced as the phone on Olivia’s desk rang for the fourth time that day.

“Elliot Stabler,” he said softly as he answered it.

“Can I talk to Olivia, please?” Evelyn Rivers’ meek voice quivered with her last word.

Elliot closed his eyes to keep from sighing into the phone. “Evelyn...we’re still waiting to hear from Olivia, but I *promise* you. You’ll be the first person she calls the second we see her.”

“It...it’s just that...one of the people here told me that...she said that Micah tried to get in here Tuesday. Olivia said he wouldn’t know where I was, but he found me. How could he’ve found me?”

“Evelyn, I don’t know. But what I do know is that Micah is sitting in a prison cell right now and he’s not going anywhere. Trust me.”

He could hear Evelyn sniff on the other end of phone. “It’s just that...she said she’d by and she hasn’t. I don’t think she’d forget, but it’s just that she hasn’t come by and she promised she would. And now Micah’s come after me like he said *he* would, but Olivia hasn’t come here like she said *she* would.”

“I know, Evelyn,” he said with as much compassion as he could muster. “And, trust me. She didn’t just forget about you. Something really big must’ve happened for her not to check in on you, but I promise you that she didn’t forget.”

“Oh...okay, thank you.”

She hung up before he could reply again and Elliot felt his pulse begin to race although his spirits were completely depressed. In trying to find Olivia, he also had to manage to keep the peace for as long as possible. Her worried friends would start the kind of panic he would just as soon avoid, though he knew the storm was coming, regardless. If Olivia did not stroll into the squad room with the next few hours, all hell was going to break loose from all sides.

He picked up Olivia’s phone and ran through her speed dial numbers in hopes of finding a “Sarah” somewhere the near the top. He paused briefly through the numbers noting, with a small smirk, that while he was first, “Jonathan Halloway” was fourth after “MJ Shah” and “Mr. Huo’s.” Fourteen numbers later, Elliot stumbled upon “Sarah Hyman” and called the number immediately from the phone on his desk.

“Hello?” a female voice answered.

“Yes, hello. My name’s Detective Elliot Stabler. May I speak to a Sarah... Hyman?”

“This is...how can I help you?”

“Yeah, you know my partner, Olivia Benson?”

“Oh yeah!” Sarah said brightly. “I knew that name sounded familiar. That’s right, you’re Liv’s partner. What can I do for you?”

“Well, uh...I haven’t seen her in a couple days,” he began with an upbeat voice to keep Sarah from becoming worried, “and I was wondering if you’ve heard from her.”

“No,” Sarah said slowly. “Liv and I actually haven’t talked in a while. Too long, really. I guess since New Years...I should probably give her a ring, just to see how’s she’s been.”

“So, you don’t know if she’s visiting anyone or anything like that?”

Sarah paused. “Well, I’ve actually grown a bit closer Liv’s cousin, Allison. She works with me here in Hoboken and, actually, she just had a baby yesterday and if Liv’s not in the city, she probably came out to see the baby. When I saw her at New Years, she said her New Year’s Resolution was to get to know the little family she *did* have.”

“Do you have her number, ‘cause I just need to check on Olivia?”

“Sure, I do. Just give me a sec and I’ll find it. I can’t barely remember phone numbers anymore. I’ve always got things stored in my phone...”

Sarah rambled on for another minute before giving Elliot the number for Olivia’s cousin, but he only stared at the number once he had written it.

When Olivia’s mother had died seven years earlier, Elliot met who he assumed was Olivia’s only family; a single aunt, Sylvia. They did not seem to be a close-knit family and Olivia appeared to be closer to the seven members of the Shah family that had come to pay their respects. Even after the funeral, Olivia never mentioned her aunt again and she never once said anything about a cousin.

There was also the issue of troubling a relative with whom Olivia, New Year’s Resolution or not, may not have had any interaction in years. In all the years that Elliot had known Olivia, he had seen her go to just one baby shower and he knew that she left early from it, unable to take the squeals and pastels for a full day. Nothing in Olivia’s personality, from her aversion to leaving Manhattan to her avoidance of social situations that involved “oohs” and “ahs,” would lead him to believe that she would take off in the middle of the night to meet her estranged cousin’s newborn.

Elliot shook his head at the number and slid it into his desk drawer. Even if Olivia had dropped everything in the middle of the night, she would, at the *very* least, have told Maya that she was leaving town and she also would not have left her apartment in the shape that it was.

“Anything?” Cragen asked once he noticed Elliot was off the phone.

“Nothing. No one knows where she is.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“One friend suggested that I talk to Liv’s cousin who just had a baby in Jersey, but the Liv I know wouldn’t skip town just to see the child of cousin she never talks to. Not leaving her apartment in the condition that it was this morning.”

“Well, what did her apartment look like?” Cragen asked crossing his arms.

Elliot paused and glanced at the glossy floor before looking his superior in the eye. “It looked the way it did when I left her place Tuesday. In fact, a little too much.

Before I left, things got a little... shuffled in her apartment and I just would've expected to her have cleaned up a bit before she left. But everything was the same."

Cragen stared silently at his detective, his eyes pausing on each bruise on his face and his slouched position in his chair while the words "a little shuffled" rolled around in his head.

"You know," he said after a full minute. "I remember you telling me that maybe Kreider had a little something for Liv a while back when we first started looking at him. Why don't you and Fin go to talk this Roy friend of Kreider's and grill him a little harder. I've a feeling if he's at all close to Kreider, he knows something."

"What about Liv?" Elliot asked. "I mean, I've called just about every person I can think of and no one knows where she is."

"I'll have Munch keep on it, but... I want you to follow up with Roy."

Elliot nodded and minutes later he was on his way out of the precinct to speak to Lucas Roy again.

"John," Cragen said motioning Munch into his office. "Tell me something... what do you know about these injuries Stabler's come in with?"

Munch, now inside Cragen's office with the door shut, shrugged. "Nothing. He came in Wednesday all banged up and said he didn't want to talk about it."

"He never said anything?"

"No," he said shaking his head. "I mean... I admit it was a little unnerving to see him like that after the way he left here Tuesday night, but... I think if it was truly serious, he would've spilled."

Cragen sighed. "Do me a favor... just for my own peace of mind. Go to Liv's apartment and talk to her neighbors."

"Didn't Stabler already talk to them?"

"It's not that I don't trust what Elliot says. I just want another perspective on what her neighbors have to say."

Munch gave him a nod as he left the office and though his inquiring mind desired to do so, he did not pry into what Cragen meant by "another perspective."

"Look, I told you already! I don't know where Owen is!"

Lucas Roy's face held red blotches where blood rushed through the capillaries in his cheeks through the force of his shouts and his breathing had intensified to the point that it was coming in gasps.

Elliot and Fin glanced at one another as all three stood in an unused conference room, and then turned their gazes to Roy, skepticism well set in their eyes.

"Lucas," Elliot began. "We really need to find him."

"I know, but I'm telling you, I don't know where he is."

"But you'd tell us if you did," Fin said.

Roy turned toward Fin as his eyes grew wide. "Yeah... of course I would. I mean, if he's done all these things people are saying he's been--"

"There's no *if* to it," Elliot said. "Owen Kreider is a murderer and if you're hiding him somewhere, you're liable for every murder he committed."

Roy shook his head. "I'm not... I'm *not*."

"We don't believe you," Fin said.

"You can look through all my stuff! I don't have any hideouts or something where he could be staying. I don't know where he is!"

Elliot took a step toward him and spoke in a soft, deep voice. "Listen. As if what's happened to these kids wasn't bad enough, he murdered his neighbor and now... there's a cop missing. If you know anything about where he is and you're holding out, believe me, you'll be doing time right next to him at Rikers."

"I promise you," Roy said. "I swear on my mother's life, I don't know where he is."

"We need to find him," Fin said. "And after everything we've heard, you the one who's closest to him."

"I don't know anything."

"Did he say anything about the police talking to him before he left?" Elliot asked.

Roy shook his head.

"Think before you answer," Elliot said. "Now, think back. Did Kreider say anything to you about any of the cops who were talking to him?"

"No...at least, I don't think so. It's hard to remember. I mean, that feels like a lifetime ago."

"Try harder. Did he mention speaking to the police?"

Roy stared at the table for another before popping his head up, as if the memory had simply jumped to mind.

"Yeah...I think he did mention a cop."

"You're sure?" Elliot said.

"Yeah," Roy said nodding. "We were talking about the ladies who all work on the third floor and he mentioned a lady cop...He said she looked him in the eye when he talked, unlike other women he tried talking to."

Elliot and Fin glanced at one another again, each frowning.

"What else did he have to say about her?" Fin asked. "It's important."

Roy shrugged. "Nothing really. I mean, he only mentioned a woman cop that one time and all he said was that she was pretty and that she looked him in the eye when they talked. That's it."

His eyes bounced back and forth between Elliot and Fin and widened.

"You think he might've done something to *her*? Is this the cop that's missing?"

"If you know anything," Elliot said. "You need to tell us."

"I'm really wishing I had something to tell you," Roy said. "But...I don't know where Owen is. Now, look. People are starting to talk about you people coming in here to talk to me. I don't know anything and I need you to stop coming here."

Elliot glared directly into the pits of Roy's pupils, seeing the cowardice that lied within, before he nodded at Fin and they both left the building.

An odd mixture of apprehension and guilt came in a wave over Munch as he stepped off the elevator on Olivia's floor. Reviewing the actions of his co-worker made him feel like a rat and each step he took closer to Olivia's door brought the vision of seeing his friend's face in a newspaper that claimed she had been murdered. Let into the

building by the superintendent, he knocked on her door, knowing that he would not receive answer, but hopeful nonetheless. After receiving no response from Olivia's door, Munch went to the apartment next to hers.

"Yes?" Mrs. Fitzgivens said as she answered the door, eyeing Munch suspiciously.

"Hi there," he said, flashing his badge. "I'm Detective John Munch. You're super let me in."

"Can I help you?" she asked, still not opening the door to any extent.

"I work with your neighbor, Olivia Benson, and I was wondering if you'd seen or heard from her recently."

"Another cop was just here asking that same question. Don't you people talk to one another?"

Munch bit the inside of his lip, wondering if the hostility stemming from the woman before was because he was simply a stranger to her or whether it held some deeper meaning that might ignite if he said the wrong thing.

"Well, we're just trying to make sure we've got all our bases covered."

Mrs. Fitzgivens rolled her eyes. "Like I told that other detective...her partner or whatever. I haven't seen her."

"When was the last time you talked to her?"

"Sunday, I think. Anyway, I don't know see what the big fuss is."

"An officer might be missing," Munch said.

"Are you sure? I figured since she was just a little whore, she had just gone out whoring and had forgotten to come back."

"Where the hell do you get off saying that!"

"Well, I live right next to her, so I think I'm perfectly capable of making that assumption. Good day."

As she closed the door in his face, a door behind him opened and a face popped out from the doorframe to see what had caused the commotion.

"Everything all right out here?" Mark said, staring at Munch through narrowed eyes.

"Yeah," Munch said walking toward Mark's apartment. "My name's Detective John Munch. Is...is your neighbor always so hospitable to strangers?"

Mark shook his head as he leaned against the frame. "She's been here since as long as anyone can remember and she doesn't like new people."

"I see. Well, I work with your neighbor, Olivia Benson, and I was just checking to see if anyone knew what she'd been up to."

"Up to?" Mark said. "I haven't seen her in...a couple days, I guess."

"She tell you that she was going anywhere? Maybe taking a trip to clear her head?"

"No. She didn't say anything like that."

"Well, have you noticed anyone around the building lately that you didn't recognize?"

"You mean other than you?"

Munch grinned. "Yeah, other than me."

"No one out of the usual. I know she's been fighting with her boyfriend or whatever and he's been storming in and out of here for the past few days."

“Anything else?”

“Well...I mean there's been a lot of arguing from other there recently. I thought it was just that Halloway guy, but I think one of them was her, um...partner, I think.”

“You think?” Munch said. “What'd he look like?”

“Tall, big, strong guy. Brown hair...I don't know. Almost every time he's been by lately, I've heard him screaming. She was actually crying about it a week ago. And, you know what? He was actually here asking about her yesterday and he looked kind of...I don't know, frazzled or something.”

Munch frowned at the news, but pulled out a notepad and began writing. He took out his card a minute later and handed it to Mark.

“If you see her...or if you hear anything else, just let me know.”

Mark nodded. “Will do.”

“Is there anyone else home at this time of day on your floor?”

“Yeah, Sam,” Mark said pointing down the hall toward the second door on the left. “He's some kind of artist. He's home, I think. And Mrs. Fitzgivens, but you've already talked to her.”

Munch gave him a nod and headed down the hall.

“No, I haven't seen her,” Sam said several minutes later. “But, um...another detective, her partner, I think his name's Elliot, but he was over here yesterday asking if I'd seen her too, but he didn't have a notepad or anything like you.”

“Well, I'm sure he just memorized what you said.”

“Yeah, probably. I mean, you cops have good memories, right?”

“I did in my springy, younger days, but now...” Munch shrugged and Sam let loose a wide smile.

“Well, I haven't seen Olivia in days. But, someone's been over there because the other night, there was all this screaming and yelling and banging around.”

“You didn't check to see what was wrong?”

“I was in the zone, you know. I get into a sculpture and I can't stop until I'm out of it. By the time I thought about it again, it had all stopped. But, um...I mean, is she okay? Because this is the second time someone's asked me about her in a couple days.”

“I'm sure she's fine,” Munch said, not believing his own words as he pulled out one of his cards. “Give me a call if you see her.”

“Yeah, just let me know if you hear anything,” Cragen said into his phone. “Thanks George.”

He set the telephone back on its receiver and let out a deep sigh. Having called any department he could think of, Cragen called Casey to ask if she had needed Olivia for anything and when she had said that she had not seen nor hear from her, Cragen called George with a last hope that Olivia had been spirited off with the FBI again. However, George had not seen nor heard from Olivia either. As the day wore on, it seemed more and more likely that some severe harm had befallen his detective.

Cragen rested back into his chair as a small envelope popped into view on his computer monitor, telling him new e-mails had arrived. He closed his eyes knowing it was his own superior wanting a status update on SVU's cases and ran through a quick list

of all the funerals he had been to for officers cut down in their prime. The phone on his desk rang as he remembered a tenth name and the tragic funeration that followed, and he reached slowly to answer it.

“Cragen,” he said.

“Yeah, it’s John. I just got back from Olivia’s place and I’m pulling her phone records right now.”

“Anything?” Cragen asked.

“No,” Munch said curtly. “No one’s seen her, but apparently Elliot neglected to tell us a few things.”

“A few things like what?”

“Like he didn’t find it necessary to take any notes on what her neighbors had to say or that he was at her place Tuesday night, while as one neighbor said, there was a lot of screaming and yelling and banging coming from her apartment. And, this was from the guy who lives all the way down the hall.”

“Anything else?”

“The guy below her confirmed the same stuff and he got a time frame. He said he heard the shouting start around midnight and everything was all over in a half hour.”

Cragen rubbed his temples and caught sight of Elliot and Fin walking into the squad room from his office window. “All right. Well, get her luds and we’ll see who she’s been talking to.”

He set down the receiver and waved Elliot into the office.

“Cap,” Elliot said, still flush from the outside cold. “We talked to Roy again and he’s standing firm on Kreider, but he did say Kreider talked about Olivia before he took off.”

Cragen put his hand in his pockets and pursed his lips before speaking.

“John went to Olivia’s apartment this afternoon to talk to her neighbors.”

Elliot shrugged. “They have anything else to say?”

“No. Just that they heard a lot of commotion coming from her apartment Tuesday night...something you didn’t say anything about this whole time.”

“I knew what it was about,” Elliot said, his eyes shifting to the side for a moment. “There was no need.”

“No need?” Cragen said taking a step forward. “Her neighbors down the hall heard this commotion that you felt there was no need to discuss.”

“I knew what it was about,” Elliot repeated. “And when I talked to them yesterday, I was still hoping that Olivia and Holloway had just run off somewhere or something.”

Cragen stared at him allowing a full minute’s silence to pass before even blinking.

“What happened that night?”

Elliot’s eyes looked toward the floor, then at the ceiling, at the computer monitor; anywhere except at Cragen.

“Tuesday night...I went to Olivia’s. That’s why I didn’t need to take down what her neighbors were saying. I was there. I wanted Drover’s file and we had an argument.”

Cragen narrowed his eyes at Elliot. “What do you mean you had an argument? Weren’t you asked to stand down on the Drover case?”

Elliot stood silent for a moment. “I know, Don. I know. I spent most of Tuesday thinking about Drover and what Dickie said and I just...I wanted this file.”

“For what, Elliot? What could you gain by going to see Drover on your own except a reprimand from even higher up the chain?”

“I don’t know,” Elliot whispered. “I just kept thinking about my son...I just don’t know.”

“What about Olivia? Why’d you go to her place?”

“She had his file...and I wanted it.”

“And you argued?”

“Yeah.”

“And these injuries?”

Elliot just stared at him, not wanting to continue, but Cragen could read his expression regardless. Most likely, at some point during the night, Elliot had said or done something to piss off Olivia and she slapped him; hard.

“Did she say she was going anywhere when you last talked to her?” Cragen felt like he had asked the question a dozen times that day.

“No,” Elliot said. “I just left. She didn’t say anything.”

Cragen stared at him, allowing silence to settle between them again. The sun had long since set and they had not made any real progress on any of their other cases. God only knew how many others they would accrue over the next night, and it was looking like one of his lead detectives had actually vanished without a trace. The urge to bring out the old Scotch he kept locked away in his office pulled from all sides.

“All right,” he said after a while and a deep sigh. He marched out of his office toward Munch, who had just arrived at the precinct, and Fin and Elliot followed after him.

“Fin,” Cragen said. “I want you catching for now and I’m going to need any final reports you might have had on the Fayden case. John, Elliot...I want you both going through Olivia’s address book and her phone records. I want to hear from anyone who’s had any contact with her in the past month. She couldn’t’ve just disappeared over night.”

“Are we making this official?” Fin asked. “We going to Missing Persons with this?”

Cragen shook his head. “Not yet. I’m still hoping she’s...” He sighed. “Not yet.”

Munch handed Elliot a stack of papers as he sat down at his own desk and pulled his telephone closer as he knew he would be making numerous calls throughout the rest of the evening. Unable to look his co-worker in the eye after coming from Olivia’s building and learning what he had, Munch read silently through the lines of phone, incoming and outgoing from Olivia’s home and cell phones.

Thirty minutes later, Elliot sighed as he banged his telephone back to the receiver. Munch wanted to tell him to calm down, but seeing as the words had had no effect during previous bouts of aggression coming from Elliot, he held his tongue.

“Just got off the phone with some guy Liv had apparently forgotten to call back after dinner,” Elliot said. “He’s the third one. She’s pissed off a lot of people.”

Munch simply nodded and to combat the monotony, he began reading off the names that had been linked to Olivia’s phone over the past month.

“Shah, Maya,” he said. “Shah, Maya...Shah, Maya...Halloway, Jonathan. He’s not related to *the* Hallowsays, is he?”

Elliot nodded absent-mindedly as he stared at the name Michael Zurquist in her address book.

"Humph," Munch said. "Shah, Maya...Shah, Maya...Halloway, Jonathan...It's the same people over and over again. Shah, Shah, Halloway...Stabler...Shah, Halloway...Oh, here we go: Harfort, Joshua?"

"That's Liv's friend," Elliot said. "I already called her and if I call again, she'll file the Missing Persons report herself."

Munch nodded. "Shah, Shah, Stabler, Shah, Shah, Halloway, Shah, Harfort, Shah...K. Stabler..." Munch glanced at Elliot who simply nodded in reply. "Halloway, Shah, Harfort...Anyone talk to a Landon?"

"Neighbor across the hall," Elliot said.

"What about a P. Fitzgivens?"

"Neighbor next door."

Munch frowned at the list. "No, this Fitzgivens lives across the city."

"I think it might be her son."

"I see...Shah, Shah, Halloway, Shah, Harfort, Halloway, Stabler...all the way down the list, it's the same people."

Elliot sighed and threw down his list as he came across a midnight call coming from a pay phone down the street from Olivia's apartment on Thursday past.

"This is a waste of time," Munch said bitterly. "We've already talked to anyone who's had any contact with her in the last two months. Probably the last six months for that matter!"

"*Somebody's* gotta know where she went," Fin said.

Munch stood and put a hand to his forehead. "None of us knew when she went underground with the feds."

"Exactly," Fin said, noting the sudden change in his partner's demeanor. "That's why I'm not thinking it's time to panic yet."

"No, now's the perfect time to start!" He rounded on Elliot. "When was the last time you saw her?"

Elliot shook his head. "That night...I was back in my car at 12:30 and then I went home."

"And, you didn't stop anywhere along the way?"

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Elliot said as he glared at him.

"Elliot, as of right now, you're the last person who talked to her." He picked up the top sheet from his desk. "Liv's last call Tuesday was with Maya Shah and it ended a little after ten o'clock. That leaves you as the last person to see her."

"You're making it sound as if I did something to her!" Elliot yelled standing.

"Whatever it sounds like, I saw how angry you were when you left here Tuesday night looking for Drover's file. Between the way you looked Tuesday, what I heard from her neighbors and the way you look right now, I know something went on that night!"

"Hey," Fin said, standing between the two of them. "John calm down. We still don't know what's up. Maybe she caught a lead on Kreider and hasn't had a chance to call. Maybe she just needed to leave town and clear her head. Maybe she's back with the Feds, maybe-"

"She's not with the Feds," Cragen interrupted. "Huang just got back to me. No one from the Bureau's been in contact with Olivia."

"And she didn't just leave," Elliot said. "I went to her place last night and today and her wallet, badge *and* gun are all sitting on her dresser. Even if she stepped out for just as second, she wouldn't've gone far without all three."

Cragen ran a hand over his face. "Is there anyone else we need to talk to?"

"Don," Munch said. "No one's seen or heard from her."

"What's the worst case scenario here?"

"Drover," Elliot said immediately. "He attacked her last week and was stalking her before that. What if that Tuesday-"

"What about Kreider," Munch interrupted. "Or Diorel? You two said it yourselves; Kreider talked about Olivia to people at his job, and Diorel even said he wanted to take her down for the Rivers case."

"Either way," Fin said. "Elliot woulda seen something at Liv's place. You said her placed looked exactly like it did when you left Tuesday. You woulda noticed if there were any sign of a break-in. Plus, you said her place was locked from outside, but her keys were on the hook."

"But, her extra set was missing," Elliot added.

Munch shook his head. "It's all adding up. All her neighbors said they heard a commotion that night and now she's gone."

"That was me," Elliot admitted with a sigh. Munch and Fin stared silently at him and Cragen stared at the floor, a frown set squarely upon his face. "She wouldn't give me Drover's file and we argued about it. When I talked to her neighbors, they all said they heard this *commotion* stop about 12:30...when I left. Something *else* must've happened that night."

Elliot crossed his arms in front of him, not liking the way the conversation had turned. All three were looking at him, as if he had done something to Olivia; as if he was a perp.

She was fine when I left, he thought. Wasn't she?

"Well, I got a call a little while ago," Cragen said breaking the tense silence.

"Drover's conscious. Fin, Elliot: grill him, hard. I want to know every step he took between the time he left his cousin's place to the time he passed out in the drunk tank at the 1-6. And, Elliot...I don't want to hear about any trip ups with Drover."

Elliot gave him a nod as he and Fin left the squad room and Munch followed Cragen back to his office.

"I don't like this," Munch said. "We need to figure what happened to her that night."

Cragen leaned against his desk and sighed. "Calm down, John. If anyone understands, it's me. But, I wanna know what happened *here* Tuesday night." Munch raised his eyebrows and Cragen continued. "You said that you saw Stabler Tuesday night. What'd he say? What'd he do?"

"Oh, you want me to be a rat?"

"No, I want to know what the hell's going on! From what I know about Tuesday, Elliot came back to the house for the Drover file, he went off to Liv's to find it, then he comes in yesterday morning with a black eye and now Liv's gone. We've busted perps with less than this."

It was Munch's turn to give the deep sigh. "I know what you're thinking, but I really don't want to go there."

“All right, let me ask you this: Do you think that Elliot did something to Olivia?”

Munch stood silent for a moment staring at Cragen’s desk. “Cap...I don’t know. I just don’t know. If you’d’ve seen him that night...I don’t know. From what I know about the two of them, everything looks like he went to Olivia’s for the Drover file and got his assed kicked when she wouldn’t give it to him.”

“But, do you think he’d hurt her in retaliation?” When Munch did not reply, Cragen rephrased the question. “Knowing how angry he was Tuesday night, if she wasn’t willing to give up that file, do you think he’d hurt her?”

The question rolled in his mind for a full minute, but Munch each time he attempted to reply, no answer would come.

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“So,” Fin began as he and Elliot stepped onto the brightly lit floor of the patient quarters, “you gonna tell me what really went down between you and Liv on Tuesday?”

“Look,” Elliot said, pausing his quick stride to look Fin directly in the eye. “I went to her place for Drover’s file and she wouldn’t give it up. We argued, I left, that’s all.”

Fin nodded, disbelief shining through his eyes and they continued down the hall.

“Drover,” Elliot said minutes later in Drover’s common hospital room. “Wake up! Time to talk to the cops.”

Drover, looking very pale, slowly opened his eyes and scowled at the detectives in front of him.

“I don’t have a goddamn thing to say to you people without my lawyer.”

“Oh, you’re *gonna* talk to us,” Fin said. “We can call your lawyer and we’ll all wait around and have a chat if you want, but you’re talking.”

Drover turned onto his side, shifting his gaze away from them. “Haven’t you people screwed me over enough? How much do I have to suffer before you’re satisfied?”

Elliot walked toward the other side of Drover’s bed to look him in the eye.

“We know, Drover,” he whispered. “We know about last Thursday and we know that you’re the one who came after my kid. We know about everything.”

Drover’s large eyes grew larger and he switched positions, but Elliot followed.

“Did you think it was all just going to go away?” he continued. “That no one would find out what you did to her?”

“That fucking bitch!” Drover yelled shooting upward, his arm catching on handcuff that tethered him to the bed frame. “She told me she wouldn’t say anything!”

Elliot pushed Drover backward on the bed, but Fin appeared at his side a moment later shaking his head. Anger coursed through Elliot and he shook as he slowly released Drover.

“Did you get bored?” he seethed. “Did you come after my kid because you couldn’t get anything off my partner!”

“Not everything’s about you, you bastard!”

Fin pulled on Elliot's shoulder and he shook him off as he crossed to the room's other side, knowing that being such close proximity to Drover could lead to violence.

"We know what happened Thursday," Fin said. "And, you know from the cuffs around your hand that you're *gonna* do some time for this, so it's time to spill. Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Olivia!" Elliot shouted completely red-faced. "You call her in the middle of the night to lure her to an alley and now you can't figure out who we're talking about!"

"I don't know where she is!" Drover screamed in return. "The goddamn, bitch liar! I swear to God if I did, I'd've finished what I started that night."

Twenty minutes later, Fin and Elliot were back in the squad room, having had their fill with Jeffrey Drover.

"He said he blacked out," Elliot said. "Says he doesn't remember being anywhere near the village that night."

"Police reports say different," Munch said sitting at his desk. "Besides, with as much as he had downed that night, I'm surprised he even woke up. For all intents and purposes, he probably should've died from the alcohol content in his blood."

"Yeah, but if you'd've seen him today," Fin began. "He would've remembered if he'd come across Olivia that night."

Cragen sighed and headed for his office as Elliot followed. "I'm grabbing a small CSU team to go over her apartment and I figure from there we'll decide if we need to get Missing Persons involved. I want you and Munch down there when we go in a bit."

"Cap," Elliot said. "It's too early to bring Missing Persons in on this."

"Something happened to her," Cragen said. "Unless you know where she's gone, we're all at a loss here. I've got a team, we're going to her place and if it looks like something went down, we're getting Missing Persons in on this. They're not taking her case away from us, but they need to be notified."

Cragen took his coat off his hook, paused at the door as Elliot stood facing the far wall.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Elliot slowly turned toward him, the bruises on his face, all deepening in colour, distorting his face into odd bumps in the false light. "When Olivia and I argued that night, things got a little heated."

"Heated how?"

"Stuff got thrown around a bit." He paused as the concern on Cragen's face grew into a glower. "Even if someone came after her after I left, we wouldn't be able to tell."

"How bad is her place going to look?"

"Like we had a fight. Which is why I think it's too early to bring in CSU and especially Missing Persons."

"Well, what else would you have us do? She's gone there's no one else to call. From what I know, you and her friend Maya are the two people who know Olivia best and neither of you know what happened. We have to expect the worst and begin an investigation."

Elliot stared at the floor. "I just don't want you to walk into her apartment and make assumptions as to what happened."

“Fine,” Cragen said. “You tell us what’s different from the way you...left it and we’ll go from there.”

“Just what kind of *argument* did you and Olivia have, Stabler?”

Munch was standing in the middle of Olivia’s apartment glaring at Elliot as the CSU team began to take pictures throughout the apartment. Elliot stood at the door looking small and despondent and unable to look Munch in the eye.

“All right, John,” Cragen said. “We already know what initially happened and we’re looking for any signs of foul play.”

Munch crossed the room three steps and stood in front of Cragen. “Are you looking at this place?” he hissed. “What else do we need to define *this* as foul play?”

“Just let CSU do their job and we’ll discuss it later,” Cragen replied. He turned toward the dispersing team. “Let’s do this right and carefully. This is one of ours.”

The detectives stood back as the crime scene unit took pictures of Olivia’s apartment. Cragen stood between Elliot and Munch prepared to *handle* either should the need come.

Elliot allowed an involuntary shiver to slide down his back as one of the officers gave him a side glance just before photographing the rust-coloured smudge on Olivia’s rug. Though the lights were on and the heat blazing, the room felt bitterly cold to him and had the appearance that it had lost whatever it was that made it seem so bright in the past.

His eyes fell toward the corner of the door and saw that one of the keys Olivia had thrown down her shirt Tuesday night to keep him from getting lied near the door frame. The first instinct to pick up seemed naturally, but he paused instead. Though he wondered where the second key had flown, he could not afford to arouse anymore suspicions.

He saw Munch whisper something to Cragen and he studied Olivia’s window instead of looking at the pair, wanting nothing more than to close his eyes and pull himself into a ball in the corner. Whispers were floating through the air along with occasional fringe glances and he knew that every cop in the room was looking at him as if he were a criminal.

She was fine, he thought to himself. *She was fine when I left. She fine when I left...*

What he had done was wrong, but he knew, even through the look of desperation and scorn on Olivia’s face when he had last seen her, she was perfectly fine the moment he had left her building.

Having had his fill of sideways looks, Elliot gaited toward Olivia’s bedroom in hopes of seeing some sign that she had purposely fled her apartment.

“Well, at least all the action was kept out of the bedroom,” Munch said upon entering the room.

Elliot ignored the offhand comment, knowing that Munch had only followed him into the room to ensure that he did not try to take or move anything that would seem incriminating. Stifling a sigh by swallowing the air in his mouth, Elliot knew it was only a matter of time before Olivia’s disappearance became an official case and all eyes would be squarely pointed at him.

She was fine when I left...

His eyes continued to scan the room and came upon her dresser. At first, he noticed a long, thin package of pills sitting toward the dresser's edge and he struggled to suppress rolling his eyes. Frames of various sizes lined the back edge and walls surrounding her mirror, each holding images of days long past. Some were photos of Olivia and her mother while others were most of were she and numerous friends from nights he doubted if she remembered. A smirk played across his lips as he noticed an older photo of two girls, one white, one Indian, who looked no more than six or seven, dressed up for Halloween. The Indian girl, standing with her hands on her hips, was dressed up as Wonder Woman and the other little girl, whose blonde hair looked like it was beginning to turn brown, was dressed, was dressed as an Indian princess, complete with bindi and slippers. Both girls were grinning wildly and looked as though they thought their happiness could never end.

Munch continued to make small talk and sarcastic comments as he followed Elliot back into the living room and toward Olivia's desk. His eyes slowly took in every file that had slid into a disheveled mess on Tuesday night. Manila folders for their open rape cases and another murder lay on top of one another in a perfect shift, yet something seemed amiss. Files for four of Owen Kreider's seven victims lay across one another on her desk, yet Elliot could have sworn there were five. He sifted through the files, CSU having already dusted and photographed them, and looked for the missing file.

"Find something?" Munch asked.

"Jacob Lewendale's file is missing," Elliot said setting down the file.

"What do you mean it's missing?"

"Liv had a copy of it here. It was on her desk. I remember because she went through them for a second while she pretended to not have Drover's and now it's not here."

"Are you sure?" Munch said. "I mean, she's got dozens of them here. Maybe you thought you saw his name when you saw all the others."

"No," Elliot said. "The Lewendale file was here on her desk and these files looked like they were moved since...Tuesday. They sort of...fell over when we were...talking, but these look like they were shifted and the Lewendale file is gone."

Munch opened his mouth to respond, but Mark Landon's door opened across the hall before he could.

"What's going on?" Mark said pulling a dark blue bathrobe around him.

"Mark," Elliot said stepping out into the hallway. "We're just bringing in some other cops to go over Olivia's apartment. We just want to make sure we haven't missed anything that might let us know what happened to her."

Mark shook his head, but he continually glanced past Elliot's shoulder and into Olivia's apartment, distress set in his face. "You're making a lot of noise."

"We'll be done soon," Elliot said. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, it's just...I mean, I'm just not sure what's going on."

Elliot stared at Mark's pale face for a moment. "Can I come in for sec?"

"Y-yeah, I guess."

He opened the door to let Elliot inside the apartment. Elliot gazed around the apartment surprised to see how bland it was. There were no pictures on the walls and nothing that had the lightest semblance of decoration. He could see into the bedroom and saw his bed lacked a comforter having only a single blanket and a sheet. In comparison

with the normally warm embellishments of Olivia's apartment, Mark's home was stark and uninviting and smelled strongly of household cleaner.

"Mark," Elliot sighed. "We don't know where Olivia is. No one's seen her and we've called every single person in her phones and in her address book and no one knows what's up."

Mark's eyes fell toward the floor as the floorboards creaked from behind him.

"We're *looking* for her, Mark," Elliot reassured him. "And, I know we'll find her safe and sound, it's just that we need to do this to give us something on where she went."

"No one..." Mark said. "No one called me."

Elliot felt his eyebrows furrow, unsure how to approach Mark's comment. "Well, we'd come by to ask you and you said you hadn't heard from her."

Mark sighed. "I've been living across the hall from her for ten years and I'm not even in her address book."

"You're across the hall," Elliot said shrugging. "I'm sure she didn't think it was necessary."

Mark stood silently for a moment staring at the floor. "Well," he said. "I work from home and I've got a lot to do."

He ushered Elliot toward the door.

"If you hear any word from her," Elliot said from the hall and handing Mark his business card, "give me a call. Day or night. We just need to make sure she's okay."

He added the last comment hoping he would see a flicker of interest in Mark's eyes. Mark seemed like the type of person in whom Olivia might confide something she did not want the rest of world to know; someone who they would be least likely to question severely. Mark, however, showed no signs that he understood Elliot's suggestion.

Looking dejected, Mark sighed again as he slowly began to close his door. "She's in *my* address book."

Elliot stood staring at the closed door for a moment, slightly taken aback by Mark's sudden depression as he heard a commotion from the CSU team who was studying Olivia's rug with a UV light.

"Looks like blood over here," Officer Harridon said. "But, there's something else over here, but I'm not sure what that is."

The detectives crowded around the spot over which he was holding the light. The phosphorescent, green stain glowed from Olivia's rug, but several feet away from it and towards the door sat a larger blemish, lying half on and off the rug. More blue in colour than its sister stain, each officer present seemed puzzled as to what it could be.

"I'll take a sample and send it the lab," Harridon said. "I don't know what it is, but it definitely is not blood."

"There's another one closer to the door," another officer said, holding her own light. "Yeah, I don't know what that could be."

Elliot turned on his heel and knocked on Mark's door again.

"Yes?" Mark said, barely opening his door.

"Hey," Elliot said. "We're finding some stuff on the floor in her apartment. You have any idea if she's been moving things around lately or had anything delivered that might've leaked?"

"I wouldn't know," Mark said shaking his head.

Elliot stared at him a moment, so frustrated that his partner was missing that he could have easily lashed out the small person in front of him.

"Can you think of anyone, anyone at all, who might've had an issue with Olivia?"

Mark opened the door a bit wider and stared at the ceiling. "There's a guy...Philip or something like that. I think he's Mrs. Fitzgivens's son...He's been around here lately. I heard him and Olivia arguing a few days ago, but I didn't know about what. And of course...you did seem to be quite vocal with her over these past few days too."

The narrowing of Elliot's eyes at his last comment caused Mark to take a step backward.

"But I know," he continued, "that you haven't, uh, done anything to harm her. But, I would walk to Mrs. Fitzgivens' son. Definitely give him a ring. I mean, I wouldn't say that he's shady or something, but he's definitely a weird guy. Yeah, I would definitely talk to him...definitely."

Friday February 2, 2007
339 East 13th Street
1:09AM

"I swear to God I haven't seen her."

Philip Fitzgivens sat on his couch, his head resting in hands and his arms resting on his knees. He shook violently, still startled at having been awakened in the middle of the night to find the NYPD bearing down upon him and his lanky form appeared paler than ever.

"This is the first I've heard that she's even missing."

"We haven't announced it yet," Elliot said. "We don't anyone making any rash decisions too soon."

"Well, she hasn't spoken to me in like a week and that was just to tell me off," Philip said.

"Her neighbors have said that you were practically stalking her," Munch said. "Showing up all the time, cornering her in the elevators..."

"Hey, my mother lives right next to her!" Philip yelled. "I just kept running into her. That's not my fault!"

"Just calm down," Elliot said, noting Cragen answering his phone out of the corner of his eye. "There's no reason to get excited."

"No reason? The cops are at my apartment in the middle of the night telling me that some woman that I asked out is missing. You're asking me these questions like you think I did something to her."

"*Did* you do something to her?" Munch asked.

"No! Of course not. She told me last week she didn't want to see me and I said I was done with her. She was a real bitch to me and who needs that...not that that comment means I did anything."

Munch and Elliot glanced at one another, but before either could respond, Cragen tapped Munch on his shoulder.

"We've gotta go," he said. "Fin got hit on Kreider."

An hour later, Cragen, Munch and Fin stood outside an interrogation room watching Lucas Roy stare into space, perfectly calm as he sat alone at the table. Fin had spent much of the night following up on all incoming information regarding Kreider and had found a report of someone matching Kreider's description using a storage unit on the Lower East Side. A few calls later, he learned that the unit in question was owned by a Vanessa Talbert and after discovering that she had died four years earlier, Fin called Cragen.

"You're sure?" Cragen asked.

Fin nodded while they all stood in the smaller room. "Three payments of three grand going into that account."

"And they're all from Donough?"

"Every one of them."

"Let's go," Elliot said.

He and Fin went into the interrogation room, but Roy did not flinch or bat an eye at their entrance.

"Now, Lucas," Elliot said with obvious mock concern as he sat at the table with Fin's documents. "We've got just a few questions for you, 'cause we've been doing some digging on Kreider and we came up with the name V. Talbert. We're not sure if he or she might be somehow related to Kreider. Do you have a lot of family in the area?"

"No. Just a brother."

"That it? What about your parents? Are they from here?"

"Dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that... So, your mother... what was her name?"

Roy stared at the table in the small room. "Vanessa Talbert-Roy."

"Talbert, eh? Well, that's just fascinating, isn't it? Your friend, Owen Kreider, hides out with his mother and then when he disappears, fifteen thousand dollars appears in an account of someone named Vanessa Talbert. And, as it turns out, your name is listed as an account holder on her account. Fifteen thousand in the account of your late mother, the same mother on whose life you swore that you didn't know where Kreider was."

Roy continued staring at the table, not making a sound.

"Better talk now," Fin said. "The longer we wait around, the more likely our DA will be in the mood to just let your ass fry right along with Kreider. If we wake her up this early in the morning, who knows how she'll be feeling."

Tears had appeared on the red rims of Roy's eyes and he looked toward the ceiling to keep them from falling.

"Why'd you hide him?" Elliot asked.

Roy sighed. "I needed the money."

"Who doesn't?" Fin said.

"You don't get it! My kid brother has a gambling problem. He got in big with this kid who's all cozied up with some mobsters. He owes them ten grand and there's no way in hell he can repay it. They already ruffed up his place and broke his legs. They're gonna kill him if he doesn't pay up."

"So, you hid someone who killed seven, no, eight people?" Elliot said, rage flowing through his voice again.

"I didn't know what else to do. Owen...he said he didn't do it. He said you people were trying to frame him. I needed the money and I didn't know what to think. He's always been a normal guy and...I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Fin said arms crossed in front of him.

"Look, I got kids," Roy said. "I was afraid of what he might do to me, to us, if I said no. I mean...I believed him when he said he didn't do it, but there was no way to tell, you know? If he killed those kids, what was to stop him from back after me or even coming after *my* kids?"

Elliot fumed in his seat, but wondered if what he would be willing to risk if Nolan got himself into the same kind of trouble.

"Why do this?" he asked. "What could Kreider have said to you to make you go along with this?"

Roy shrugged. "At first, he just said he needed to use the place because he was moving to a smaller apartment and he had some credit problems. I figured...it was just sitting there. Mom had paid the rent for the place for, like, years in advance, why not?"

"And when did you realize that story was bogus?" Fin said.

Roy simply shook his head and stared at the table. Elliot felt any remaining sympathy fly out of his system.

"What *else* do you know about Kreider that you haven't told us because you knew you had fifteen thousand dollars riding on him?"

"Just that Owen kept saying stuff about wanting kids when he was older. Every once in a while he would mumble something about wanting a child's love, but never being able to get it. Something like that. He even went to child welfare to try to get a foster kid, but they wouldn't give him one."

"And with all this going on," Elliot began, "you didn't think twice about helping him hide from the cops?"

"Course not, Elliot," Fin said. "Not when there was fifteen grand to make. That takes care of his sib's debts *and* he gets a little bonus."

"I just..." Roy said, still staring at the table. "I just needed the money. And, he seemed liked a normal person. I didn't think he'd done anything wrong."

Elliot stood. He had had enough of Lucas Roy's lies and ignorance. "We're going to that storage unit...now."

Mott Street and Grand Street
3:18AM

Elliot steadied the flashlight in his hand as he guided a handcuffed Lucas Roy toward the large storage unit at the end of the lot. He, Fin and several other officers were following the lot owner as the keys to Vanessa Talbert's storage unit jingled in his hands.

"We do sweeps once every two weeks," the owner said as he walked. "We don't want people living out of these units, so do what we can, but we've got to respect people's privacy at the same time. If I'd've known that this guy had been staying here, we would've dragged him out with a stick. Here's the unit."

A large padlock glimmered in the light emitting from the various flashlights and Elliot felt a wave of nausea overtake him as exaggerated speculations about what was to be found inside the unit came to mind.

Roy's past comments about Kreider's seeming infatuation with Olivia had never left his thoughts and an image from his nightmare the previous night floated in front of his eyes: His partner lied dead, brutalized in the same manner as Kreider ended the lives of his other victims and he, Elliot, stood over her, immobile from wild grief and absolute rage.

What if he had her? Elliot thought. *God...what if he's killed her?*

The attendant held the large bolt cutters in his hand and the lock snapped apart with a metallic clang and fell to the ground. He opened the door, yet took a step backward as the rank odor of human excrement and general body odor wafted out of the locker.

"He's been living in here," Fin said, stepping into the unit with foul expression and a hand over his face. "Looks like for days. And, he's probably been using that bucket over there as a toilet."

Elliot pushed Roy toward one of the officers. "Book him on aiding and abetting. Fin, I want to find Donaugh. Her little hand is all over this and there's no way she's gonna walk away free."

Two hours later, they had arrested Emme Donaugh at her attorney's sonorous behest and she had rolled herself into a ball in the holding cell's corner, having screamed incessantly for another three hours to the point where she had worn herself languid.

Elliot had set a photo of Olivia on the board they used to make connections between victims and suspects, the nausea returning in full sway.

"All right," Cragen said in as business-like a voice he could muster. "What have we got so far?"

"We went through the security tapes from the storage place," Munch said. "They show Kreider going into the unit and leaving three days later, we assume to kill Tyler MacFarland."

"Yeah and we found a radio with all his trash in there," Fin said. "He must've been listening to the news to try to find some info on how the case was going."

Elliot nodded. "And we checked Roy's story with ACS. They confirmed that he tried to become a foster parent and that he wanted a boy around twelve or thirteen, but thankfully they rejected him because of his history."

"Well, Donaugh's lawyer is going to have her out in a few hours," Cragen said. "I've already informed Novak...what's our status on Olivia?"

All three detectives shifted uncomfortably whether they were sitting or standing, yet no one replied.

"C'mon," Cragen said. "This is Liv we're talking about. What do we *know*?"

"Kreider had a thing for her," Fin said.

"But we saw him on those security tapes," Elliot said. "She wasn't with him and the last time he was there was on Wednesday."

"That's right," Munch interjected. "And for all we know, Liv went missing Tuesday night...I think he got to her."

"Did Donaugh have anything to say?" Cragen asked.

“She just kept screaming that she did what any *mother* would’ve done,” Fin said. “And, she didn’t know anything about Liv, even when we asked her between screams.”

Elliot sighed and ran a hand over his face as he glanced at the clock on his desk that read ten o’clock in the morning. He had been awake for more than thirty hours and his thoughts lingered increasingly with Olivia with each passing minute. The memory of Olivia screaming that he was the reason Dominic Hedges was dead came to mind and he gave an absent-minded nod as if finally agreeing.

What if I hadn’t dragged my feet on Kreider? he thought.

He had asked himself the question once an hour since Olivia had first suggested it a week earlier and now, dealing the aspect of investigating her disappearance, he longed more than ever for her to simply be standing by his side trying her best not to give a patented “I told you so” expression instead of only being able to stare at her image on the array.

“...and then there’s Drover,” Elliot said finishing a sentence he began in his head.

“Let it go,” Munch said, irritably. “Drover was too busy drinking himself into a coma to go after Liv.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Elliot!” Munch yelled equaling Elliot’s tone. “You talked to Drover yourself. He was drunk the whole night and said he didn’t go after her.”

Elliot shook his head. “This is coming from the same person who swore he never laid hand on Connor Wickfield or Ricky Schrader...who gave his word that he didn’t even *know* Daniel Richardson. We have evidence showing that molested at least one of those kids and now we’re trusting what he has to say about Olivia, the same cop who he lured out of her apartment to attack her? *Someone* else has to think this is ridiculous!”

“We know where Drover was the whole night!” Munch said.

“We haven’t any idea where he was for six hours! And, you’re telling me, it’s case closed on Jeffrey Drover? C’mon!”

“Fine!” Cragen yelled. “Munch, Fin. Find out which bars in the village he was at that night.”

“He’s not going to remember,” Munch said. “And besides, he doesn’t remember.”

“Well, shake him until he does. Take his picture around the bars in the area closest to Olivia’s apartment. I also want to talk to her super. Find out if he’s got any security cameras in building and if so, see what’s on them.”

“What d’you want me to?” Elliot asked quickly as Munch and Fin parted from the group.

“I want you to track down Olivia’s every step in this past week. Go through her credit cards and bank records. I want to know where she went, who saw her and who she talked to.”

Elliot scoffed. “I don’t need to check her bank records to tell you where she’s been this week.”

A hardened scowl deepened on Cragen’s face and he took a step toward his detective. “Did Olivia take the Two or the Three Line back to her apartment on Sunday night?”

Pursing his lips and having no answer to the question, Elliot only shrugged.

Cragen nodded. “Tuesday night, did she stop for coffee...a sandwich...some *tampons* before she got to her place?”

Elliot remained silent, having fully realized his boss's point.
"I see," Cragen said. "Start with her desk. I want to know every step she took after she got off those elevators."

SVU Squad Room
1:09AM

The pen in Elliot's hand snapped in two pieces under the pressure of his palm and he jumped at the sudden release of tension.

Munch and Fin had spent the day combing the Village for evidence of Drover's bar-hopping, while he had been tracing every dime that Olivia had spent in the past ten days, looking at every thing from credit card transactions to the receipts in her bags. The combined realization that Olivia had clearly fallen off the smoking bandwagon again and the fact that not one cent had moved in any of her accounts since Tuesday night caused his hand to close around the pen until it fell to the force.

With Cragen coming to him hourly asking for updates, Elliot's nerves were shot and the constant glances he gave toward his partner's cold desk across from him did nothing to quell the stress. They had also been toying with the idea of sending news of Olivia's disappearance to the news stations, but the argument that erupted afterward, as long as it was, ended in Cragen agreeing with Elliot's theory that if someone had hold of Olivia, he might act hasty at the news that the police were investigating. However, agree as he did, Cragen still glared at Elliot for the remainder of the day as if he, Elliot, was simply a criminal stalling for time. The expression unnerved him nearly as much as glancing once more at Olivia's cold and empty coffee cup on her desk.

She was fine when I left.

Elliot rubbed the bridge of his nose with a wince and suppressed the urge to yell out and begin throwing anything within reach. He had not slept in two days and even after Cragen ordered him to take a nap in the crib upstairs, Elliot could not keep the haunting image of his nightmare out mind long enough to drift off to sleep.

She was fine when I left.

The other half of Elliot's day was spent checking further into the boring lives of Agatha and Philip Fitzgivens. He did not like the response he received from Olivia's neighbor and her son had the appearance of a stereotypical male stalker. He investigated both knowing that nothing would come of it, but he felt if he could simply make some connection, he would find Olivia faster.

She was fine when I left.

He had checked hospitals and police reports in all five boroughs and into New Jersey in hopes of finding some information on Olivia's whereabouts, only to come up empty-handed. He had even fallen back to calling her cousin, but, as he expected, Allison had not heard from Olivia since the second of January.

Cragen walked back to his office, having just told Elliot to peruse Olivia's desk and lockers again, and trolled his memory for the location of his shot glasses while wondering at what time he should alert his own superiors of the investigation and send

Olivia's information to the local news. His stride paused as he saw a figure pacing back and forth in front of his desk.

"Melinda?" he said once inside the office. "You have something for us?"

She nodded and sighed. "This investigation...with Olivia. It's still technically off the books, right?"

"Why do you ask?" he said with an eyebrow raised.

"One of the techs found something in the sample CSU brought from her apartment. She knew I worked with SVU a lot and thought she would bring it to me first, before announcing it to everyone."

"Why all the secrecy? What'd she find?"

Melinda flipped open the file she had been holding. "There were some unknown chemicals found on her floors...it's some kind of chloroform cocktail containing about at least six different anesthetizing agents."

"On her floor?"

"And," Melinda continued, nodding, "they got a hit on the blood on her rug. It's actually a mix of hers and someone else's who popped up immediately in the system... Don, it's Elliot's."

Cragen closed his eyes and sighed as Melinda slid the report she held onto his desk.

"As this is all still very unofficial, the tech just made one copy of the report, but I thought you should have it. I don't know anything about what's going on and I know this isn't normal procedure, but I thought you might want to...maybe discuss it with him first before this became official. I'm sure there's a valid explanation for it, it's just..."

Her voice trailed to silence, but Cragen nodded understanding where she going with the statement.

Melinda headed for the door. "Let me know if you need anything."

She left a moment later, leaving Cragen to stare at the file on his desk. The door to the office clicked as it closed and with the tick that left his office in silence, Don remembered an eleventh detective he had buried.

Chapter Sixteen

Saturday February 3, 2007

SVU Squad Room

Detective Eric McNaughton had been with the NYPD for less than a year when he was assigned to Cragen, nepotism higher up on the chain landing him the position in Homicide. The pale, wet-behind-the-ears, kid seemed to know more about the physics of how a gun worked than how to actually shoot one and no one thought he would ever succeed on his own as cop. All the negativity surrounding McNaughton notwithstanding, Cragen took the young officer under his wing and showed him the proverbial ropes to Homicide and the NYPD in general. Cragen took the time to teach him how to shoot properly and within six months, McNaughton was emerging as a good cop.

One evening while off duty, McNaughton was in the park with his five-year-old son, helping him set off a small baking powder powered rocket, when a purse snatcher,

who had become bewildered during the chase, literally ran into him as he was bent over with his son. McNaughton, always thought of as a “nice” guy, reached to help up the purse snatcher, not knowing what had just happened. The thief, a crackhead with a fix itching at his skin, pulled out the hand gun he had used to rob the elderly couple down the path and shot the young detective in the chest.

Little EJ Naughton had entered City College in 2006 with every intention of becoming a police officer after school, but Cragen could still remember the feel of McNaughton’s father, sobbing into his chest upon hearing the news that his only son had been murdered.

With Olivia, there would be no grieving father, and Cragen pursed his lips as the thought occurred to him that it might be he who was found crying in the arms of subordinate at the news of another slain officer.

Three days had come and gone since Olivia had been seen and yet there was no news of her possible whereabouts. With the locks on her door in place and her windows unbroken, it almost looked as if she simply vanished out of her bed Tuesday night.

Then, there was Elliot to consider. The arguing, the bruises, the blood on Olivia’s floor. Elliot would have an explanation for the whole thing, but Cragen knew deep down what he did not wish to voice; what he did not want to even imagine. Olivia was missing and Elliot had something to do with it.

He had known Olivia Benson since before she could fully handle her SVU cases and knew Olivia was a fighter, but could she fight off Elliot Stabler if he really came at her?

In all his years with the force, Cragen had witnessed the horrific things that cops sometimes did to one another, at times, after being amicably partnered for years. To think that something like this could ever happen in his unit, between Elliot and Olivia, was simply unconscionable. He had seen them work miracles together and through all the problems, through all the anger, Cragen knew even when Elliot had hung on the proverbial edge, he never slipped.

He glanced at the glistening report Melinda had placed carefully on his desk. It sat innocently catching the slight flickers of the overhead light in his office. There was just the one copy and she had left it with him, a complete violation of her office’s many procedures, but he could not be more thankful that she had risked it for him.

They were running out of options on Olivia and it was only a matter of time before they would have to release her information to the press. Any mention of Elliot’s blood in her apartment, combined with what went on in the squad room on Tuesday morning would create the kind of media circus he wanted to avoid as long as possible, especially when it surrounded Olivia. Once they caught wind that Olivia, an SVU detective who had been the product of a rape, had been abducted from her home and was potentially a special victim herself, the air would never clear long enough for them to sort out what happened to her.

Cragen sighed knowing that the report did not matter. Even without Elliot’s blood mixed with Olivia’s in a smear on her apartment floor, he knew the investigation was going to be storm of his career. Elliot’s behavior throughout the Drover case would have had him sitting at a desk in any other department, but Cragen had cut him some slack out of the loyalty of knowing his lead detective was simply going through a rough time.

Perhaps, he thought, if I’d read the signs a little better...

Perhaps he would be sending his detectives out to resolve another case instead of holding a pang in his stomach that was nearing despair.

He stared out his office window at his remaining lead detective rummaging frantically through Olivia's desk for any information. The bruise around his left eye had darkened severely, becoming more purple in colour than red and spreading across the bridge of his nose.

A hot flash of anger coursed through Don's side as he pondered on what had really happened Tuesday night. The bruises, about which Elliot still refused to give a definite answer four days later, were undoubtedly caused by Olivia and Cragen wondered what Elliot had done to make her strike back at him in such a way.

Enough is enough, he thought.

Cragen took a step toward his door, fully prepared to call Elliot into his office and have a long discussion about the details of Olivia's disappearance when the black phone which sat on the right corner of his desk lit up, ringing its tinny chime.

Elliot had had his coat on and was running toward the elevators the moment the words had left the captain's mouth.

"They found Kreider."

Cragen had shouted the address to him as the elevator doors closed and within twenty minutes he arrived at the police blockade surrounding Emme Donaugh's residence.

Munch and Fin filled him in on the situation as he slipped on a bulletproof vest the moment he arrived: A uniformed detail had been issued on Donaugh, who had been released on her own recognizance earlier in the day, and one of the officers spotted Kreider pulling up to the apartment in a green sedan, looking ragged and tired. According to the officers, he checked on something in his trunk and then went into the house.

"And," Fin continued. "Just to let you know, we weren't able to turn up anything Drover and Olivia."

Elliot nodded though he felt his stomach drop at the mention of "trunk" and "Olivia" within the same minute's time frame.

"How long's he been in there?" he asked.

"About twenty minutes," Munch said. "He sent all the help out of the house the second he got here and locked all the doors leading into the living room at the center of the house."

"He's got Donaugh in there with him," Fin added.

"Is he asking for anything?"

"Just for us to back off, which we're not going to do," Munch said. "They're talking about getting a negotiator."

"We're not getting a negotiator," Elliot said. "Kreider gave up his right to have this negotiated when he mocked us with Tyler MacFarland."

His heart raced, adrenaline coursing through his body, and he could feel his very blood having previously sat stagnant within him as he sat in Olivia's chair hoping that providential inspiration would lead him to her.

The inside of the house was humid and Elliot's clothes immediately stuck to his skin as he and Fin made their way through the halls. Flagged down by three officers, they approached the sitting room silently. The SWAT members motioned to Elliot and Fin that Kreider was in the room and had a hostage.

"Kreider?" Elliot called from the corridor.

"Don't you dare come in here!"

"I'm not coming in. I'm just gonna step into the opening." Elliot pointed his gun toward the opening and slowly stepped into view.

Kreider had Donaugh kneeling on the floor and was holding a gun to her head.

"Just step back," Kreider said, grey eyes wild.

"Now, let's just calm down," Elliot said softly. "I don't want anyone to get hurt."

"Don't hurt him," Donaugh whispered from her vantage on the floor. "Please. He's my son. Don't hurt him."

"No one's gonna get hurt," Elliot said taking a step into the room.

"I said step back!" Kreider yelled. "I'll shoot her in the head. So, help me God. I'll kill her right now."

"Please don't hurt him," Donaugh whispered again.

"C'mon Kreider," Elliot said. "I don't want this to end badly. Don't do anything drastic. Just let her go and the two of us will just have a talk."

"The hell with you," Kreider said. "I didn't do anything to her."

Panic shot through Elliot's arms. "Her who?"

"Her!" Kreider yelled. "My stupid bitch neighbor! You people are trying to frame me for her."

"How do you even know she's dead?"

Kreider bent toward Donaugh's ear. "They're trying to frame me, Mother. They're doing all this against me."

"No one is against you, Kreider," Elliot said taking another step forward. "We're just here to end this peacefully."

"Nothing's ending peacefully. I didn't do anything wrong."

"You murdered eight people."

"They all needed to die! It was the only way!"

Kreider pointed his gun toward Elliot and Elliot immediately brought his to shoulder height.

"Let's just calm down," Elliot said a sweat bead began to trace down the side of his face. "All right, Kreider? Just calm down or you know how this is gonna end."

"Yeah," Kreider said his breathing ragged. "Everyone's gonna die."

"No one wants anyone to die."

"You want me to."

"No, I don't."

"Quit lying you bastard!" Kreider's face had turned red and the gun in his hand shook violently.

"Fine," Elliot said softly. "I do. I want you dead, but I'm not going to kill you, so just put the gun down."

Kreider shook his head. "You're going to shoot me the second I do."

"There's nowhere to go Kreider. Put down the gun, Kreider and we all walk out of here as healthy men."

“You’re full of shit.”

“C’mon,” Elliot said. “You put down your gun and let her go and she’ll have the best lawyers money can buy working on your case.”

The floorboards squeaked behind Elliot, followed by the sound of shuffling feet. Kreider’s eyes grew wider and darted through the sitting room.

“You’re not taking me alive!” he screamed and the gun in his hand exploded in several directions.

Elliot and the officers behind him hit the floor. Kreider fired six shots from the Glock that dwarfed his hand before Elliot had shifted on the floor and shot twice toward Kreider’s shin. The bullets made contact and he could see a spray of flesh, blood and bone fire from Kreider’s leg as the bullet exited, pale bits of skin hitting the sofa behind him.

Donaugh’s wail bounced off the room’s wooden panels as black substance with tint of red flowed from Kreider’s left leg and onto the floors.

“My baby!” she screamed. “How could you?”

“We need a unit up here!” Elliot heard one the SWAT members say as he picked himself off the floor.

“I knew it,” Kreider whispered as he sank against the sofa, his pale body going into shock while covered in his own blood.

Within ten minutes, SWAT paramedics had stabilized Kreider and Elliot, Munch and Fin stood staring at the trunk of the green car in which Kreider had arrived, no one wanting to open it and view its contents as they each held the same thought.

Was Olivia in there?

Kreider had paused at his trunk prior to entering Donaugh’s house and with the combined inclination that Kreider had something to do with Olivia’s disappearance, all three detectives feared what lay inside the car trunk.

“All right,” Fin said preparing to open the trunk. “Let’s do this.”

They each let out sighs of relief once the trunk was opened, however, those sighs were quickly replaced with solemn faces. Wrapped in a green blanket, lay what looked like trophies from each of his victims: soccer cleats, various jerseys and backpacks. The overturned baseball cap that sat a top all seven items read “MacFarland” across its back.

Elliot closed his eyes and faced the sky. They finally had him.

Mercy General Hospital
6:17AM

The gallimaufry of equipment arranged around Kreider’s hospital bed beeped and chirped softly as Elliot and Fin stepped into the room to find Kreider with his eyes closed, but body propped up on the bed. He was handcuffed to the bed, his left leg was propped up from a hanging strap and he appeared paler than he had in Donaugh’s living room.

They allowed him some time to recovery after the two hours of surgery needed to correct that damage caused by the bullets that shot through his leg, and both Elliot and Fin were anxious to get the case resolved completely.

"I was wondering when you losers would show up," Kreider whispered, his eyes still closed, as they approached his bed.

"You want us to call a lawyer for you?" Fin said. "We wouldn't want to trample on any of your rights."

Kreider shook his head. "I know...when it's over, and...it's over."

"No," Elliot said. "I don't want you confessing to anything without an attorney present. I know you, Kreider and I don't want you using some loophole in the law to walk on eight murders."

"I was putting them all out of their misery."

"Even your neighbor?" he asked.

"She was a hundred years old with no family. It was only a matter of time before she did it herself."

"Nothing gave you the right to stab her and let her bleed to death!" Elliot yelled. "She lied there for a half an hour before she died."

"Look, I didn't mean to! I just wanted the damn box she was holding and to tell her to keep her mouth shut, but she kept screaming and I didn't know what to do."

"Why'd you call the police afterward?"

Kreider shrugged as much as he could. "I don't know. I guess...maybe I felt bad. I know what it's like to be all alone like that and...I just don't know."

Elliot glanced at Fin. "He's unbelievable, you know?"

"Let's just get a legal aide," Fin said. "Everything he says needs to be on the record."

"Hey," Kreider said as Elliot and Fin walked toward the door. "You can save the time. I don't need a lawyer."

"Yeah, and who's telling us that?" Fin said. "You or the painkillers they've got you on?"

Kreider said nothing and within twenty minutes they returned with a legal aide attorney who Kreider promptly insisted he did not need. With the attorney sitting annoyed in the corner of the room, Kreider fell into his confession explaining how each of the boys he saw appeared so strong and beautiful and he only wanted to be with them.

"All I ever wanted," Kreider said, "was for someone to just...care about me."

"You murdered these kids because you had a bad childhood?" Elliot seethed.

Kreider shook his head. "I look at someone like you and it makes me want to vomit. You probably had a great childhood with parents who cared about you and you had probably a brother or two who took care of you or whatever. *I* never had that. I never had anything. I had parents who looked at me like I was some reject because they couldn't have a kid of their own, parents who fought non-stop and a father who eventually just walked out on us to leave my *mother* a complete wreck. The only thing I've ever wanted was for someone to give a damn about me, and never got that."

"Is that why you strangled puppies in your basement as a kid?" Fin said, deadpan.

"You're not getting it! I couldn't even get them to behave; to care that I existed!"

"They were dogs."

"Don't bother, Fin," Elliot said. "There's no use in trying to reason with a crazy man."

"I'm not crazy!" Kreider yelled. "I cared about those kids without even having met them, but they never acted the way there were supposed to! That's not my fault!"

"You sodomized and strangled your own cousin," Elliot said. "Your own family?"

Kreider shook his head. "I took Jacob because I didn't want him growing up with those people. His happy family...they're the same people who all but turned their backs on my mother because she adopted me."

"You didn't answer the question," Elliot said his temper rising. "You raped a thirteen-year-old kid. For no reason!"

"I was just putting him out of his misery."

"What about all the others?" Elliot asked. "You didn't have to kidnap other kids just for the sake of doing it."

"I just wanted to raise some kids so that they'd grow up right. I wanted them to be like brothers, but they never behaved. They always acted up and so I had to get rid of them."

Elliot took a step backward to pace beside the bed and Fin took his place.

"You targeted Jeffrey Drover, don't you? Why?"

"I saw how he was with them...the bastard. All the kids looked at him, like he was some great role model. The kids he wasn't molesting, that is. He'd only do that to them when they were younger. The eleven year olds and such. He liked them that young, but he was a freak."

"He's not the one who strangled these kids," Fin said.

"But, he's still a freak. He wanted to stay friends with them even afterward. The bastard probably thought the kids wouldn't say anything if they kept trusting him. Him...the bastard looked just like me and we worked for the same damn company, but he had these kids, all these kids who loved him and I had nothing. I heard that you people were finally looking at him for what he'd done, but you even had your heads up your asses for that. You weren't even looking at him for the right reasons, but...I just ran with it."

"How many?" Elliot asked.

"Sorry?"

"How many kids did Drover molest?"

Kreider shrugged as much as he could. "Not sure. Dozens...probably all of them. Who knows for sure?"

Elliot and Fin glanced at one another.

"Did you murder all these kids because Drover had molested them?" Elliot asked in a low voice.

"Hey," Kreider said. "I didn't *murder* anyone. I just put them out of their own misery."

"You're so full of shit."

"Am I? I know what those kids were going to go through when they got older."

"How?" Elliot said. "You're telling us you were molested at that age too?"

Kreider nodded. "From some caring brotherly type at juvey. I knew how they were going to feel once they got old enough to realize what had been done to them. I just put them out of their own misery now."

"If there were dozens," Fin said. "Why these kids? What made these kids so special?"

"They were the ones suffering the most."

"Oh please," Elliot said shaking his head. "I can't believe we're even listening to this bull."

"They were. Jacob...he came from the same family as me. The same family that really didn't give a damn at the end of the day. Connor...God, that poor kid. Drover had him so wrapped up, he probably had no idea what was going on. Drover was probably still feeling him up in his spare time."

"And Daniel Richardson?"

"He was suffering too."

"He was only eleven years old!"

"And his parents were driving him into an early grave. A kid like that...he'd been strung out on heroin before he turned twenty."

"At least he'd be alive," Fin said.

"Alive and miserable. Just like me. I didn't mean to...on King Day. I just happened. I saw what Drover was doing to him. I could see it with my own eyes. Same thing what that kid Dominic. He never even had a chance. His parents would rather leave him with that child molester than race across town to pick up their own kid. And, I know what it's like to not be wanted. The only one who wanted him was that Drover and that was only when he was young enough to be used."

"Still didn't give you the right to murder him," Fin said. "And, besides, what does that make you? I mean, you're the one who raped all these kids...just because."

"I didn't want to," Kreider said. "Especially with Daniel, but he misbehaved worse than the others. I guess in hindsight, it might've been because he just distrusted someone who looked so much like the guy who had done all that to him."

"Or," Elliot said now standing on the other side of the bed. "Maybe it was because he knew what *you* were about to do to him."

"I've already told you. I put those kids out of their misery. Ricky was probably two steps from killing himself and Manny and Tyler would've turned out the same as Drover when they grew up. There were more. A lot more, but...they were the ones who needed the most help."

"You're a sick fuck, Kreider," Elliot said. "Very sick. It just makes me angry that they got rid of the death penalty because if there was anyone who deserved a needle after all this..."

In an exaggerated turn of his head, Kreider glared at Elliot. "Where's the other cop that was with you? The pretty one. She seemed nicer than either of you."

"Did you do something to her?" Eliot asked taking a step closer.

"You know," Kreider began. "Women never look at me. Never, and I really don't expect them to. I'm scrawny, pale...not much to look at. I think I can count the amount of dates I've had on one hand. Women...they just never even gave me a second glance. But, her... She actually smiled at me at one point. Didn't talk to me like I was a freak or anything. Just looked me in the eye, though she thought she knew what I had done. She was nice, even when throwing snide comments in my direction. What was her name... Olivia? Something pretty that rolls off the tongue like that?"

Elliot took another step forward and grabbed Kreider's newly bandaged leg. He let out a scream and Fin pulled him backward as tears formed in Kreider's eyes.

"What did you do to her?" Elliot said with Fin standing between he and the bed.

"That's enough, Detective!" the legal aid shouted.

"I didn't do anything to her!" Kreider yelled. "I wouldn't!"

"You expect me to take the word of a child molester?"

"Then, why even ask the goddamn question if you weren't going to believe me?"

"We might be able to squeeze something out for you if you tell us where she is,"

Fin said.

His eyes wet, Kreider shook his head. "It's life no matter how we look at it. I know how you people play."

"She's a cop and that'll count for something during your sentencing."

"I don't know where she is," Kreider said resting back in his pillows. "I haven't seen her since you and she were at my apartment weeks ago."

"You're lying," Elliot said.

"Well, if you aren't going to believe me, why even say anything. I think now is as good a time as any to invoke my right to remain silent."

The legal aide stood quickly to indicate that the interview was over, and Elliot and Fin both stormed out of the hospital room.

410 West 3rd Street
1:21PM

Elliot dabbed at the red spot on his jaw line with paper napkin as he stared into the side mirror of the car. He had given himself a quick shave in a public bathroom and thought he could get away without nicking face with the cheap razor, but he had not used water alone to shave in years and the razor slipped just enough on his jaw to draw the smallest drop of blood.

"You ready?" Fin asked, looking just as bedraggled as Elliot, while they stood outside the Richardson's home.

They had spent much of the day visiting the homes of each of Kreider's victims to inform them that he had indeed been captured, would stand trial and would spend the rest of his life in prison. Going from house to house, in order of the victims, spending an extra hour with Veronica Schrader who needed to be taken to the hospital after hearing the news, they had saved Langdon and Daphne Richardson for last, knowing there was more to Daniel's story that needed to be unfolded for them.

Mrs. Richardson opened the door for them with bloodshot eyes and she and her husband simply cried together in the middle of their living room once Elliot delivered the news.

"I don't know what to think," Mr. Richardson said through a haze of his own tears. "Is he going to stand trial?"

"Yes," Fin said quickly. "And he *will* be convicted. He gave us a confession today."

"Did he say why he took Daniel?" Mrs. Richardson asked. "He was younger than all those other boys. Why did he take him?"

"No," Elliot said. "He didn't specify."

He half-regretted the lie, but knew the truth would eventually come out during the trial, when the Richardsons had had more time to recover. Elliot had stared into her wet

brown eyes for a moment before speaking and knew he could not tell the woman before him that Kreider killed her son because he felt she was an unfit mother. No parent needed to hear that at the height of their pain.

He and Fin spoke to the Richardsons twenty minutes longer before preparing to leave.

"Wait," Mrs. Richardson said withdrawing from her husband. "There was another detective before. A woman. Is she available at all? I just...I appreciate everything that you've all done for my Daniel, but I wanted to thank her specifically. She...she held onto me at the darkest moment of my life."

Touched by the woman's sentiment, Elliot stood speechless. He and Fin glanced at one another, yet neither said anything as they were still asking her same question.

"Well, Branch refuses to take a plea on Kreider," Casey said speaking to all of them in the squad room. "He says the public wants a trial, so we'll prosecute."

"Has his lawyer been asking for a plea?" Elliot asked.

"She's called twice, but we both know it's a wash. Emme Donaugh's power of attorney has cut off all ties to Kreider which means he's now only got her as his single legal aide instead of the team of lawyers he was probably expecting. The confession he gave you two is valid, though, and we'll be using it throughout the case. He'll be serving life for sure. And, they'll be prosecuting him separately on Martha Harvand's murder."

Elliot shook his head. "If anyone deserved the death penalty..."

"March on Albany and complain," Casey said with a shrug. "Either way, he won't be getting out. Donaugh, on the other hand, is on probation."

"That all?" Fin said.

"It's her first offense and she's got a rather lengthy psychiatric history. But, Roy will be serving two years for aiding and abetting."

"Two years?" Elliot said raising his voice. "If he hadn't kept quiet about Kreider, Tyler MacFarland would still be alive."

"A *minimum* of two years," Casey continued. "He's getting two to seven in conjunction with testifying against Kreider."

"What about Drover?" Cragen asked. "What are you charging him with?"

"We can use the pictures in his apartment and some of the things they pulled from his computer to charge with him possessing kiddie porn. Kreider's attorney says that she wants a deal for Kreider to give up what he knows about Drover abusing the boys, but I'm not willing to give him anything. Drover *will* serve time, though." She noted Elliot's growing unease. "He'll serve at least three years for the kiddie porn and...we're trying to pile on more for assaulting an officer."

She paused and switched the briefcase from one hand to the other.

"Any word on Olivia yet?" she asked in Cragen's direction.

He shook his head slightly and she bit her lip.

"Well...if there's anything you need..."

"We'll contact you," Cragen said, a solemn expression set in his eyes as she began to leave the squad room.

He turned to his three remaining detectives and sighed. "We've got some new cases that are in urgent need of investigation by all of you. Elliot, a woman was attacked off of 123rd last night. I already started her file and it's on your desk. Fin, I've got another already started...a college student was raped at a party on the Hudson campus, but she doesn't remember anything. Munch, you're already on the Carolyn Davis case from yesterday. And, I've got another guy who claims his neighbor has too many kids running in and out of his apartment at all times of the night. Who wants this fourth one?"

Though the three detectives remained silent, Cragen noted each officer's eyes dart toward Olivia's empty desk.

"I'll take it," Elliot said, taking the file from Cragen's hand.

He sat down with the file at his desk to read the statements given by the neighbor over the past two weeks, trying ignore Cragen who stood next to his desk staring at him.

"Elliot," he said. "It's time."

The soft soles of Elliot's shoes squeaked across the recently waxed floor as he approached the aisle of the locker room that contained his unit. A burning sensation had erupted in his stomach and he knew it was from a combination of exhaustion and hunger as his body went on close to four full days without sleep and twenty hours without food.

As he approached his aisle, the memory of giving Olivia a slight hug at little more than a week earlier as he told her that he had grown attached to her floated to mind, and he could not help but reflect upon the irony that he was now faced with investigating her disappearance.

He opened his locker and immediately spotted the blue sweater that Olivia had bought for him in October past, having missed his birthday in September. He remembered her holding it up on him and saying that she liked the way it brought out his eyes. Pawing at the top shelf for a few moments more, Elliot finally found the object Cragen had sent him to find.

The four-inch by six-inch photograph gleamed in his hand as it caught a bit of the overhead lights. It was the only picture he had of him and Olivia together.

He had left the image in his locker after Olivia handed it to him while in the locker room months earlier, not knowing where else to place it. Every once in a while he would take it out and remember the first night when Olivia felt more like a friend than just his partner.

Elliot sighed as he stared at the image, remote guilt welling within him as he was still unsure why he kept it away in the locker.

The previous May, before the Gitano case, Maya had called him at random to lure Olivia out to a restaurant for her birthday.

"Just tell her you owe her dinner or something," Maya had said. "She'll argue about it, but just get her in the cab and over here and I'll take the blame later."

After ten minute's cajoling, he finally managed to get Olivia to the small Upper West Side restaurant where Maya had gifts and balloons waiting for her; the perfect modest gesture for a birthday for which Olivia had claimed she was not ready. Maya had invited Elliot to have dinner with them and, facing a night home alone, he readily agreed.

Prior to that night, he had only said the occasional “hello” to Maya when she met Olivia before they went out for drinks or dinner from the precinct. That night, he had come to know Maya moderately well and found out more about his partner than he had learned in seven years.

Olivia had gone to great lengths for Maya’s birthday the previous, finagling something with old friends and old flames to get a bus with “Happy Birthday Maya” to drive by at the moment they had Maya blowing out her birthday candles, and Olivia told him that she and Maya had been trying to “one-up” each other on birthdays for as long as either could remember.

That night, Maya had prepared a very small setting since Olivia had vehemently informed her that she did not want a party and it was only the three of them in the restaurant, with some musicians playing lightly in the background. Just before Olivia opened her gifts, Maya had Elliot sit closer to Olivia and she snapped the photograph with her Minolta.

He had smiled immediately when Olivia handed one of the prints a week later, impressed by how well it looked. Olivia’s face held a wide, bright smile and the dark, restaurant allowed the light that stemmed from the birthday candles to play a soft glow across her face. He had leaned very close to her for the picture and could remember that the scent of her perfume had caused him to grin wider than usual. The picture was so elegant that it made his chest tingle each time he saw them together like that.

“I need a picture of Olivia,” Cragen had said minutes earlier when he decided they were going to release her information to the news. “...one that’s going to pull some heartstrings.”

With her face lit up and eyes sparkling the photo, Elliot could not think of a single person who would not be moved by her face.

Cragen stared at the image when Elliot handed it to him, with first signs of a smirk on his lips since before Monday morning.

“This is good,” he said, but the hint of a smile faded quickly when he looked at Elliot again. “Go home, Elliot. You look like hell.”

Elliot knew Cragen was right, but he shook his head regardless. His face had a scruffy appearance, his cheap shave not accomplishing what he had intended, and the coffee he had use to keep him conscious was causing his hands to shake from combined fatigue and caffeine.

“I’m not going to sleep,” Elliot argued.

“Try anyway,” Cragen said. “I’ll see you later. Hopefully not until tomorrow.”

Elliot nodded as he picked up his coat and marched toward the elevators.

As he drove across the bridge, his mind raced, all thoughts squarely on Olivia.

She was fine when I left...She was fine when I left. What if she was really hurt? No, she would have turned up at a hospital somewhere...She was fine...She was fine when I left...

Once in his apartment, he showered and simply fell onto his couch, the television on in the distance, as he allowed pure exhaustion to overwhelm him. When he woke, around six o’clock the first thing he saw was Olivia’s face from the picture he had given Cragen on his television. The announcer was speaking with a concerned expression on her face and Elliot felt his stomach burn once again as she spoke.

“...with Kreider now behind bars, one search ends, yet another begins as the police are now looking into the disappearance of Manhattan detective, Olivia Benson...”

They had cut him out of the picture to focus on Olivia and with her image in the background, the reporter prattled off Olivia’s various awards and accommodations.

“...Detective Benson was also one of the lead detectives involved with tracking down Owen Kreider...”

Elliot hated the thought of her life being summed up in less than two minutes of speech and shortly after the anchor had switched the topic to the weather, he was out the door and heading back the precinct.

The phone lines were beginning to light up by the time he arrived and he took a place at his desk to see if anyone had information regarding Olivia’s whereabouts.

In the case of civilians, the Department of Missing Persons in New York County required that citizens were missing for at least forty-eight hours before an officer would even begin looking at the case, and even after that time had expired only one or two detectives would be assigned to the case which could take months to resolve. In the case of Olivia, a seasoned and decorated officer, the situation was far more dire. There was never a possibility that she had gone for an extended run, skipped town or simply run off with someone as seen with so many Missing Persons cases, and with the news that Olivia had met foul play, officers were volunteering to find out what happened to her.

A little after ten o’clock, Elliot rubbed the bridge of his nose as he slammed down the telephone receiver. The caller had been an elderly woman claiming that she was a “mystic” and could feel Olivia’s soul was peril. He knew he might have entertained the woman’s ranting for a bit longer had Olivia been sitting beside him laughing uncontrollably as the woman drived endlessly, but the situation at hand drowned out every bit of his sense of humor.

He walked toward his desk to stretch his legs, only noting the error in his action when he viewed his partner’s empty chair and cold coffee cup once more. His eyes strolled the room in hopes of something to ease his spirits and fell upon the undersized contour of a young man looking no more than nineteen years old. He looked aimlessly around the busy squad room, concern etched across his face.

“Can I help you?” Elliot asked in his direction.

His meek expression hardened the moment Elliot’s voice reached his ears and he stared through icy blue eyes that seemed to pierce Elliot’s very soul.

“Perhaps,” he said with a scornful, yet nonchalant air to his voice. “I need to speak to someone about Ms. Olivia Benson’s whereabouts.”

Elliot’s eyebrows flew upward and Cragen, who had overheard the man’s statement, appeared at Elliot’s side in half a step.

“You have information about Olivia?” Elliot asked.

“I might,” he said. “But, I’d need to speak to someone about it. Someone else.”

“Look,” Elliot said taking a step toward the short, blond-haired man. “We don’t have time for any games here. A cop is missing. Do you have any information on her or not?”

The young man glanced at Cragen and then narrowed his eyes as he glanced back at Elliot. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“Fine,” Cragen said, noting Elliot’s skin turning red from frustration. “Talk to me.”

“Okay,” he said. “Is there someplace we could talk?”

Cragen nodded and lead him to the nearest interrogation room as Elliot followed.

“What’s your name?” Cragen asked as they sat at the wooden table in the room.

“Harry Morse.”

Cragen pursed his lips. “Morse...Are you a third or a fourth?”

“I’m neither,” Morse said arrogance biting in his voice. “My oldest brother, Richard...I call him Dick because he is one...he’s the third. But thanks for asking.”

“I see,” Cragen said glancing at Elliot.

The Morses were as old as money could be in the city, and Cragen knew that the name itself carried a worth greater than many of the wealthier families in the city combined.

“You said you had information on Olivia Benson,” Elliot said quickly. “Do you or are you just wasting our time?”

Morse smirked at him and turned toward the captain. “It radiates off him, doesn’t it?”

“Excuse me?” Cragen said.

“The anger. The *rage*. It’s right there, just like he’s emitting it or something.” Morse turned back toward Elliot. “Are you always so angry or is it just lately that this has been happening?”

“If I seem angry,” Elliot said through his teeth, “it may be because while my partner has been missing for nearly four days, you’re in here jerking us around. Now do you have any information or not!”

Morse scoffed and then chuckled to himself. “It’s actually been about ninety hours since she went missing, hasn’t it?” Morse looked at the Breitling watch on his arm. “Yeah...well, its ten twenty-six so that’s actually ninety-three hours and fifty-eight minutes since Olivia’s been missing. So, almost ninety-four hours...close to four days, but not quite.”

Elliot stood slowly, glaring at the young man sitting across from him. “You’ve got about ten seconds to tell us what you know before I throw you across this room and-”

“And what?” Morse shouted. “You’ll tell all the other cops about me? Make ‘em believe I *allegedly* did something to your partner?” He let out a fake laugh. “Honestly, you slay me, Elliot. You really do.”

“All right, Morse,” Cragen said unable to miss the fact that Morse already knew Elliot’s name without either of them mentioning it. “You’ve got our attention. What do you have for us?”

“Oh, I’ve got a lot. I’ve got a whole lot. A lot of information about Mr. Big-Bad Detective Stabler here and a whole lot more on Ms. Benson.”

“Care to share any of that information?” Cragen asked with strained breath. He, too, wanted to throttle Morse, but he knew he needed to keep him talking.

“Well, I’d love to,” Morse said. “But, I’ll be damned if I give this up in front of him. I’m not so hot about you either, but I’m not that picky.”

Elliot slammed his hands on the table. “You walk into the special victims unit asking for someone to talk to about Detective Benson’s disappearance and you got us. You talk to us or you don’t talk.”

Morse turned toward Cragen again. “You see, Cap. That’s the problem with this one. He’s a loaded canon waiting to go off at even the slightest provocation.”

“Do you have information on Olivia!” Elliot screamed into Morse’s face.

Morse scraped his chair backward against the hard tile floor. “I do,” he said softly. “But, I’m not telling either you or your superior. I know how this works. The two of you get together and decide on what you’ll report. I want the other two detectives. Munch and Tuta...I can’t remember how to say it. I want to speak to them, because... from what I know about all of you *and* this unit, I can’t trust the angerball or the one who keeps taking his back.”

Cragen and Elliot simply stared at Morse for a long while. Both men easily towered over his small, thin frame and though he appeared to be no older than nineteen or twenty, the baritone hints of his voice gave way to someone much older. His close-cut blond hair highlighted menacing blue eyes that held an extra glint of something sinister behind them. The very curl of his lips made Cragen’s stomach turn and after another moment of wondering how Morse was able to acquire so much information about them, he turned on his heel and patted Elliot on the shoulder. Elliot did not budge at first, but eventually he turned to follow Cragen out of the room.

They entered the small watch room from behind the large mirror in the interrogation room to find Munch and Fin standing with concerned expressions.

“We’re gonna get Huang in here as soon as possible,” Cragen said, “but keep him talking. I can’t tell if he’s just a kook or if he really knows something about Olivia. The only thing that makes me think he’s legit is that he knows all our names and who’s partnered with who. Just keep him talking as long as possible. If he knows where Olivia is, we’ll drag it out of him.”

Munch nodded and he and Fin stepped into the room.

“Morse,” he said brightly. “How the heck are you?”

“John, I’m doing just fine,” Morse said with the same sardonic tone.

“Well, good,” Munch said as he sat at the table. “So, why don’t you tell us how you know Detective Benson and tell us where she is?”

“Well, I don’t know where she is, but I know that *he* most likely does.” He pointed toward the mirror, where he figured Elliot would be standing.

“What makes you think that?”

“Because I saw what went down that night.”

Munch and Fin glanced at one another. Behind the mirror, Cragen saw Elliot visibly tense and his own thoughts went back to Melinda’s report that sat locked in his desk.

“What d’you mean, you saw what went down?” Fin asked through narrow eyes.

“You know what I’m talking about, Fin.” Morse smiled with a mouth full of perfectly straightened white teeth. “I saw what happened. I saw what he did to her.”

“Who?” Munch asked, immediately dropping the sarcasm.

Morse glanced toward the mirror and then back at Munch. “You know who I’m talking about.”

Munch sat back in his chair and stared at Morse. He had not wanted to fathom about what Morse was suggesting, but the expression on Elliot’s face when he first entered the squad room Wednesday morning fluttered to mind nonetheless.

“You were stalking Benson,” Fin said as more of a statement than a question.

“No,” Morse said quickly. “I don’t stalk. I never *stalked* Olivia. I just...paid special attention to her.”

“Stalking a police officer is a felony,” Munch said. “A felony which we’ll gladly lay aside if you can give us some information about Olivia.”

Morse shrugged his shoulders. “What is it you’d like to know? I mean, I know practically everything there is to know about her. I even know a fair bit about you too, John...” He stared at Fin. “I’ve never really got *your* name right. She always calls you Fin.”

Fin felt a sharp shiver racing down his spine, but he refused to let it show. “So, you stalked her long enough to know a little about where she works and the people she works with. Now, why don’t you put us at ease by tellin’ us where she is?”

“But, I keep telling you, I never stalked her.”

“That’s right,” Munch said. “You paid her special attention.”

Morse glared at him. “I noticed her. I first noticed her about four...well, closing in on five years ago. I saw her through the window from my own place...”

From behind the mirror, Elliot and another and another detective, Brown, furiously jotted down notes.

“He’s probably been living in the building right across the street from her,” Cragen whispered to them.

“She was just doing some dishes,” Morse continued. “And she was sort of...lip-synching with some music as she did them. It was the strangest thing I’d ever seen.”

Fin shook his head. “Strange because you were stalking her or strange because you were just *watching* her.”

“Strange because you really don’t see a person until you can see them when they think no one is watching. She was standing at her sink, her hands slightly red from the warm water and covered in soap bubbles. I’d seen her around the block here and there, but I’d never really noticed her until I happened to just look up that night and see her so very innocently doing her dishes while singing along with her music...as if lost in her own little world for a moment.”

Morse’s eyes seemed to lose focus as he sat, clearly remembering the very night of which he spoke.

Fin felt his foot start tapping. He wanted nothing more than to simply shake the answers out of Morse, but he knew he had to maintain composure.

“Get to the part where you started stalking her,” he said.

“I tell you, I didn’t stalk anyone. I watched her from afar.”

“Watching her doin’ her dishes?”

“At first. That’s how she first caught my eye. And I admit, even that moment was not enough to really bring me into her. Back then, I had no direction whatsoever. My parents were throwing cash at me to make me do something...anything.” He laughed. “They still are actually, but now at least, they can say that I’m the starving artist, black sheep of the family, instead of just a general waste of space and oxygen.”

“Is that what the problem is?” Fin said. “Daddy’s little protégé needed some extra attention and he thought he could get it by stalking Olivia. Building her up in your head.”

“Oh, she didn’t need to be built up,” Morse said, his eyes becoming dreamlike and unfocused again. “She was...well, she was an amazing person.”

Munch felt his stomach flip. *Was*. Morse had used the past tense to describe Olivia and if he was involved, it could only mean one thing.

“But,” Morse continued. “I didn’t start to watch her, I mean really watch her, until a few months later. I saw her out of the corner of my eye while in my apartment. She was racing around her place like crazy. It was really fascinating to watch actually. She was simultaneously doing laundry, cleaning her bathroom, doing her dishes, and cooking this spaghetti dish, complete with its own homemade sauce. It was like, she would stir the sauce, separate some more clothes, throw some cleaner in the toilet, wash her hands, clean a few dishes and then go right back into the meal. I’d never seen someone moving so fast in my life. It was as if she knew she had, like, one night to do everything that she had to get done in a week. And, that’s how it started.”

“How what started?” Munch asked, impatience growing in his voice. “You stalking Olivia?”

“How much longer are we gonna let him go on like this?” Elliot hissed from behind the glass.

“He’s got a story to tell,” Cragen said. “He wants to talk, so we let him.”

“But how much time are we willing to waste letting him talk? He could have her anywhere.”

“Exactly. And how the hell do you think we’re going to find her if we shut him up too quick. We let him talk.”

Elliot ran a hand over the back of his neck and through the glass, Morse smiled as he shook his head at Munch.

“At first I just watched her from my window. I liked seeing her do the little things like put on her makeup in the morning or even ironing. And then, I started to actually follow her. I wanted to know more about her; what she did for a living, the type of person she was.”

“And when you found out she was a cop, you naturally backed off, right?” Munch said.

“I was intrigued,” Morse said still smiling. “I looked up as much as I could about her and as it turned out, she was a rather *good* cop. She worked here, in this Special Victims Unit, with kids who’d been hurt and rape victims and such. She was an incredible person.”

Munch felt his skin begin to crawl with the use of “was” again and, the side glance he threw his partner, told him he was thinking the same thing.

“So, when I saw how amazing she was, I knew I needed to see more of her.”

“See more, how?” Fin said.

“*More* of her,” Morse said as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “It was like I need more of an Olivia fix than I could get just by watching her through my window or following her every once in a while outside. I mean, she *was* a cop and I knew eventually, she was bound to notice me.”

“So, what did you do?” Munch asked regaining equanimity as he spoke, hoping that Morse would slip and tell them what happened to Olivia.

“It was actually a real dilemma,” Morse said somewhat breaking his reverie. “Even if I was awake when she was, I had to sleep eventually and *then* I couldn’t watch her. And, that was the thing I liked most about watching her...watching her sleep. She always had the most peaceful look on her face...sometimes, I’d feel like I just wanted to curl up beside her while she slept.”

Fin stood quickly, unable to hear anymore from Morse, and held an expression reminiscent of Elliot who had sat in the same chair minutes earlier.

"Fin," Cragen said, opening the door. "A word, please."

He stormed out of the room. "How long we gotta hear him talk about Liv like this?"

"Until he gives up where she is," Cragen said. "We've got to keep him talking. Let him finish his story. If there's any truth to what he's saying, we might be able to find Liv quicker."

"What if he's just jerking us a round?"

"And what if he's got her held up somewhere and just wants to tell his story to congratulate himself on kidnapping a cop? We've got no leads. We have to let him talk."

"Don, let me talk to him," Elliot said. "I want him to look me in the eye and tell me what he's been doing."

"No," Cragen said. "He asked for Munch and Fin, and he's got them. Go."

He motioned for Fin to go back into the interrogation room.

"So, what'd you end up doing," Munch said very calmly to Morse.

"Well," Morse began, suddenly sounding mild and small. "I bought a camcorder and just sort of aimed it at her place. It worked well for a little while, but it just wasn't what I wanted."

"What *did* you want?"

"Well, I liked the camcorder because I could watch her anytime of the day. Even when she was out and about, I could get video of her doing things...rolling her eyes at the smokers who dropped their butts on the ground, ironically, I might add...smiling at happy little kids who happened to glance her way...giving that little smirk of hers and extra shake to her stride when she walked by some guy she found attractive... I really enjoyed taping her, but the camcorder was stationary in my apartment, and if I left my place while she was at hers, I'd only get shots of her while she was directly in the camera's line of fire."

"Sounds like a real problem," Munch said sardonically.

"It was. So, finally, I got this brilliant idea. I went to the old man for some cash and I went out and bought some of these really cool, high-tech cameras...I mean, these things were great. They were like, the size of pen cap and could see everything. They had motion detectors and everything and they came with all this storage too for the videos because it was all digital. I'm talking James Bond, here. So, I bought everything, I hooked up my stuff and then I went to work."

"Went to work?" Fin asked.

"Yeah. I went to work...in her building. Her building's super looked like he needed a hand, so I bummed a job from him. Gave me complete access to the whole building, including her place. And, oh man. I have to tell you. It was one thing to see the apartment from across the street, but it is a whole other ball game when you're actually there. I mean, I could smell her in the air, in the couch cushions, in her bedroom, everywhere."

"What did you do in her apartment?" Munch asked slowly.

"I set up the cameras. I bought about a dozen of them and just positioned them all so that every single part of her apartment was covered. That way I'd be able to see her

anywhere she went, even her hallway. Everywhere except the bathroom...Everybody needs *some* privacy."

"Well, of course," Munch said. "Naturally."

"How long've you been taping Olivia?" Fin said.

"Since...early January 2002. It's weird..."

"What?"

"Back then...it seemed like such a strain, watching her all day, but now...Now, it's difficult to imagine a day without seeing her. It feels like my whole world is about to fall apart when I can't see her face."

"Why would you have to go without seeing her?" Munch said, crossing his arms. "It's not like you have a job or something that keeps you from *watching* her."

"No," Morse said. "I don't have any other obligations aside from her." His expression grew somber. "But, she keeps doing things to keep out of my reach..."

"Like what?" Munch asked not liking Morse's new demeanor.

"Like...how she's always leaving at, like, four o'clock in the morning, and you know, I'm sleeping and then when I wake up, she's gone. And then, I can't find her for a day. The next thing I know, she and the Indian girl are standing at her sink talking about scars and putting Vitamin E or something on this...wound on her neck."

Munch glanced toward the small dark window in the room. They all remembered the day to which Morse was referring and he felt a slight wave of pity for the man who would have never known what would have happened if Olivia had been a step closer to her quarry.

"And then," he continued, his voice now quavering. "There was this past summer when she just vanished into thin air. I mean, one day, I saw her packing up a bunch of bags and then she was just gone..." Morse let out a low breath. "Do you know what it's like to watch someone everyday of your life for years and then all of a sudden they're just gone?"

Munch nodded as if he understood the question posed, but he was far more preoccupied by how closely Morse had followed Olivia's life.

Behind the mirror, Cragen turned to Elliot.

"Check out everything there is to know about this Morse. I want to know if he's had any arrest, aliases, whatever. If he's starting to lose it just thinking about last summer, then he probably did something stupid about that time too."

Elliot nodded at him and rushed out of the room. Within the hour he had pulled Harry Morse's entire, surprisingly lengthy record.

Despite his youthful appearance, Elliot learned Harry Morse would be celebrating his thirtieth birthday in ten days and had more petty arrests than Elliot had ever seen in one criminal file. Apart from eight different charges of pick pocketing which he had proclaimed were simply street art, Morse had been charged with everything from jaywalking to destruction of property, yet served not one minute of time for the charges. Morse had, however, been incarcerated in a padded cell at Bellevue for thirty-five days starting in August past.

The police reports were not as detailed as Elliot would have liked them to be, but he learned as he sifted through files that Morse had strolled into the twelfth precinct screaming "She's gone! She's gone!" and attacking an officer who had tried to subdue him in the process.

Elliot swallowed as a chill ran down his spine as the image of Morse screaming for Olivia came to mind. He was about to delve deeper into the files, when he spotted a dreary-eyed George walking into the squad room.

"George," Elliot said flagging him down. "How much clearance do you have in looking into medical records?"

He shrugged. "Not much more than you. Who's records are you trying to look into?"

"This guy's," Elliot said pointing back toward the interrogation room where Morse was still being questioned. "He's spent time in psyche ward at Bellevue."

"That doesn't mean I can get at the medical records," George said. "They're confidential and either one of us would only be able to see them if he was taking some kind of insanity defense."

Elliot sighed. "We're gonna need you to talk to this guy. We're not sure, but we think he might have Olivia."

They walked to the interrogation room and George stared at the young man who sat speaking with animated gestures to Munch and Fin.

"He says he's been stalking her," Cragen said with no inflection in his voice. "I'd prefer not to think it, but he's letting on a little too much about Olivia."

"He's probably an obsessive compulsive. I wouldn't be surprised if he drops some sort of bombshell about her that he's certain no one else knows about. If he's fixated on Olivia, he's going to try to prove that he knows her better than any other person possibly could. What's his name?"

"Morse," Cragen said. "Related to Richard Morse, the second, so he's got a lot of money backing him."

"Is he asking for a lawyer yet?"

"We haven't made an arrest. He just walked in here, asked for Munch and Fin and started talking. I've been trying to keep him going because I assume he'll give up some information when he's done telling his story. You want to have a go with him?"

"I don't know what kind of help I'll be. If he's asked specifically for them, there might be something he sees in one or the other that makes him think they understand the story he's telling."

"But, do you think you could get a grasp on whether or not he knows where she is. The way he sounds...I mean, he's been saying that he's been following her with a camera. I want to know if he's just holding her or if he's..."

Cragen's voice trailed and George pursed his lips knowing how Cragen would have ended the sentence were he talking about any other person.

George nodded and Cragen opened the door asking to speak with Munch and Fin. Once they had stepped out of the room, George slipped through the door to stare at Morse.

Cragen turned toward Munch and Fin. "I want you two to wake up Liv's super. Take Morse's mug shot with you."

"He already said he bummed a job with the guy," Munch protested. "What if they've changed supers, what if-"

"I want to know exactly what he had access to," Cragen continued. "We might be moving a step in the right direction if the super's never heard of him."

They left Cragen and Elliot in the side room, and inside the interrogation, George approached Morse.

"Harry," he began. "I'm George. How are you feeling tonight?"

Morse shrugged. "A little chilly, I suppose. But, it is an interrogation room and these places aren't meant to be suites, are they?"

"No, Harry, they're not."

George sat at the table and opened his mouth to begin probing, but Morse spoke first.

"So, George," he said. "You came in here, speaking very calm and referring to me as 'Harry' instead of just 'Morse' like the others. You must be a shrink."

"I'm a psychiatrist, yes. How did you know?"

"I know shrinks. You're all the same. It's in the voice or something. And, how you look at people with that 'I know why you do everything that you do' expression. I think they sort of brand it on you once you graduate or something."

A small smirk pulled at George's mouth.

"Well, since you seem to know me so well, I'll cut to the chase. How long have you been fixated on Olivia Benson?"

"Good news travels fast, eh?" Morse said glancing toward the mirror. "Well, I do thank you for not saying that I was a stalker. Fixated...yes. I've been fixated on her for a long, long time. I was really such a boy back then."

"Do you feel more like a man having followed her for so long?"

Morse nodded. "I suppose so."

"What is it that draws you to her?"

"She's a beautiful person."

"That's it?" George said. "She's pretty?"

"Not just physically, but throughout everything that makes up her personality. She's my muse and the most magnificent person I'd ever...never met."

Morse's eyes grew large and glossy again and George continued to press him.

"What do you do with the videos you take of her?"

Morse snapped back to reality, slightly taken aback by the question.

"I just watched," he said with another shrug. "Anytime she went someplace I knew I couldn't follow, I'd go home and watch the tapes. You can learn so much about a person by just watching them. You get to know them more completely than they know themselves. Like, I know when Olivia's going to be running out of her apartment late just by seeing if she *falls* into the bed the previous night, instead of actually *getting* into bed, like normal."

George gave Morse a slight nod, wishing he knew less about the young man in front of him, but intrigued all the same.

"Harry, why did you come here tonight?"

"Because...my angel is gone and I know what happened to her." His eyes suddenly appeared wet and he looked toward the ceiling as if holding back tears.

"What happened to her?"

Morse's hands began to shake and he remained silent, his gaze fixed on a dried water spot on the ceiling. George decided to switch tracks.

"Well, why did you insist on speaking to Detectives Munch and Tutuola about this? Why couldn't you talk to Detective Stabler?"

Morse's eyes finally dropped to meet his. "I don't like him. I've seen a fair shake of men come in and out of Olivia's apartment and even I'll admit that not all of them have treated her the best, but he...he comes to her and he's either angry or drunk. Every time. Of all the bastards she's let through her doors, he's by far the worst. Even the one who..." Morse shook his head at the mirror. "I hate him."

"Okay, what've we got?" Casey asked, having just stepped into small room on the other side of the mirror. Her eyes were dull with sleep and her hair was thrown into a loose ponytail.

Cragen turned toward her and Casey's eyebrows furrowed at the expression on Cragen's face. He glanced at Elliot, who stood perfectly still staring through the glass at Morse and George, and told her what Morse had been saying.

"Do you think he has her?" Casey asked quickly now staring at Morse.

"We still don't know," Cragen said, "but a warrant to search his place would be nice."

Casey nodded. "I'm on it. We've got more than enough for a warrant, *and* we've got extenuating circumstances. I'll wake up every judge in the city if I have to."

The moment she darted out of the room, Cragen took a deep breath, not sure where his suspicions lied most: with the boy who sat in the interrogation room revealing more and more about his mania or the colleague and friend who stood directly next to him.

Greenwich Village, New York
12:09AM

Fin's hand banged on the old wooden door, shaking the door in its frame.

"Hang on a sec!" a voice shouted from behind it.

"We don't have a sec!" Munch yelled through the door. "It's the police. Open the door!"

Joseph Rhames, thin and balding, appeared at the door in grungy, deep red robe.

"What the hell do you people want at this time of night?"

"Harry Morse," Fin said, holding up Morse's most recent mug shot.

"He doesn't live here," Rhames said about to close the door.

Munch blocked it with his foot. "We know he doesn't live here. He's down at our precinct. We want to know what *you* know about him."

Rhames took the image from Fin and stared at through narrowed eyes. "Yeah...I remember this kid. Like three or four years ago. I gave him a job just doing some work here and there around the building that I needed to get done. He seemed like he was done on his luck or something and just needed a gig for a little while. He only stuck around for about a month before just moving along."

"You didn't think about getting background checks for this kid who was down on his luck?" Fin asked through his teeth.

"C'mon, Fin," Munch said. "He was paying Morse under the table. A little way to shirk some of his financial obligations to the Feds." He took a step toward Rhames.

"Because of you a cop is missing. She could be dead!"

“Wait a minute!” Rhames said. “Is...is this about Benson? No way!”

“Yes, way,” Fin said. “You let some guy work in your building and right now he’s at our precinct telling us how he stalked Olivia.”

Rhames shook his head. “Look, he looked like a good kid. One of those rich boys, obviously. I figured he was trying to just make it on his own. He didn’t look like he could’ve done anything wrong. Besides, if I heard about any of the tenants complaining, I’d’ve busted the guy.”

“What the hell would you have done if he raped and murdered someone in their apartment!” Munch yelled taking another step toward Rhames.

Rhames took several steps backward and Fin put a hand to Munch’s shoulder, trying to calm him.

“When was the last time you saw Olivia?” Fin said after Munch had stepped back into the hallway.

“I...I don’t know,” Rhames said, putting a hand to his head. “She’s got autopay from her bank account. I haven’t seen in her months. I’ve seen that Indian friend of hers more than I’ve seen her.”

“How?” Fin asked.

“She came around here in the summer saying that she was taking over the lease while Benson was gone, wherever the hell *gone* was.”

Munch rounded on Rhames again. “If something’s happened to Olivia because of Morse, I’m holding you personally responsible.”

With those words, he stormed down the hallway, Fin shaking his head after him.

Morse paced back and forth in front of the large mirror that spanned across the room’s back wall, peering into it as if he could he see the figures of the three men standing behind it.

“I think he would react well to Elliot,” George said behind the mirror.

Cragen shook his head. “Bad idea. If Morse hates Stabler...”

“It’s part of his show,” George said. “He’ll crack with Elliot in there. I’m sure of it.”

Morse tapped on the window and flattened his nose on the window, leaving a greasy smear on the mirror as he slid his face around it.

Cragen nodded at Elliot, who had strode to the door almost too quickly for Cragen’s liking.

“Have a seat, Morse,” Elliot said as he came around the table.

“So, they’re sending you in again, then?” Morse said, his eyes narrowed at Elliot as he sat at the table.

“Just coming to have a little chat.”

“Yeah, okay...”

“So, tell me,” Elliot began. “What do stalkers do when they’re not stalking?”

“Well, I wouldn’t know,” Morse said in soft, calm voice. “After all, I’m not a stalker.”

“C’mon, Morse. We both know what you are. Plain and simple stalker.”

Morse shook his head. "That's such an ugly word. And I'm not. I just watched her and I wasn't the only one, but I'm *telling* you, I'm not a stalker. Wanting to see someone all the time doesn't make me some kind of freak."

"Sure, it does."

"Look," Morse said, his face growing red. "I'm not going to go around in the circle with you all night. I've already told a million times and if you're going to keep insisting it, you might as well send the doctor back in."

Elliot glanced at the screen knowing he had to keep Morse going.

"Fine, Mr. Watcher. I suppose you know everything there is to know about Olivia?"

"That's right, I do," Morse said finally sitting at the table across from Elliot. "Better than her friends and definitely better than you."

"Is that a fact?" Elliot said sardonically.

"Yes, it is. Like, I always know when you've called her. It's that look on her face when she looks at her phone. It's something...off. Like happy memories mixed with anguish, fear and regret. It's an odd expression."

Elliot nodded his head, wondering how many times he could punch Morse across the face before the others could get to him.

"Did you know that Olivia is a real musician?"

"As opposed to a fake one?" Elliot said suppressing a smile.

Morse rolled his eyes. "She plays the violin and the cello. That's when I realized just how special she was. When I heard her play Ava Maria on her cello. It was so soulful and brilliant...I admit, I didn't think some cute cop could be capable of such...grace, but she threw me for a definite loop."

"You forgot the guitar," Elliot said monotone, breaking Morse's reverie.

"Huh?" Morse said, eyes back to the present.

"The guitar. Stringed, musical instrument, usually made of wood and used for music of the rock or country persuasion. She was trying to teach herself back when I first met her, but she gave it up after a while." He could not suppress the arrogant smile spreading across his face. "Guess that was just before your time with her."

"No, it wasn't," Morse corrected. "And she didn't give it up either. She first put it away in storage along with that really expensive cello her mother got her for her thirty-first birthday. The last one she was alive for. She brought it back out a couple years ago and her neighbor who lives a few floors above started giving her lessons. She was getting pretty good. And, there's a piano at this bar in the village that looks like the definition of a hole in the wall. I've heard her play there a few times and she's quite good there too, but obviously, she doesn't get a lot of practice on it. Like I said, she's quite the musician."

Elliot sat silently frowning over Morse's revelations.

"Did *you* know," Elliot began, "that she bites her lip and tilts her head to the left simultaneously when something confuses her?"

"I did!" Morse said brightly. "And not just when she's working. When she's watching Jeopardy or comes across something strange on her computer or when's she's talking on the phone with that Maya woman and she says something off balanced. Did you the only magazines Olivia ever reads are the ones that Maya gives her?"

"I figured as much," Elliot lied.

Morse nodded. Elliot sensed he had struck something within Morse and could feel the game increase as Morse opened his mouth again.

“Did you know her favorite colour’s green be-”

“Because her mother’s eyes were very green.”

Morse nodded again. “Did you know when she cleans her apartment she blasts-”

“Oldies music.”

Morse was now smiling. “How ‘bout when she has time to just veg?”

“It various,” Elliot said after a pause. “Could be Stevie Wonder, could be Rascal Flatts. That’s Liv.”

“Did you know during her time of the month, she craves-”

“Chili dogs and McDonald’s apple pie,” Elliot interrupted. “Not homemade. Not store bought. *McDonald’s* apple pie.”

Morse beamed at Elliot.

“Look, Morse,” Elliot said, a smug annoyance heavy in his voice. “If you wanna do this, at least give me a hard one.”

Morse just stared at Elliot, simply grinning.

“You can’t,” Elliot said. “Can you, you bastard?”

Again, Morse sat only grinning.

“Because even though you watched her through your window, stalked her when she wasn’t looking, you know that I know my partner better than anyone else here, so why don’t you just cut the crap and tell me-”

“Did you know that Olivia had a miscarriage a little more than two years ago?”

The shock that registered on Elliot’s face resonated through both men. He felt his mouth gape and Morse’s drawling laugh flowed through the room.

“That one good enough for you?” Morse said, his white smile glowing.

“You’re lying,” Elliot said after a moment.

“Am I?” Morse said as his eyes danced. “You really want to think that, do you?”

“I know my partner.”

“Obviously, you don’t.”

“And obviously, you’re full of shit! Now, why don’t quit playing games and tell me where Olivia is!”

Morse held up his hands in mock fear. “Hey now, Mr. Detective. Don’t want to get you too angry. Especially since I’ve seen what you can do once you’re angry enough.”

Elliot felt his stomach drop as he considered what Morse had said and quickly changed the subject.

“I would’ve known if she was ever pregnant.”

“Obviously, you didn’t!”

Elliot glared at him, but Morse continued. “Don’t suppose she ever told you about a guy named Jeremy Cross?”

Having been answered with only a silent glare, Morse continued.

“Yes, Jeremy,” he said as he leaned back in his chair. “I wish I had the chance to speak to her back then. Maybe I could’ve warned or something. I mean, I saw her in the weeks before where she’d forget to take her pill, like three or four times in a week. Then, she’d count them and just down four of them, like that would make it all better. It was inevitable.”

Morse stood and took to slowly pacing the room, his eyes fixed on Elliot.
“And Jeremy...he was about as dumb as they come. Only served one real purpose.”

“Which was?” Elliot said monotone.

“Come on, Detective! You know what’s what. A single woman, living in New York in the prime of life. They all have a fuck buddy or two. Depending on the woman, sometimes three. But, Olivia had just the one. Just Jeremy. He was a massive guy. Had to be at least six-five and easily two-fifty. Hung like a goddamn bull!”

Elliot shook his head at the table. He did not know which shook him more: shock or fury.

“But, he was a real idiot,” Morse rambled. “And she knew it. A few minutes after he was done, she was showing him the door...*if* she could stay awake afterward.” Morse took a long pause and sighed. “It kind of makes me wonder where the hell she even found him. I mean, he’s definitely not the sort you’d meet...Hell, I doubt he was even smart enough to find his way to the bar. No...it’s good that she didn’t have it. She’s better off.”

Elliot scoffed. “You’re sick, you know that?”

“How so?” Morse said. “And, don’t start on that stalking shit again.”

“She’s supposed to be your muse and you think it’s a good thing for her to have miscarried...assuming that’s even true.”

It was Morse’s turn to shake his head. “If you’d seen the guy, you would agree. I never even met the guy, but I could tell he was a complete idiot. The way she looked at him to...there was a strong chance that baby would’ve been a real moron. Albeit very *good-looking*, but just as stupid as they come.

“What was fascinating, though, was that I knew before she did. I saw that she missed her rag, but she didn’t even seem to notice until another week went by and even then she didn’t believe it. Even when she started getting sick, she was still in this state of denial or something.”

Elliot perused his memory of the last time Olivia seemed markedly ill. It was more than two years earlier and they had sent her home because she looked like she might have had the flu. He remembered telling Kathy that Olivia was sick while he was with the kids and Lizzie, having overheard the conversation, gave him chicken noodle soup that she had made herself to give to Olivia. Even through three different pregnancies with Kathy, he never once imagined...

“She kept looking at her calendar,” Morse said with a laugh. “And she would count up the days over and over again. It was find funny to watch because I was always looking for that moment when she would finally make the connection. Then, halfway through that second month, she came home with a little pregnancy test, but she just left it on her dresser for, like, *days*. And, I’m watching her *knowing* that she had to see it each time she walked by. It’s like maybe she didn’t want to know or something. But, then she finally took it...and that look on her face...eyes squinting at the stick, head cocked to one side, biting her lip slightly. I didn’t have to see it to know.

“Then, she runs out of the apartment and down to the store a few blocks down our street. And, I’m freezing my ass off because it’s the middle of the night and I just grabbed my camera and a light jacket and took off after her. I had no idea where she was going at that point, so I’m trying to watch, but trying not to be seen either and...Well,

thank God she was so distracted because she practically ran into me on the way out of there and probably would've known I was following her.

"So... she goes home and sets up the five different tests that she just bought, at the same time! And, she's pacing back and forth the whole time waiting for them with this look on her face and I think she was sweating too. Then, her timer goes off. She looks at the first one and throws it on the floor. Looks at the second one...throws *it* down. Third one, fourth one...throws both down. Then, the last one...she looks at it, closes her eyes, leans against the wall and just slides to the floor. It was the first time I'd seen her really cry."

Morse leaned against the far wall and gauged Elliot's expression. The scowl that had set in Elliot's face was accentuated by the finger-like, purple smudge that darkened the side of his face. The room felt warmer from only the angry heat emanating from the seasoned detective. Morse's small blue eyes narrowed and his lips grew tight at seeing Elliot's face and Elliot could see Morse's right eye twitch slightly.

"Anyway," Morse said after moment. "She eventually got over the shock and I knew she was going to keep it."

"How'd you know?" Elliot said, his voice lacking intonation.

"She kept walking around her apartment patting her stomach. Every once in a while, I'd see her just staring the mirror with this odd smile on her face as she'd turn to the side and kind of stuck her stomach out. And, of course, she'd practice out loud what she was going to say to you. 'Elliot, I'm pregnant.' 'Elliot...I'm pregnant.' 'Elliot, I have to tell you something.' 'Elliot, there's something you really need to know.' 'Look, Elliot, I don't want you thinking you've got to treat me delicate or something, but...' 'I'm having a baby, Elliot.' 'You'll never guess what happened!'

"After she got her first ultrasound, she would be at her desk and take out the image to just stare at it. She'd sit with that little smile on her face and pat her stomach every once in a while."

Morse let loose a long breath and shook his head. "And then...I'm still not quite sure what happened. I had followed right up to the precinct and even managed to keep up with you two a bit that day. But, you were chasing after some guy and I knew I couldn't keep following so I just went back toward your car when I saw him and her tearing down the street. I don't know where the hell *you* were, but she half tackled him and she had him down, but he...he kicked her. Right in the stomach...hard. She'd banged his head on the ground to keep him down, but he kicked her anyway. She was up again in, like, two seconds, but she definitely went down holding her stomach.

"A few days later, she'd just gotten through her door and she just...doubled over. She tried to keep walking, but this...I don't know. I guess it was just pain, but I could see it, like, rippling through her and she just slid down the wall."

"You saw that she was hurt," Elliot said in a low voice, "and you just stood across the street and watched?"

"No," Morse said. "I was--"

Elliot's voice cracked. "How long were you going to let her lie on the floor before you did something?"

"I *didn't*," Morse said now leaning across the table. "When I saw what happened, I was about to run out the door for her when I saw her crazy neighbor across the hall

jump out in the hallway. I followed them when he drove her to the hospital. From what I could tell, all she kept saying was for them not to call anyone.”

“She didn’t want anyone to know,” Elliot said monotone once again.

“She didn’t want you to know,” Morse said. “Not that way, at least. I wasn’t in the hospital with her, so I didn’t know how bad it was until the neighbor brought her home. She was just slowly paced around the apartment holding her stomach for hours, until she finally leaned against a wall and just started crying. It was awful. I cried with her...”

“She’d been showing slightly even. I could see it when she got out of the shower. This slight curve in perfectly toned abs...I think it says a lot that you didn’t even notice anything. Not even a change in her personality.”

“Well, I think you had the advantage on me since I wasn’t the one stalking Olivia at the time.”

“I wasn’t stalking Olivia and *you* have no right to judge *me*.”

“Oh, you’re so full of shit! You come here telling us you have information on Olivia and you’ve got nothing but a bunch of made up stories!”

“Made up stories!” Morse screamed. “Who’s full of shit now? I’ve gotta story for you detective: Once upon a time, a woman let her partner bully her to the point where he thought he could get away with anything and when she stood up to him, he took her down the only way his feeble mind knew how!”

Elliot narrowed his eyes at Morse. “Tell me where she is, you sick bastard.”

Morse just slowly shook his head.

“If she’s somewhere...” Elliot said, “somewhere...hurt, so help me God, I will personally make you pay.”

“Not before I make *you* pay.”

“Enough with the games, you freak! Where is she!”

“Look, you can call me a freak, a perv, a stalker, whatever. I don’t care. It doesn’t change what happened.”

“You explain to me what happened,” Elliot said. “I’ll make sure the same thing only happens to you a few times a week in prison instead of everyday.”

Morse glared across the table at Elliot. “I’ll be damned if I explain any of this to you.”

“Tell me where she is.”

“I’m not telling you a goddamn thing.”

“What happened to her!”

“You tell *me*!”

Elliot slammed his hands on the table, looking ready to leap across it at Morse, whose cold eyes reflected the same malice. The door to the interrogation room opened with Cragen, Munch and Fin standing in the doorway.

“Morse,” Cragen said. “You remember Detectives Munch and Tutuola?”

“So, what if I do?” Morse asked his eyes never leaving Elliot.

“They’ve a few questions to ask you,” Cragen said. “And meanwhile, Detective *Stabler* and I need to talk.”

“Talk, eh?” Morse said. “Have a little talk. Have a little cover-up talk?”

“No ones’ covering up anything,” Munch said.

“Like hell you aren’t! Either you’re all in on it too or you’re all too thick to see what’s going on. The thing is, I don’t think Olivia would work with such stupid people, so you all must be in on it!”

“No one’s in on anything ‘cept you,” Fin said.

Elliot and Cragen stepped out of the room, leaving Munch and Fin with a distracted Morse.

“Why’d you take me out again?” Elliot asked.

“It’s not working,” George said, though he knew it was the understatement of the night. After what he had just witnessed in the room, he now wondered whether he had underestimated Morse, and Elliot.

“Olivia’s the focal point of his life,” he continued, “and he thinks you have something to do with her absence.”

“I don’t,” Elliot said.

“But as long he thinks you do, he won’t be giving up anything regarding Tuesday to you. If he thinks you’re her assailant, he’s going to want *you* to confess to *him*.”

Elliot shook his head, fuming. “He took her.”

“We don’t know that,” Cragen said.

“You heard him in there! He’s been stalking her for years! Probably planning all this for just the right moment!”

“All right, fine,” Cragen said. “We’ve got his address and a warrant to search his place. Go to his apartment, Elliot with the CSU team. If he’s been doing all that he’s said he’s done, we should find miles of evidence of it in his place.”

“No,” Elliot said. “I need to be here. I want to be here when he tells us what happened.”

Cragen took a step toward Elliot so that both men were directly eye to eye. “*That’s* an order, Detective. I want you at Morse’s apartment executing this search warrant. If he’s done something to Olivia... I want as much evidence as possible.”

Elliot stared at his captain for a moment more before leaving the room and heading in the direction of his coat.

“If Morse is here,” George said, “then he’s probably covered his tracks at his apartment, too.”

Cragen sighed. “Do you have any idea if Morse’s involved?”

“I don’t think he did anything to her,” George said. “But, he saw something that night. Something has set him off to think that Elliot’s the main player in her disappearance. If he’s been watching her all this time, he would have noticed anyone who was around Olivia. Old boyfriends, other cops. But he’s focused on Elliot as the one who’s hurt her.”

“Couldn’t that just be because he’s the one around her the most?”

“But even the closest detectives have lives outside the force; apart from each other. He had an entire host of people to choose from, but he’s fixed on Elliot. There’s something more to this and he *wants* to tell us. That’s why he’s giving us these stories. He wants to show how much he knows before he gives the coup de grâce. We just have to drag it out of him.”

Cragen felt his stomach turn. The off-balanced twenty-something in the interrogation room stood yelling at Munch and Fin. Morse thought Elliot was the one

who had hurt Olivia and Cragen knew he had a mountain of evidence that suggested the same.

He ran a hand over his sparse scalp. His hope that Olivia would simply walk into the precinct having just chased off a lead had long since vanished and his sanguine optimism of finding Olivia alive was quickly fading as everything tied to her disappearance pointed directly at Elliot Stabler.

Chapter Seventeen

Sunday February 4, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York

Harry Morse's apartment building had been recently renovated and Elliot could feel the instant collision of classic and modern architectures as he moved throughout the corridors.

After taking a moment to get his bearing in the building, he approached the third apartment on eighth floor, with the CSU team behind him, pondering over the set of coincidences that had thrust Morse into his life. Had Morse lived across the hall or one floor down; had Olivia lived at the end of her hall or in the Upper West Side apartment her mother had left her, none of them would have ever had to deal with Morse's ravings.

The metal doorknob was cold to the touch and Elliot thrust the key given to him after much shouting by the building superintendent into the door lock. The lock turned with a thick thud and he allowed the door to open fully before taking a step inside the flat.

"Olivia!" he called out in the darkness. "Liv! Are you here?"

A team member shifted behind him and he made the first move into the apartment. His eyes careened through the darkness in a failed attempt at finding a light switch and he called back to the cop nearest the door to look for one.

The sound of plastic hitting metal resounded through the apartment and Elliot squinted through the now bright light that flooded the room.

"Mother of God," he heard someone whisper and it was not until his eyes had grown accustomed to the new brilliance that he could see what had caused the stir. The expanse of living room spread across several tens of square feet and every wall, every single surface, was covered with an image of Olivia.

Elliot took a step backward, his breath knocked out of him, as he took in the room's character. Set at intentional angles to one another, in sizes varying from that of an index card to poster-sized, were pictures of Olivia Benson. Most were in black and white, though some were sepia-toned and every few feet, a full-coloured image could be found, but all were made with a telephoto lens. Some of the photos showed Olivia in her apartment, smiling on the phone or eyebrows furrowed while peering into her computer monitor, but the vast majority displayed her with the city as a background. While many were solely of Olivia, Elliot could see Fin in considerable amount of them and Munch was in several as well, yet what set the lurch in his stomach were the scores of images that showed him as well: he and Olivia eating lunch together, the pair of them walking

through the city, him driving her home, the pair of them arguing with one another; the list went on as did the images.

Elliot and the CSU team spanned out to stare, shocked, at the images, and Elliot did his best to hide the nausea and fear that was coursing through his bones. Morse had collected a myriad of nearly every facial expression Olivia seemed capable of making. From laughing and smiling, to thoughtful or simply angry, every picture held a piece of Olivia normally one would only see if they knew her well. His photos did more than invade in her privacy; they had captured a part of her soul.

"We need to...uh," Elliot began with a crack in his voice after five minutes silence. "We need to take in everything. And we're looking specifically for the tapes that Morse mentioned. If he's telling the truth at all, we should find stock piles of them."

The team set to work photographing the photographs and Elliot padded softly through the apartment in a slight daze, his mind not quite caught up to what he was witnessing.

He took a step toward the closest wall to view the photo that was stapled on top of several others behind. It was of him and Olivia and he felt his stomach lurch again as he placed the time. Two weeks earlier, in the early morning hours, snow had just begun to fall on the pair of them as they both laughed at something he could not remember which one had said. They stood outside her building both wearied from days of arguing and the news that Kreider had slipped through their fingers, and Elliot sighed as he looked at the version of himself that never thought he would be leading a search for the woman beside him.

He had to've been right there, he thought.

Telephoto lens or not, Morse would have had to have been directly on the street to take the picture, yet neither of them noticed him. Elliot shook his head, wondering whether it was simply fatigue or Olivia's smile that had garnered his thoughts away from all others.

He glanced through the nearby window that gave Morse a clear view into Olivia's apartment and felt the nausea return. Morse had probably hurt her and most likely left her for dead while he continued his charade in front of Munch and Fin.

"Elliot," one of the officers called. "We found something you should see."

Elliot left his post at the window and strode through the apartment to see at what several other officers were staring. Inside of what should have been used as a laundry room, stood stacks and stacks of small, grey plastic boxes. He picked up one and noted the words "USB 2.0" and "500GB" etched onto the box's flat side and white label with "January 7 – 13" on the other.

"What the hell?" Elliot said his eyes narrowed at the box in his hand.

"They're hard drives," the youngest of the team members said. "Thousands of external hard drives."

"What could he be doing with these?" Elliot asked, eyebrows still furrowed.

"Your videos," the officer said. "He's got a lot of complex video editing equipment set up throughout the apartment, with several of these connected to his system. He doesn't need to use tapes because everything's all digital. The drive you're holding can store probably a week's worth of video without the trouble of having to go through actual video tapes."

“Great,” Elliot said with a sigh as he set down the drive. “Stalking for the twenty-first century. Pack them all up. We’re gonna need to take them with us.”

As the unit thoroughly photographed Morse’s apartment, Elliot took in every item Morse had strewn about the rooms. Apart from the hard drives, also scattered throughout the apartment, Morse had blueprints of Olivia’s apartment building as well as journals cataloging her every movement.

Out of morose curiosity, he picked up one of them and to his horror learned that Morse had documented everything from how long she brushed her teeth each day, dates of her menstrual cycle, the last time she had slept with Jonathan and the probability that the food in her refrigerator was decomposing to predictions on which Golden Oldies playlist Olivia would listen to when cleaned her bathroom.

Elliot passed a lone camera that appeared to swivel in any direction that Olivia might move in her apartment and walked into what looked to be another sitting room. His breath caught again as he saw that Morse’s real artistic skill rested with a paintbrush, not a camera.

Much like the living room, the walls of the new room were covered with images of Olivia, yet in place of photos were framed paintings and sketches Morse had made of her over the past few years. A sole painting hung in Morse’s bedroom. Her hair was much shorter, but her smile was dazzling and Elliot could not help, but smirk slightly noticing that Morse had managed to capture the certain sparkle of her eyes to which he had become so accustomed. As he gazed at the painting, he half-wondered if he could take the work of art for himself, but squashed the idea, knowing that he would never be able to explain it properly to anyone who saw it in his apartment.

He passed a small television that was connected to a system and another hard drive in the bedroom and sighed as he pulled out his phone.

“It’s Stabler,” Elliot said when Cragen answered. “This situation with Morse...it’s far worse than we thought.”

SVU Squad Room
2:26AM

The thin vertical cursor blinked at Elliot as he stared at his blank report, without the faintest idea of how to proceed. He began by simply typing “Detective Olivia Benson,” but the appearance of her name in relation to “Missing Person” made his nausea return.

Cragen had asked him to begin the paperwork on Morse’s apartment while CSU set up to see what was on the hard drives and Munch and Fin still spoke with Morse. He had wanted to simply barge into the interrogation room and demand an answer from Morse, but he knew it would not solve the problem at hand.

He saw a flash of the overhead lights hitting black hair and looked up to see Maya walking toward him quickly with a tear-stained face.

“Maya,” he said standing. He had expected to hear from her, but he had hoped she would not find out for another few hours.

Maya shook her head at him. “Please...Elliot, please, no. No...where is she?”

He took her by the shoulder and guided her toward his chair. "Just...just sit for a moment."

"I don't want to sit...just...please, just tell me where she is."

"Maya, Liv's-"

"No," Maya interrupted bursting into tears. "No, please, no...No, just tell me where she is."

"Maya, we don't know-"

"Please Elliot!" she pleaded. "It's me, okay? It's me. It's just me and I need to know. You have to tell me. You *have* to tell me."

"Maya, if there was anyone in this world I would tell if I knew where she was, it'd be you. But-"

"Why didn't you tell me earlier!" Her frantic screams drew attention from every officer in the squad room. "Why did I have to see it on the news!"

"Maya..."

"There's crime scene tape on her door," Maya sounded pounding a fist into his chest as he tried to calm her. "Why is there tape on her door! Why didn't you tell me! You called me Wednesday and you said everything was fine! I could've been looking for her, but you said everything was fine! Fine!"

"Please, Maya..."

"Just...please, just please tell me where she is."

Elliot managed to maneuver her into his seat. "Maya, as soon as we know-"

"Don't feed me that bullshit! Where is she, please! I need to know! You have to tell me! Please!"

"You have to calm down," Elliot said softly.

Maya's breath was coming in haggard pants as she continued crying. "Elliot... she's like my sister. You have to tell me where she is. Please."

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're right, I should've told you, but we're looking for her and we're gonna find her. I know she's fine. It's just gonna take some time."

"That's what she told me," Maya said jumping out of the chair. "She says that what you tell the parents all the time...even when there's no hope, now, c'mon. It's me you're talking to. You've got to tell me the truth!"

Maya let out a wail and dissolved into a fit of tears as Elliot held her in the squad room. He could only whisper to her that everything would be all right, though he did not believe one word of it. She shook and sobbed in his arms for another ten minutes, before he was finally able to gather her into a cab.

With Maya on her way home, Elliot stepped off the elevator, wondering when Jonathan and Olivia's other friends would start appearing as he headed for the interrogation room where Morse was still held.

"And you still don't think you're a stalker?" Munch asked Morse as he leaned over the table toward the narrow-eyed individual who he knew held their only information on Olivia's disappearance.

"No," Morse said. "No, I just followed her and watched her. You know a stalker has plans to...do things. I just wanted to see her. I didn't even want to touch her or be with her. She was like my magical star. You can't hold it or touch it, but you can always gaze upon its beauty and worship it from afar."

"You're sick," Fin said, his lips curling in a sneer.

"How am I sick?" Morse asked. His bright eyes were beginning to lose some of their vivacity and were becoming pink near the brim. "I just watched her and loved her from across the way. No one person in the precinct can say that about Olivia, no matter how hard they try or how long they've known her."

"You need to cut the crap," Fin said through his teeth. "Tell us where Olivia is."

The pink along Morse's eyes turned red and he looked as though he was about to burst into tears. "I...I should've known better. I underestimated him. I underestimated everything, and now, she's gone because of it."

"*Tell* us," Munch said growing impatient. "Where is she?"

"I went for a walk," Morse continued as if Munch had not said anything. "She seemed like she was in the for night and I decided to go for a walk to stretch my legs. You know, I figured I'd be back by the time she went to sleep and I'd just catch up on her during the day when she was here. Where I couldn't follow her."

"You're leading us through this bullshit again," Fin said. "Just tell us where she is. That's all we wanna know."

Morse gave Fin a weak, tearful smile. "I...underestimated everything. I thought I had enough room for the rest of the night, but..."

"But what?" Munch asked.

"When I came back home after an hour...I'd run out of room. Everything had stopped taping."

"Is that when you snatched her?" Fin said. "You broke in her place and took her because you didn't get to *watch* her that night?"

Morse's smile turned somber and he broke into a sob. "You don't understand. I didn't do anything. In her greatest moment of need, I went for a walk around the city...I went for a walk and when I got back, everything had stopped...and she was gone."

Munch and Fin were silent and watched together as a tear rolled gently down Morse's cheek.

"Morse..." Munch said.

"Don't you get it!" Morse yelled. "Of all the times in the world to take a fucking walk, I did it then! The one time when it would've mattered the most!"

"Where is she?" Munch repeated.

Morse shook his head and loosened several more tears to make the trek down his face. "When I came back and saw that the cameras had stopped, I looked up and saw that she was gone. And I knew. I knew right in that instant he'd done something to her."

"Who?" Fin said.

"Fuck who!" Morse screamed. "Him!" He pointed back at the two-way mirror behind which Elliot took a step backward, surprised that Morse had pointed in his exact direction though he had no way of knowing whether he was there.

Inside the interrogation room, Morse pulled a small disc out of his jacket and slid it onto the table. The disc, about half the diameter of a normal DVD, glowed in the poorly lit room and all those present stared at it as if it were enchanted.

"I've...made copies," Morse said. "I've made loads of copies of it, so I don't want to hear about any of this Blue Wall nonsense. I saw what went down that night and I'm here to make sure everybody knows about it."

“You just said you went out for a walk and when you came back Olivia was gone,” Munch said. “Which is it? Either you were there and saw what happened or you didn’t.”

“When I saw that she was gone, I rewound the last hour to see if maybe she just took a walk like I did or got called out on a case. Imagine my surprise and horror when I saw that he’d been there.” Morse nodded toward the mirror. “*He* knows where she is because...*he* attacked her.”

A hard silence fell over both the interrogation room and the small room attached to it.

“And, you say you taped it on that disc?” Fin asked after a full minute’s silence.

“Yeah,” Morse said. “On this disc and the one I’ve got in my car and the five others I’ve got in my apartment. Not to mention the ones I’ve put in my safe deposit boxes and gave out to some friends of mine, all just in case you people get amnesia or lose the one I brought. See, I know what happened and I want everyone to know too. The world needs to see what the cool, collected detective did to her.”

Munch pursed his lips never taking his eyes off of Morse. “What makes you think that Detective Stabler has anything to do with her disappearance?”

Morse slid the disc toward Munch. “Watch it. It plays in any DVD player. It’s all on there. Watch it and tell me you don’t think he had something to do with this. That he didn’t hurt her.”

Cragen glanced at Elliot as he brushed past into the room. “If you’ve got plans to air something like that, you’re dreaming. The media’s not going to air anything, especially with you here. And, considering what we just found at your place, you’re in for the long haul.”

“Oh,” Morse said eyes slightly brighter. “You’ve seen my...uh, wallpaper.”

“Yeah. We saw it.”

“Well, then you know I mean business.”

“I know you’re a sick freak with nothing better to do than stalk innocent people!”

Morse scoffed. “Yeah, you’re one to judge who’s innocent. Anyways, once you watch that video, I want Detective Elliot Stabler arrested or else I guarantee you that tape will run.”

“And, I’m telling you,” Cragen said, “you’re not releasing anything to the media.”

“Who said anything about the media?” Morse said darkly. “I gave copies of that video to three friends who, if they don’t hear from me by eight o’clock, will upload that video to the Internet. The *Internet*. And label it, ‘Cop Murders Partner, Caught on Tape.’ It will spread like a virus and in less than a day, the whole world will know the little secret you’re trying to keep quiet about him. Now, I *know* you all have more than enough evidence against him and I want him arrested for murdering Olivia, *tonight!*”

Munch and Fin stared at Cragen who, in turn, glared at Morse who now stood breathing hard and looking up at the captain. Cragen picked the disc off the table and left the room in the direction of his office, motioning for Elliot to follow. Once inside his office, he closed the door, turned on the small TV in the corner and set the disc in the DVD player. Before starting the disc, he shut off the entire set-up and turned with a sigh to Elliot who sat in the chair across from his desk.

“Is there anything that you want to tell me before we watch this?”

Elliot sighed and rubbed his hands across his face. "Olivia and I had an argument that night."

"Yes. You've mentioned this. Is there anything *else* you want to say?"

"You're asking me for my statement," Elliot said sardonically.

"Yes," Cragen said with no hint of amusement in his voice. "What you tell me now makes the difference between whether or not I have to consider pressing charges on my own detective, so...Is there anything you want to tell me?"

"We argued and...we fought."

"What do you mean fought?"

"Look!" he said sitting back in the chair. "She yelled, I yelled louder. She pushed me away and...I lost it. I grabbed her and pushed her against a wall. Her...her frames started falling down. She slapped me and we struggled for a bit. I pinned her to the floor and I told her all I wanted was the Drover file, but she still wouldn't give it up." He paused. "She struggled around, hit me twice in the eye and flipped me. She handcuffs me and leaves me on the floor and goes into the kitchen to pour herself a drink. Then she tells me...this was the reason I couldn't have the Drover file. Because she knew that I wouldn't be able to control myself. After a little while, she uncuffed me and then I left."

"Why didn't you say something earlier?"

Elliot gave a slight shrug. "Because she was fine and...I was ashamed. I had lost complete control and had wrestled her to the ground without another thought. When I saw myself in the mirror Wednesday morning, I saw exactly what I had done. But, I swear on my father's grave, she was fine when I left. I walked out the door and she was perfectly fine. I figured that maybe she was still pissed and was going to maybe take a personal day or something before she came back in, but she was fine. When I left her, she was fine."

The glower on Cragen's face was too much for Elliot to take and he lowered his large eyes to the floor. Cragen stood, leaning slightly on his desk, with his arms crossed and a frown set so deeply in his face it appeared that it might never release.

He was angry and wanted to slap Elliot himself after hearing the story, though a part of him was not too surprised. After so many years together, he had seen partners go crazy against one another countless times and as he turned back toward the television set, he hoped he could chalk up the story to a simple misunderstanding between old partners.

When he turned on the television, there was only a blue screen that flickered several times before an image of Olivia's empty apartment came into view. The camera was clearly posted in the far corner of Olivia's living room, but nearly every part of the apartment could be seen from the single view.

Cragen pulled out a remote control and pressed the fast forward button, yet nothing seemed to change in the empty apartment. After five minutes of forwarding through the video and watching the shadows in the apartment grow duller and duller as the sun slowly set, Olivia's door opened finally and she entered the apartment looking slightly pink from the cold.

They watched silently as Olivia set down her things and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of the small bag in her hand. Jacket on, she slid out to her fire escape and the camera could just catch Olivia in the farthest edge of the frame smoking a cigarette on the escape.

"When did you get there?" Cragen asked, noting the time stamp on the video.

“May-maybe eleven...midnight?”

Cragen nodded once at sped through the film. On the screen, Olivia shimmied back through her windowed and placed the cigarettes under her sink before reaching for her phone and dialing, when Cragen slowed the film again.

“MJ?” the Olivia on the screen said. “Alone...It’s just hard to come to that realization...Oh God, Maya. That was nothing. His true colours were in full force later in the day...”

Elliot shifted in his seat when he realized it was apparent that Olivia was talking to Maya about him. He avoided Cragen’s glance as he wondered how often they talked about him.

The Olivia on the screen wiped at her eyes and continued speaking. “...God, Maya. It’s like everything in my life is just spinning out of control...” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “...I know you will, Sweetie. Thank you.”

The minutes rolled by as they watched in odd wonder as Olivia moved about her apartment, and for a brief moment, Elliot could see some of Morse’s fascination with simply watching someone who did not know they were being watched.

She changed clothes, thankfully, out of site of the camera and emerged wearing a dark purple cami and black pajama pants as she attempted to work on something at her desk. She gave up on work after a while and walked so close to the camera to retrieve her cello that it made Cragen shift as he leaned against his desk. It seemed as if she just looked up, she would be able to see the hidden camera.

Cragen resisted the urge to fast forward through her playing and having never heard her on the cello previously, he let the video play, but before long, she had replaced the cello in its case and shut the door to her bedroom. He forwarded the film until the display read just after midnight, when both men jumped at the sight of her door shaking in its frame. Cragen threw Elliot a dirty look as the Olivia on the screen padded across her apartment to answer to the door.

The next twenty minutes of film passed quickly: Elliot barged into the apartment and he and Olivia began arguing immediately. He grabbed her arm and she snatched away and they progressed into even louder arguing, which caused Elliot to slam his hands on her desk. Her lamp crashed to the floor taking the cello bow with it, yet Elliot did not seem to notice. The arguing continued softly at first, but grew louder and louder until Elliot gave Olivia an angry push in her shoulder. She shoved him back, but he proceeded to push her backwards over a series of words. When Olivia had backed up against the wall closest to the camera, she pushed back against him, but he barely moved. They then spoke softly for a few moments more before Elliot stormed out of the apartment. The moment it appeared that Elliot had gone, Olivia took a graceful leap across the broken glass that now littered her floor, pulled a file from the stack remaining on her desk and threw it into her top desk drawer. As she set the key in its lock, Elliot came through the door behind her. A moment passed where neither moved, but Olivia shook first and jumped from him throwing the keys down her cami and pulling her hands up in a defensive position.

Elliot lunged for her, but she swerved out of the way, tipping over her chair and causing some of the files on her desk to pour onto the floor. He screamed that he just wanted the file, but she said that she refused to give it to him. They argued for a moment and a barely distinguishable jingle came from Olivia’s direction as they paced about her

apartment. He came after her again, dragging the chair across the floor and she jumped over her couch to get away from him. He tackled her as she got over the side, but she still tried to crawl from as her afghan fell off the couch. Elliot climbed on top of her with a knee on her legs to keep her down as he ran his hands up and down her abdomen searching for the keys while Olivia screamed from him to get off of her. She kicked backwards trying to push him up, but he missed her foot and grabbed hold of her shoulders as he fell on top of her. He lied on top of her for a few moments as they lied on the floor, both breathing hard.

Behind Cragen, Elliot shifted uncomfortably in the chair, a knot growing his stomach as he realized what was coming next on the video. He knew rage alone could not explain his actions at this point and he pursed his lips, expecting Cragen to turn on him with a glare that could rip through walls.

With Olivia pinned beneath him nearly out of breath, the Elliot on the screen slowly slid his hand from Olivia's wrist and up to her shoulder. She said something indiscernible with her face against the floorboards and Elliot shifted on top of her. He ran his mouth up her other bare shoulder and said something quietly into Olivia's ear. He leaned against her and said something that sounded like "file" and she elbowed him in the stomach as she scrambled out from under him. He gave chase, tackling her again and managed to straddle her on the floor screaming that he wanted "the file." She tried to flip him over with a sway of her hips, but he fell on top of her and his arms came around her, placing her in a headlock. She reached for his hands with a grimace on her face and the video crackled for a moment before returning to a solid blue screen.

Both Cragen and Elliot stared silent and still at the television for a full minute after the video had stopped, neither able to believe what had been seen. Cragen turned off the television as Elliot rubbed the bridge of his nose and stared at the floor.

"Christ, Elliot," he began. "I don't know what to say."

"I know," Elliot said solemnly.

"You know? That's the best you've got for me? I just watched you attack and damn near strangle your partner and that's *all* you've got to say?"

"I didn't hurt her," Elliot said. "When I left her, she was fine."

"Are you sure?" His words stung and Elliot closed his eyes as he sighed.

"I did *not* hurt her."

"The bruise across your face says different."

"That video cuts off halfway through the fight."

"And she's still missing, so it makes me wonder if Morse is right."

Elliot stood. "Don, it's me!"

"And that's *Olivia* you were struggling on the floor with!"

"I know! I know it's Olivia, but swear to God I didn't hurt her."

Cragen pulled himself to his full height to look Elliot square in the eye. "So, you come in here looking like you got ran over by a train and you're telling me you didn't do anything to her? Keeping in mind that I just saw what happened and she didn't look like she was getting any hits on you."

"I know," Elliot sighed. "But, that is not all that happened."

"What do *you* say happened?"

The mistrust in his voice seemed overwhelming. "She struggled away from me and I grabbed her again and she sort of...fell towards the wall."

“Fell?”

“I guess...I guess I threw her against the wall.”

Cragen crossed his arms. “So far, I’m not liking this story.”

“Cap,” he said exasperated. “When she hit the wall, she doubled over and I remembered what Drover had already done to her and I...I...I sort of snapped out of it. But she was still pissed.”

“And rightfully so.”

“She lost it on me and I...tried to defend myself a little, but I let her because I knew I deserved it.”

“So, all this...?” Cragen said motioning to Elliot’s remaining facial bruises.

“She let me have it. But, I swear to you. I swear on my children’s *lives*, she was fine. When I walked outta her door, she was perfectly fine.”

At long last, Cragen’s expression seemed to soften. “And we checked hospitals for her?”

“I checked every hospital from Beth Israel to the orthopedic institute. She wasn’t anywhere and there’s no one even matching her description, plus all her stuff was still in her apartment...Don, I don’t know if he’s trying to pull something with this cut off tape, but Morse is in on this. He did something to her.”

Cragen sighed. “This is bad, Elliot. You and Morse are all but pointing fingers at one another and this thing makes it look like he’s the one telling the truth.”

“You have to believe me,” Elliot said. “I wouldn’t hurt her. I’d never do anything to hurt her.”

“If she was standing between you and the person you thought had done something to your kid, you’re telling me, you wouldn’t do anything?”

Elliot fell silent as the rhetorical question floated in the air. He was about to come up with an answer when they both heard a crash from outside the office.

They opened the door to find a circle of officers surrounding a red-faced Jonathan Hallaway.

“Where is he!” he screamed.

“You need to calm down,” Fin said among the circle of cops.

“No, you need to get off your *asses* and tell me what’s going on!” Jonathan yelled. “She’s gone on the news and I know he’s involved, so where the hell is he. I want him to tell me to my face what he did!”

“Who?”

“THE GODDAMN PARTNER! I want him!”

Elliot stepped into the squad room and made a beeline for Jonathan.

“What the hell do you want, Hallaway?” he said. “You told me that Olivia and I could kiss your ass.”

Jonathan froze for a second and then slowly turned to face Elliot. His face grew redder and simultaneously scrunched as he attempted to crash through the circle of officers in Elliot’s direction.

“You bastard! I’ll kill you!”

Several hands took hold of Jonathan, but he barely took notice. He struggled and pulled for Elliot, his eyes watery and blazing, and even after a several minutes of raging, Jonathan still screamed at Elliot from the cell to which officers had dragged him in order to help calm him.

“You just couldn’t keep your hands off her, could you? I’m calling every attorney my family has and I’m gonna take you down! You bastard! I’m gonna take you down and I’m gonna kill you myself!”

Though he was set apart from the rest of the squad room, Jonathan’s subdued shouts still echoed off the walls and suspicious looks were cast at Elliot from every direction.

“Well?” Munch said staring at Cragen. “What was on the video?”

Cragen glanced at Elliot who refused to meet his eyes. “We need to go through all the tapes we recovered from Morse’s place. There’s no telling what he’s edited to make us see what he wants us to see.”

Munch did not look convinced by Cragen’s answer. “But, what was on the disc?”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Cragen said and pulled Elliot closer to his office to whisper. “Why does Holloway think you’re involved?”

Elliot shrugged. “We’ve never really got along, and besides that, *he’s* a bastard.”

“This isn’t funny, Detective,” Cragen said.

“*Morse* is involved,” Elliot said.

“And Holloway’s the second person looking at *you* for doing something to Olivia, and that’s without him even seeing the video.” He sighed. “Just...stay in my office for a second. Regardless of what Morse *and* Holloway are saying, we need to see what Morse might’ve left out on that disc.”

Elliot walked toward Cragen’s office in a huff while he turned toward the rest of his detectives.

“We’ve thousands of hours of video to go through to see whether Morse’s story has holes or not,” he said. “Who’s gonna do the honors?”

Munch and Fin glanced at one another, yet neither moved to indicate they wanted to undertake the daunting task. Watching the inner workings of an average victim was an undesired task in itself. Viewing Olivia through the lens of a psychopath such as Morse seemed like grounds to ask for a transfer to a different department.

Realizing that neither Munch nor Fin nor any of the other detectives facing at him would be willing to take on the chore, Cragen’s eyes scoured the squad room for someone to pull.

“Brown,” he said as he turned toward a young Third Grade detective with red hair and brown eyes, who appeared heavily involved in the large map laid out on the table in front of her. “I need you for a project.”

With a bounce in her step, Alexa Brown stood at Cragen’s side a moment later and he pointed in the direction of the small room where the CSU team had set up the videos recovered from Morse’s apartment.

“I need you to go through the videos in there. They’re all of Detective Benson’s apartment, but I need you to just make as many notes as possible about what you see. Who goes in, who comes out. Times and places of anything out of the ordinary. Everything. We need notes and we need you to be thorough, but still work fast.”

Brown nodded enthusiastically. “I’m on it, sir.”

“All right,” he said turning back to Munch and Fin. “Benson’s a priority, but we need to play catch while we’re still doing recon on Morse and anyone else in her life.”

“What about Elliot?” Munch said his arms crossed. “What about the tape Morse was raving about?”

Cragen stood silent for a moment. “I’ll deal with that. Just get us caught up.”

Inside Cragen’s office, Elliot stared at the far wall slowly shaking his head.

She was fine when I left. That tape is crap. She was fine.

The video played across his thoughts, unable to be shaken and he shook his head at what he saw continuously. Grabbing her the way he had; Pushing her across her apartment; Tackling her when she tried to get away from him.

How could I have let it go so far?

Elliot did not move when Cragen came through the door behind him and continued to stare at the far wall as Cragen went behind his desk to retrieve a glossy report.

“Melinda came by last night,” he said. “They ran some of the substances found on Olivia’s rug and found that one of them was blood, specifically Olivia’s...and yours.”

Elliot sighed. “We were on the floor with all that glass...We got cut a bit. I mean, I’ve got some scratches still on my arms.”

“This is bad,” Cragen said as he sat in his chair. “Even without your blood on Olivia’s floor...the way the two of you’ve been arguing lately, the way you’ve been acting in regards to the Drover case. Before we had that tape, this was looking bad.”

“But, I didn’t hurt her.”

“Elliot, no one in this world wants to believe that more than me, but if you were just a civilian off the street, we’d have already called Casey, ready convict. Just the look of Liv’s place by the time we got there makes this look worse. Plus, we’ve got to look at this like anyone else would’ve. You went to Olivia’s apartment before CSU got there.”

“To check on her. To make sure she hadn’t fallen in the tub or something. I went to make sure she was okay.”

“But, it still could look like you had time to clean up. You refused to tell anybody what had happened until just now and now...now we’ve got this tape to deal with. We’ve convicted on less, Elliot. Far less.”

“I can’t believe this,” Elliot said, astonished that the conversation was even taking place.

“I’ve known you and Olivia for a long time, but my instincts tell me that a lot of things can happen between partners.”

“She was fine when I left. After she ‘cuffed me, she poured herself a scotch, drank it and told me she wasn’t giving up the file. She was standing in the middle of her living room when I closed the door behind me and she was perfectly fine.”

“Then, where is she, Elliot?”

“How the fuck should I know! If I knew that I wouldn’t be sitting here getting accused for doing something to her.”

“Morse’s video ends a little before 12:30. If what you’re telling me is true, then something had to’ve happened to her immediately afterward.”

“And that’s why we need to look into Morse. If he’s been taping her and stalking her and painting her picture every chance he got, *he* knows what happened to her.”

Cragen stared across the desk at his detective for a long time. Elliot’s blue eyes were laced with traces of red from lack of sleep and severe stress and pity coursed through him. He wanted to ask how Elliot could have allowed things to get so out of

control, but the question was futile, having seen Elliot explode at suspects, victims and other cops previously. If Olivia had vehemently insisted that Elliot could not have the very thing that would keep him from getting his hands on the man who had propositioned his son, a fight, even with his female partner, seemed perfectly imminent.

“Go home, Elliot,” he said after a while. “Just go home.”

“What about tomorrow?”

“You attacked your partner and regardless if that fight has anything to do with her disappearance, it’s been caught on tape. Just go home and we’ll handle it from here.”

“Am I being suspended?”

“Officially, no. But, it’s best if you let the rest of us sort this out for a while.”

Elliot sighed as he stood and he slowly marched out of the squad room, eyes from all corners watching every step he took. As the elevators closed around him, he wondered just how long the stares would linger and missed Olivia by his side more than he had ever in his life.

Chapter Eighteen

Sunday February 4, 2007

SVU Squad Room

The orange sunset blazed before Elliot, yet the sun’s rays were soft against his eyes and he had no reason to shade his eyes. He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned his head toward the woman lying in the reclined seat stuck in the sand next to him.

“But, do we know, yet?” she asked.

Elliot slowly shook his head. “We won’t know for a while?”

She sighed. “I want to know.”

“Me too.”

He reached out his hand to cover hers and she squeezed his in return.

“I love your eyelashes,” she said. “You don’t know what your eyes do to me.”

“Is that so?”

He fluttered his eyes at her playfully. Olivia laughed for a moment, but her eyes shot behind him and she gasped. Elliot turned around to see what had caused the gasp and saw the grey darkness of his Queens flat. He whirled back around and found only a cold, empty pillow beside him as he lied in his bed.

Elliot stared at the ceiling in his apartment and wondered what, if anything, the dream had meant. He had had so little sleep in the past few days, he had nearly forgotten what dreams were like. Closing his eyes, he tried to shake away the images of the dream, but the sound of her laugh seemed to reverberate throughout the room.

The clock on the nightstand next to him read several minutes after six o’clock, but Elliot chose not to move. He knew it could have read ten o’clock; he would not be leaving the bed that morning.

An unintentional sigh escaped his body as he made a final resolve to miss morning mass at his church. He had not missed mass since before he could remember, but he saw no reason to go. Even if Olivia strolled into the precinct, alive and well, nothing would be able to trump Morse’s tape and his actions the night of the thirtieth.

Cragen could manage to stall for a while, but he would still be suspended for some odd length of time until he was sent before the police commissioner...again. His career would be at a complete stand still.

Then there was Olivia. He would mostly be barred from working her case, if he was even allowed to work, but the problem remained: there was nowhere to even begin looking. As much as he wanted to push every bit of blame on Morse, he knew with a heavy heart he could not. At the moment, he viewed the painting in Morse's bedroom he knew Morse would never have hurt her. Yes, he was a sociopath, but he would never lay a hand on Olivia.

He shifted on the bed and winced as the last of his bruises ached dully on his side. The clock ticked in the distance and he could see the gentle spray of sunlight attempting to penetrate the grey clouds. He heard snow hit the window with a gust of wind and wondered if he closed his eyes and lied down again, if he would still be able to see the sunset with Olivia beside him.

When the dream did not return, Elliot sighed and left his bed to lounge on his sofa. He turned on the television for some background noise and the first thing on the local channel was a charismatic televangelist. The preacher's face had turned red from heat of his sermon and his deep, coarse voice with the hint of a southern drawl echoed his thoughts about Cain killing his brother out of sheer anger.

"We have to wonder. Wonder! Wonder what that anger was like. The kind of anger that could drive a man to murder his brother. The kind of anger that drove him directly out of God's light! And, we've all felt it! Anger against our fellow man; against our brothers and sisters in Christ. And if we don't control that anger, my brothers and sisters, we'll end up just like Cain. *Fallen* to the wayside and *fallen* out of God's light!"

He turned off the television in deep disgust and stared at the ceiling.

Where the hell could she be?

SVU Squad Room

6:09AM

Cragen glanced at his watch and suppressed a sigh, wishing he had not sent Elliot home, while his one of his higher superiors fumed at him from the telephone in his hand by firing question after question.

What's the status on Detective Benson? What's this video we're hearing about? What's this I'm hearing about a Holloway sitting in your lockup?

He managed to finesse his way through the rest of the questions and left his office to retrieve an update from Brown, when a woman with short blonde hair walked into the squad room, bearing straight for him.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

The woman glared at him for a moment before gripping her bag a little tighter and pulling herself to her full height.

"Yes. You can help me by telling me what the status is on Detective Olivia Benson."

"As you can see," Cragen said. "It's six o'clock on a Sunday morning and we've got people working the case non-stop."

"That's not good enough!" Her cheeks grew red as she stared at him. "After all she's done for this department...for this *city*, you're working on it, is not good enough."

Cragen's eyebrows furrowed. "Who...?"

"My names's Jillian Harfort and Olivia's been a dear friend of mine for as long as I can remember. She's godmother to my children for Chrissake."

"Mrs. Harfort, I'm her captain and I assure you, there is no one looking harder for her than-

"You know how I found out?" Jillian said, nearly yelling. "My son started yelling at the television when the nightly news came on. 'Mom!' he yells. 'What's Aunt Liv doing on the TV?' I didn't get a call, any notice. Nothing! No one told me that there was even the possibility that she was missing."

"Our detectives called every single person we found in relation to Olivia."

Jillian shook her head. "I got *one* call from her partner who told me that everything was fine and that she just wasn't returning phone calls. Why didn't he tell me then that she was missing? God, I went to her apartment building and there's tape all over the door. I went to see Maya and she's delirious with grief and all the while, she's gone and no one knows anything! How can this be?"

"Mrs. Harfort," Cragen said taking a calm step toward her. "Every officer available is working on trying to find Olivia. Now unless you've got something new to give, please go home and let us do our jobs."

"I don't see *him* around here. How can *everyone* be working on her case when he's not even here?"

"Detective Stabler has been up for days looking for Olivia. I sent him home to get some rest."

As he stared into Jillian's bright blue eyes, he immediately regretted the lie. It was akin to the one told to her by Elliot when it first seemed that Olivia was missing and eventually this one would warrant Jillian storming back into the precinct after new information emerged.

"The last time I spoke to her, she was contemplating leaving this unit...because of him."

"This is the first I've heard of it."

"Well, I'm sure Olivia doesn't confess to you how things are going between her and her partner." Jillian's voice held a growing arrogance that made the lines in Cragen's forehead deepen. "She told me. She was wanting to leave because of how things were with him."

"How is this significant?"

"Because she's gone and all of sudden he's not here. Has anyone asked *him* what's happened to her?"

"I don't like what you're suggesting."

"I don't care if you don't like it," Jillian hissed. "If Olivia and her partner were fighting non-stop and all of a sudden she's vanished without a trace, *everyone* should be a suspect."

"Nothing gives you the right to traipse into my squad room and make unwarranted accusations. Now, if there's something substantial that you know might help

us find Olivia faster, by all means, let us know. Otherwise, just go home and give us some time to do our jobs.”

“Look,” Jillian said crossing her arms. “If there’s a call list or whatever, I want to be on it. I want to know what happened to her and I don’t want to hear some watered down version from the news. I want to hear it directly from *you*.”

“We have your information,” he said. “The minute we have any word, we’ll let you know. You just have to give us some time.”

“How much time is ‘some time?’ Christ, it’s been five days. She’s the detective who helped bring down that psycho strangler and no one can get a move on *her* case. What’s it going to take?”

Unable to come up with anything else, Cragen repeated himself. “Just give us some time. We’re *going* to find her.”

Jillian shook her head at him and turned on her heel to storm out of the squad room. As she left, Cragen glanced toward the interrogation room where Morse was still being held and then toward the corridor where he knew Jonathan Halloway sat in a cell. Jillian made three completely unconnected people who made reference to Elliot having some kind of involvement in Olivia’s disappearance. The best friend, the boyfriend and the stalker; all three would presumably know Olivia well and all three had hinted toward Elliot.

He sighed as he watched Fin crossing the squad room in his direction. After realizing that Munch would most likely throttle Morse after another word in the interrogation room, Cragen had him work on the newest rape case that had fallen to the precinct while Fin continued working on Morse.

“This kid’s got problems,” Fin said.

“What else is new? Has he said anything else about what might’ve happened to Olivia?”

Fin shook his head. “No. It’s scary though, Cap. I mean...it’s like he worships her or something. Every part of his day is spent thinking about her and ways that he can follow her without her knowing it.”

“Is he giving up this stuff?”

“Yeah, completely voluntary. Like he’s glad to get it off his chest, but still...I mean, he’s talking about dressin’ in drag and in wigs so that Olivia wouldn’t recognize him. He’s put too much thought into all this.”

“Have you seen the tape yet?”

“No. What’s on it?”

“I’ll spare you the gory details, but it shows Elliot and Olivia arguing and him attacking her just before the tape goes out.

“Attacking her how?”

“Had her in a headlock on the floor.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Last thing Liv told me was that they’d all but made up.”

“From what?”

“Last Saturday, Liv told me she and Elliot nearly came to blows because she helped his daughter get birth control.”

“And this is the first time you’re mentioning this!”

“What’s it matter? It’s Elliot. They almost threw down. *Almost*, and they were fine come Monday.”

“That was before Drover tried to pull something on Elliot’s kid.

Fin shook his head again. “Just don’t make any sense.”

“Another one of Liv’s friends just came in this morning...She hinted that she thought Elliot might be involved too.”

“Aw, c’mon!” Fin said.

“We have to look into it. Especially given what’s on that video.”

He did not want outsiders who were not privy to what he knew to leap to assumptions about Elliot, but Cragen knew the facts had to be considered.

Fin rubbed his forehead. “You haven’t been talking to this guy all night. He’s literally, crazy for Liv and the way he talks about her, he was probably threatened just by seeing Elliot.”

“That would make sense,” Cragen said. “Except that he’s got a choice of a slew of people to focus on.”

“Cap, think back to when you were Second Grade. How much time did you spend with your partner? He didn’t need to focus on anybody else because Elliot’s with her all the time.”

“I want to talk to him again,” Cragen said after a moment’s pause. “I want him to tell us specifically why he’d look at Elliot instead of Halloway or anyone else for this.”

The shrill cry of Elliot’s phone barely caused his eyes to flicker at the interruption. In the past hour, he had switched from staring at the ceiling above his couch to staring at the ceiling above his bed and back to the couch again.

“Yes,” he said in a low voice.

“El, it’s me,” Kathy said from the other end of the phone.

“Hi, Kath,” he replied in a tone so subdued and rasping it was barely audible.

“I saw the news yesterday.” Her voice was hushed, though Elliot doubted it was in response to his own.

He remained silent, not sure what she expected him to say and she continued.

“None of the kids saw. They were all out...out of the house. Just like normal.”

“Yeah...”

“Are *you* okay?”

“Kathy, my partner’s missing and we don’t have the slightest idea what happened to her.”

“I know. Is there...” Her voice trailed and he knew she wanted to ask if there was anything that she could do, but thought better of it. There was nothing that could be done.

“I just,” she continued. “I didn’t know whether or not I should call, but I just wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“I’m fine, Kath.”

“No, you’re not, Elliot,” she said, this time, her voice almost a whisper. “I know you. You’re at home instead of at the precinct which means they sent you home because you probably haven’t slept in three days.”

“Four.”

“And, you’re probably lying down, staring at the ceiling counting down the second before you can go back and look for her.”

Elliot sighed deeply into the phone.

“Come to mass this morning with us, El. We’ll all be together, we’ll light a candle, we’ll talk to Father-”

“Kathy, I don’t think I’m in the mood for it today.”

It was her turn to sigh. “Elliot...if Olivia is missing, what better time can you think of to lean on your faith?”

He lied on his couch silent, his mouth gaping slightly as he tried to think of a retort. None came.

“Elliot, just come. I mean, I’ll do my best to keep the kids from hearing about it, but they’ll find out eventually and they’ll worry about you. And about her. At least come to be with them for the morning.”

“All right,” he said. “I’ll meet you there, but I don’t want to talk about it. If the kids find out, they find out, but I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay. Well, we’ll see you there?”

“Yeah. See you in a bit.”

Elliot turned to sit up on the couch and put his head in his hands.

She’s right, he thought.

Olivia had been gone for, now, five days and he was quickly spiraling into a depression. His faith was probably going to be the only thing to hold him together if they were unable to find her.

“Morning, Gents,” Morse said brightly though his small eyes showed the beginnings of murk from lack of sleep. “When’s our friendly detective getting his cuffs?”

“You know what I think, Morse,” Cragen said, as he and Fin entered Morse’s interrogation room. “I’m thinking that someone’s doing a great frame up job on Elliot and someone like you would be the perfect guy to do it.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Someone with limitless means and time to set all this up.”

“First of all...No, screw that. I had nothing to do with this, and regardless of what you *think*, I didn’t fake that tape. I notice he didn’t come barging in here screaming that I framed him or something after you watched the tape. He attacked her and you’re all just wasting time because he’s a cop. If I showed you a tape of an old boyfriend or just a friend, you people would be packing eighteen in a car just to get as many cops as possible to take him down. But, since he’s one yours...”

“And her partner.”

“So,” Morse said. “Cops kill one another all the time.”

“Only in the movies,” Fin said.

“Well, movies or not, *that* movie shows what happened to Olivia and in case you’d forgotten, it’s getting awfully close to eight o’clock.”

“Your tape doesn’t show dick!” Cragen yelled. “It cuts off halfway through. Who knows what happened between the time they’d stopped fighting and the time she went missing. You’ve got nothing!”

Morse laughed. "I didn't need to see how that fight ended because I already know what he's capable of. And, you do too. You'll keep it under wraps because he's your detective and your friend, but it's all out there."

"What's out there?" Fin asked.

"Like the fact that he pummeled a guy nearly to death in a bathroom stall a year ago or that he attacked another cop right in this very precinct a while back. If you know what you're doing, the world is your oyster."

"You're full of shit," Cragen said standing from the table.

"Am I?" Morse said quickly. "Last Friday, the good detective swung by her apartment to pull this same thing. Raving about something on his daughter. If you'd've seen the way he looked at her that night, you wouldn't be so ready to stand at his defense. She was all but cowering at the sight of him and he looked like he was ready to rip her apart."

Cragen and Fin glanced at one another, but both remained silent.

"And all that doesn't matter anyway," Morse continued. "When I saw that I'd run out of space that night, I set up another drive and *then*, I found out that she was gone. Roll back the videos. I know you took them all. Watch them. You'll see. There's just six minutes between the time I ran out of space and the time I set up the next drive. Six minutes between the second he's got her in a headlock and the moment I look up and see she's no where to be found."

Cragen stood immediately and Fin followed him as he all but raced out of the room.

"Where are you in all this?" he asked Alexa when he stepped into the small room CSU had set up with the videos.

Alexa looked startled for a moment and it took Cragen another moment to see that George had joined her scrutinizing of the videos.

"We were starting at the beginning of January," she said. "It's...it's kind of frightening. He managed to tail her so well. There's even a couple times when he managed to come right up to the precinct. He was even standing with her in the elevator up here."

"With a full camera?" Cragen said.

"Probably a small one he had hidden on him somewhere," George said. "There's something significant about all these, though. We've gone through days of tape and they're all edited."

"Edited how?" Fin asked arms crossed.

"Edited," George repeated. "Any time it looked like he was invading her personal space too much, the video cuts and jumps in time."

"I'm not following," Cragen said.

"Like this one," Alexa said, pointing to the screen in front of her. "She just changed into pajamas here and this camera's set on her bedroom. But, if we roll back a few minutes...she's back in street clothes. It's like he was too embarrassed or something to see her without her clothes on."

"Which is what he's been proclaiming from the beginning," George added. "He repeated it more than a dozen times: stalkers are looking at their victims with some kind of sexual gratification in the process. He only wanted to watch her."

"Is that supposed to be some kind of comfort?" Cragen spat. "He still managed to hook cameras up throughout her house and spy on her for years."

George shrugged and Cragen, exhausted from days of arguing about the situation, continued. "Pull the tapes from the thirtieth and the thirty-first. Go to the very end of the video. I want to make sure that Morse isn't just trying to pull something else on us."

Alexa worked quickly to bring up the desired video and all four watched, mesmerized as Elliot and Olivia fought on the screen as the video clock clicked closer to twelve-thirty.

"That's the end," Alexa said.

"What time was that?" Cragen said.

"Twelve twenty-six."

"Pull up the next video."

"It's just of her empty apartment," Alexa said a moment later as she watched the video, but Cragen was already shaking his head at the screen.

"It's six minutes later," Fin said. "Just like the bastard said."

"Why's six minutes significant?" Alexa asked.

Cragen sighed. "Because it means that only six minutes passed from the time the first tape ends with Elliot tackling Olivia to the time when there's no one in her apartment. Just six."

"Wait a minute," Alexa said. "You...you actually think Stabler's involved?" Cragen stood silent, but she scoffed. "No way. I mean there's just no way. I've been watching these videos and I'm telling you, there's no way."

"Have you seen something on there that suggests what happened to her?"

"No...but, I *have* seen Elliot in her apartment after she's gone. Look."

Alexa forwarded the video on the screen to show a far more bruised Elliot looking over the disastrous expanse of Olivia's apartment.

"Look at the concern on his face. He's worried about where she is. He checks her bedroom, checks her bathroom...peeks out the fire escape. He even notices her keys on the hook. It's right there on the tape and there's no way he could've known he was being watched."

The knot in Cragen's stomach eased slightly. Alexa's words were comforting even with the small gap in which Olivia had seemingly disappeared. On the screen, Elliot was not seen cleaning up anything or removing anything from the apartment other than what he said he had. If he was not behaving the least bit guilty in the crucial hours after Olivia had gone missing, there was a strong possibility he was not involved in the disappearance at all.

"What about last week?" he said glancing at Fin. "I want to know what happened on Friday."

Alexa moved quickly about the small station and queued up the videos for Thursday night and Friday morning.

At first the screen before them showed only Olivia's empty apartment, yet the single video seemed to cut from one angle to another as Alexa scanned through the video.

"They do that a lot," she said sensing the others were about to inquire about the different angle. "That's another way we figured out that these have been angled. They usually stop going from angle to angle when she gets the apartment."

As the words left Alexa's mouth, Olivia came through her door on the screen. Alexa slowed the video as Olivia's leg hit her end table and they watched as Olivia stumbled a few times before falling onto her couch.

After she took one phone call and fell asleep on the sofa, Cragen felt his stomach turn as the camera changed once more, this time into what looked like a hand held in camera from Morse's own apartment. Morse could be heard rustling and giving the occasional cough from somewhere behind the camera and Morse zoomed on Olivia's sleeping form, wrapped in her blanket, by hand.

Cragen was about to ask Alexa to forward through the rest of the night and into the next day, when Olivia's head popped up from her pillow and her hand reached for the cell phone on her coffee table. He grew concerned from Olivia's look of unease as she spoke into the phone and took a step toward the screen.

"Do we know who she's talking to?" he asked.

"We have a pretty good idea," Alexa said.

"How? Who the hell is it?"

"I think it's Jeffrey Drover... He's on this a little later."

Feeling his eyebrows furrow, Cragen crossed his arms and continued watching the video as Olivia put on her coat and leave her apartment.

The camera zoomed out to show the rest of the apartment and then focused on the building's front door, out of which Olivia nearly tripped as she appeared on the street. Morse's camera followed her as she shivered in the cold and just as she got to the alley between hers and the neighboring building, all those present saw a flash of hands snatch Olivia toward the alley, her cell phone falling to ground as she was pulled from it.

"What the hell?" Fin said.

"It's Drover," Cragen said, softly. "This must be the night he attacked her."

"But, I didn't know it went down like this," Fin hissed as Morse's camera focuses on the alley and Drover could be clearly seen pinning Olivia against the building.

Cragen opened his mouth to tell Fin that even when Olivia admitted what had happened with Drover, she still left out the specifics, however all his attention returned to the screen.

Morse had zoomed even closer into the alley and the white of Drover's hand was just barely seen on Olivia's thigh. The camera faltered for a moment and after some rustling, looked like it had been set back in its stand where they could make out Olivia and Drover's shadows in the alley.

A door slammed faintly behind the camera and as it looked like Drover was beginning to release Olivia less than a minute later, Morse's blond form was tearing down the street towards the alley.

"That's just crazy," Fin said several minutes later, while Olivia slumped into a tearful form near her door. "I mean, Morse..."

Cragen nodded in his direction and Alexa, who had already watched the video, skimmed through the rest of the night and into the next day for them to see Olivia argue with Jonathan Holloway.

"Slow down," Cragen said.

They watched the Olivia on the screen turn colours as she screamed back at Jonathan and as he voiced something to her just above a whisper, she crossed the room and slapped him across the face, causing Alexa to jump in her seat.

"I thought you already watched this?" Cragen said. "Why are you so jumpy?"

"I did, but it's just as bad the second time around as it was the first. I mean...she slapped a Halloway. *A Halloway*..."

The video continued and by the time Elliot appeared in the apartment, Cragen could feel the same anger that spurred when he watched Morse's first video return to him. As strong as she was normally, Olivia looked like a complete wreck and he crossed his arms again as he wondered why Elliot could not see how fragile she was as slowly backed across the apartment under Elliot's tone and glares. He gave an unintentional sigh, however, when Elliot snatched away from Olivia and simply left the apartment without another word.

"Wasn't as bad as I thought," he said.

"What did you think had happened?" George asked, his eyes showing fingers of red against the dark brown.

"Morse made it seem like Elliot first attacked her here, but I don't see any evidence of that, which makes me wonder about whether or not he's for real."

"His running out to Olivia's rescue on that tape is pretty real," George said. "Drover's twice his size and could've seen that from his window, but he went to her aid anyway."

"I'm not saying his *wonderful* feelings aren't genuine," Cragen said. "I just think he's leading us down the wrong road for specific reason."

"Still, though," Alexa said shaking her head at the screen. "...a Halloway."

"You think he's into something?" Fin said.

Alexa shrugged. "There's no way to know what he might've done...especially after getting slapped like that. That family walks around like they're plated in gold. It probably did something to his ego for damn sure."

"Let's hear it from him," Cragen said as he turned to leave.

"Halloway," he said curtly several minutes later as he stood before Jonathan's resting form in the holding cell.

He looked weathered and subdued from having screamed through the most of the night.

Jonathan slowly turned his head toward Cragen and Fin. "It's about time you people came to let me out."

"You're not going anywhere," Cragen said.

"Look," Jonathan said standing. "Up to now, I've been nice. I've sat quietly waiting for you to pull your heads out of your collective asses to figure out what's going and now I'm sick of it. Now, when the hell am I getting out of here and when's her partner being arrested?"

"You should be asking questions about your own arrest," Fin said.

"You can't just hold me unlawfully."

"You attacked an officer," Cragen said. "Several of them."

"Oh, that's bull."

"A room full of us saw it."

"Yeah, a room full of cops just trying to railroad me because of my family. You people can't do this to me."

Cragen was quickly losing his patience. "You know, Olivia's one of these 'you people' you keep referring to, and if you're involved-"

“Involved in what!” he shouted stepping directly to the bars.

“With her disappearance!” Cragen yelled. “We just watched a tape of you screaming at her then storming off when she threw you out of her apartment. I want to know when you last talked to her.”

Jonathan took a step backward. “Tape? What tape?”

“Some guy across the way from her has been videotaping her.”

“The guy across the hall?” he asked slightly calmer.

“No, the building across the street,” Cragen said. “What’s special about the guy across the hall?”

“He’s just weird...” Jonathan shook his head. “This is great. This is *great*! There’s a psycho taping her from across the street and you people are here asking *me* if I’m involved. If I had any idea that the NYPD was this inept, I would’ve demanded that Olivia switch careers.”

“And, I’m sure she would’ve told you where you could shove that demand,” Fin said.

“Why hasn’t this guy been arrested?”

“Because we don’t have anything to hold him on.”

“You’ve got to be kidding?”

“No,” Cragen said. “Now, Olivia’s apartment was locked from the outside. And, it doesn’t appear that the other guy had a key, but we know *you* do.”

“And, this is what makes you think I did something to her?”

“Where’s the set she gave you?” Fin asked.

“In my pocket,” he said, fishing them out of his pants pocket. “You people were so quick to throw me in here, you didn’t even bother to frisk me.”

Cragen took the keys and then opened the cell. “Let’s go. Third door on your right.”

“You’re interrogating *me* now?”

“Yes,” Cragen said. “We’re interrogating *you*.”

“No way in hell. I’m calling my lawyers.”

“Fine,” Cragen said. “Call out Daddy and Grandpa’s lawyers. Meanwhile, we sit and wait to get your side of the story before we can move on and that can be minutes... hours wasted as we’re trying to find her.”

“I don’t need my father’s lawyers.” Jonathan glared at him, but brushed past him and headed towards the room. “This is absolutely ridiculous, but let’s get this over with.”

“What’s been going with you and Liv?” Fin asked as they all sat at the single table in the room.

“*This* is what you want to know?”

“It’s relevant,” Cragen said. “So, you can drop the attitude. We work with Olivia and we know she’s like when she’s talking to you. Half the time it sounds like you’re fighting.”

Jonathan shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I didn’t love her.”

“So,” Fin said, “you probably got a little pissed that someone you loved spent all her time on the job, surrounded by other men.”

“Didn’t bother me,” he said and Fin and Cragen glanced at one another.

“C’mon,” Cragen said. “There’s a lot of cops who work out every day and have had their eyes on Olivia since she first walked through the door.”

“You’re trying to bait me, but it’s not working.”

“No one’s trying to bait you,” Fin said. “We’re just making an observation. You say you’re not bothered by Olivia being around a bunch of cops all day, and I want to believe you, but *you’re* never here. You don’t see how many times a day she gets hit on...by people who already know she’s with a pretty boy, rich kid like you.”

Cragen moved his chair closer to Jonathan who was now silently shaking his head at the table. “We all know what it’s like. Who wouldn’t want their woman at home barefoot and pregnant? Yours was running around like a man as a cop and calling *you* telling *you* that *she* can’t make it to dinner. It’s ridiculous. *She* should’ve been the one making dinner for *you*.”

“No, that’s bullshit because I’m not like that. I love that Liv has a job she loves and until last week, every time someone mentioned the cops, I’d get happy because I was with one. I’m not like that.”

“And all this time,” Cragen continued knowing he had hit a nerve. “She spends nearly every part of her day with a tall, muscular guy, who...well, we’ve all seen the looks and we’ve all heard the rumors.”

“*Look*,” Jonathan said, nearly yelling. “I don’t know where she is, but if there’s anybody who does, it’s him. So, why don’t you people quit running these games on me and find her!”

“Everything’s pointing at you,” Fin said. “The jealous boyfriend.”

“Jealous of who!” Jonathan yelled. “Her partner? Oh, screw that! There’s no way in hell, I’m jealous of anybody, especially him!”

“You came in here raving that Elliot must’ve done something to her,” Cragen said. “The moment you saw him, you were throwing threats and you were ready to jump. All you knew was Olivia was missing and the first person who looked to was Elliot. Why?”

Jonathan pursed his lips and shook his head.

“C’mon,” Fin said. “You say you weren’t jealous of him, so what’s the deal, then?”

A moment of silence passed over the room and finally Jonathan spoke in a low, punctuated voice. “You don’t understand...I only saw her, like, two or three times a week and the first thing out of her mouth was something about him.”

“They spent a lot of time together,” Cragen said with a sarcastic undertone caught only by Fin.

“I know. And every time I saw him, he was always...standing too close to her or looking at her...” Jonathan sighed and pushed away from the table. “You know, this doesn’t even matter. If you don’t think her partner’s involved, what are you people doing to find her?”

Cragen and Fin looked at one another, unable to provide an immediate answer. With not even the slightest vestige of a suspect, they were out of leads on the case and Morse’s possible video was hanging over their heads as eight o’clock ticked nearer and nearer.

“You don’t have anything...do you!” Jonathan yelled with his face was suddenly streaked with tears. “How can you sit there like that? Why aren’t you even remotely upset!”

Cragen stood. "If there's anyone upset about Olivia's disappearance, it's the cops in this unit. We've worked side by side with her *years* and we know and care about more than you ever could. You're free to leave, now. We won't be any assault charges, as long as you behave yourself."

"I'm not leaving!" Jonathan shouted as he stood. "I want to be here, watching over your shoulder while you dick around instead of giving everything to find her!"

Without answering, Cragen turned to leave and Jonathan flipped the table to cross the room in half a step. He had both arms around Cragen a moment later and Fin jumped toward the pair to pry Jonathan off of the captain. By the time Cragen regained his footing, Fin had handcuffed and wrestled a screaming Jonathan to the ground.

"Now..." Cragen said out of breath. "Now, we *are* pressing charges. Take him back to the cell."

Fin dragged Jonathan down the corridor toward the holding cell, his prisoner yelling every step of the way.

Cragen stared at the clock on the far wall as he walked pass Morse's interrogation room. He stepped inside a moment and saw Morse with his forehead pressed directly onto the glass and wearing the largest grin Cragen had ever seen. He sighed, leaving the room and walking toward his office to arrange his phone properly, resigning to the fact that he would most likely be spending the majority of the day on the phone once Morse's video hit the Internet.

He pulled out the cot that stood in the corner of his office and managed to sleep until pounding on the door roused him.

"Yes?" he said softly to the tall, thin black man holding a briefcase in his doorway.

"Captain Cragen," the man said shaking hands with Cragen. "Reginald Torvant. I am lead council for Mr. Jonathan Holloway."

"*Lead* council," Cragen said sardonically. "I expected you to be here earlier."

"We'll get to that later. Right now, I want to know why my client is still sitting in one of your holding cells."

"He attacked multiple officers."

"Then, he should have been charged and arraigned, but instead I received a trickle-down phone call from one of his secretaries who eventually notified me that he was here. What can we do to get Mr. Holloway out of that cell as soon as possible?"

"Fine. He's been a pain in the ass since he walked off the elevators."

"No," Jonathan said in the cell a few minutes later. "I'm not leaving."

"Jonathan," Torvant said. "We can't just leave you in this holding cell."

"No," he repeated. "I don't want to be arraigned because I want to stay right here."

Cragen sighed. "You can't stay here. Your attorney's here to take you back to your palace."

"I want to stay!" Jonathan yelled. "If I'm here, I see everything their doing, or not doing about Olivia. I *don't* want to leave."

Torvant gave Cragen an exasperated look and pulled him away from the cell.

"What can we do?" he asked.

"Nothing," Cragen said. "You can take your client and you can go."

"Why don't you just do us all a favor and drop these charges?"

“He attacked me and he attacked other officers. We can’t just let it go.”

“He’s emotionally distraught. All he talks about for the past year is this girl and now she’s missing. Now, we’ve all been there and we can all sympathize. What can you do for us?”

“I don’t care what you do with him, but he’s not staying here. I’ll drop the charges, but you do whatever you can to keep him away from here and away from my detectives.”

“Done,” Torvant said and turned back to Jonathan as Cragen opened the cell. “Jonathan, we’re going.”

“I’m not leaving,” Jonathan said. “Not until I know they’ve got something on Olivia.”

“They know who you are and what you want,” Torvant said in a very pacifying voice. “They’ll notify you if they get any word on her.”

Jonathan glared at Cragen for a full minute before striding out of the cell. “Today, I *am* calling my father and grandfather, and I’ll be sure to let them know how poorly this case is being handled. I want results, *Captain*.”

Before Cragen could respond, Jonathan had brushed past him and was walking toward the elevators. Torvant gave Cragen a sympathetic glance and followed.

As the doors closed on Jonathan and his attorney, Cragen walked back to his office thinking about Morse and wondering whether or not the threat was real. The moment he sat down on his desk, with Morse’s name readily on his mind, the telephone on his desk sprang to life with his superior, Deputy Inspector Felton, on the other line.

“This should be handled by Missing Persons,” Felton reiterated. “They at least need to be leading the case.”

“Not a chance,” Cragen said. “She’s my detective and we’re all taking her case.”

“Don, I understand that SVU has concerns over their detective, but you still have a job to do.”

“She’s been missing for almost six days,” Cragen said. “And, we have reason to suspect foul play. I can’t believe you’re even entertaining the possibility of SVU pulling off her case.”

“You’re all too close to the situation and I think it should be handled by a different—”

“This is ludicrous,” Cragen said nearly shouting. “Our detective is missing and you’re telling us to pull off.”

Felton sighed. “We recovered the CSU team’s report. It shows that Detective Stabler’s blood is on the floor of her apartment.”

Cragen paused. “He gave an explanation for that.”

“And, I’m sure he did, but this report was drafted two days ago and it’s just now surfaced. I’m also sure I don’t have to tell you that withholding this information is the kind of violation that breaks careers and cuts pensions.” Cragen opened his mouth to retort, Felton continued. “Now, considering the severity of what’s in the report, I’d rather the media not get a hold of this information until we can get a thorough, independent investigation conducted.”

“We don’t need an *independent* investigation,” Cragen said. “I kept that under wraps because I have faith in my detective and I didn’t want that blown out of proportion by the media. We don’t need Missing Persons.”

“Well, I’m telling you, you do,” Felton said now raising his voice. “I’ve also been called about a video that’s been circulating the Internet. Computer Crimes brought it to my attention this morning....Don, the goddamn video shows Stabler...attacking her over the course of several minutes before it goes to snow and tells the viewer that they can make up their minds over what happened.”

Cragen sat speechless, unable to move.

“And,” Felton continued. “I heard it on a good authority that you could’ve stopped this video from leaking.”

“The guy who brought that tape to our attention is certifiable, Inspector. He’s still here and he’s about three cards short of a full deck, if you know what I mean. We had no reason to believe that he was reliable.”

“Regardless,” Felton snapped. “I don’t want Elliot Stabler anywhere near this case while the investigation continues. And, I’m *telling* you, Missing Persons will be let into the investigation. I’m already up to my ass with calls with this and I am at the very least displeased by the mistakes SVU has made in your own detective’s case. And, Don, nothing relieves captains of their command faster than the botched investigations of fellow officers.”

Felton ended the call, leaving Cragen alone to allow the words to float in the air around him.

“Cap,” Fin said sticking his head into the office minutes later. “Casey and the Morse family attorney are here.”

Cragen sighed and straightened his suspenders a bit before following Fin out the door.

“Gentlemen,” a broad, pale man with black eyes said as Cragen and Fin approached the interrogation room where Morse had been held. “My name is Chalse Greyson and I’m here to take Mr. Morse home to his family.”

Cragen scoffed and glanced at Casey. “Like hell you are. He’s in it as deep as anyone can get. If anything he’s headed for a cell at Rikers.”

“For what?” Greyson said with a haughty air to his voice. “Some alleged peeping? Nonsense.”

“Peeping?” Casey said, indignant. “He’s got years of videos of the woman across the way from him. He’s *looking* at a lot more than just peeping.”

“Regardless of that,” Greyson continued, “Mr. Morse is ill and needs his rest.”

“He seems just fine to me,” Cragen said. “We’ve fed him any time he says he’s hungry and he doesn’t seem to want to sleep or leave.”

He intentionally left out the idea that they all knew Morse was their only key to finding Olivia to keep Greyson from trying to buy some leverage. We’re charging him with a bare minimum of voyeurism, which he’s already admitted to.”

Greyson laughed. “It’s a frivolous charge and we all know it won’t stand.”

“But stalking is still a crime,” Casey said. “We’ve got evidence that he’s been doing it for a while. Morse was also spying on the everyday actions of a police officer, which in this day and age can be seen as conspiracy and terrorism.”

“Young lady, you’re dreaming,” Greyson said. “If you think you can pass that off on any judge who isn’t on his third brandy of the night, you might be in the wrong profession. Now, I’ll collect Mr. Morse so that he can be arraigned and brought home to his family since you people have nearly destroyed his apartment.”

"Now, *you're* dreaming if you think he's going to be arraigned today," Cragen said. "He's going to have to sit in a cell with all the other common criminals until Monday."

Greyson grinned at the captain. "My dear captain. You're not speaking to some two-bit legal aid attorney who's defending some miscreant who couldn't drum up two nickels for council. I've been keeping the Morse's out of trouble since before you could even spell attorney and the benefit of that is knowing people in high places. Mr. Morse will be arraigned today, and the sooner I can get to him, the sooner we can leave this retched place."

Cragen, Fin and Casey glanced at one another as Greyson stood with an arrogant smile on his face. Fin lead the way into the interrogation room and they found Morse huddled in the corner with his knees pulled to his chest.

"Harry?" Greyson said. "It's Mr. Morse. I'm here to take you out of here."

Morse shook his head repeatedly and he rocked in the corner. "Doesn't matter. Doesn't matter at all now. I haven't seen her in days and she's gone and he's killed her and now I've got nothing. What am I gonna do?"

"You're going to get up from there," Greyson said as if speaking to a small child, "and you're going to come with me. You're not going to spend another minute in this place."

"She's gone," Morse repeated, still rocking. "What am I gonna do? He's killed her and she's gone. How'm I supposed to go on?"

Greyson turned toward the others. "Well, I think this sounds like the ramblings of someone who isn't quite well." He turned back to Morse. "Come Harry. We're leaving right now."

Morse put his head in his hands and rocked three times before rising quickly and followed Greyson out of the room.

"Think you'll get remand?" Fin asked Casey as the elevator doors closed on Morse and Greyson.

Casey shook her head. "Not a chance. I'll be lucky if I can get any bail at all, but at least this way there's a formal charge on him and we get a look at anything related to Morse or any of his relatives. If he's done something to Olivia, we'll know about it."

"What about his crazy act just now?" Cragen asked. "I'll admit he's been deteriorating all weekend, but this is the worse I've seen him."

"There's no way to know. It might not be an act. Didn't Elliot find that he was holed up in Bellevue last August?"

Cragen nodded, but his eyes noticeably fell to the floor.

"And speaking of Elliot," Casey continued. "I was able to catch a glimpse of that video today... Tell me this isn't as bad as it looks."

"It's worse," Fin said.

"But, he had an explanation, didn't he?" Casey asked her eyes reflecting the severe exasperation her voice would not betray.

"Just that the video doesn't show him leaving and her in the apartment perfectly fine. So, we're left with either taking Morse's video at face value or taking Elliot at his word, which troubles me because it makes it look like we're jumping through extra hoops for him when we all know if he was just a guy off the street we'd've been ready to convict Friday night."

She ran a hand through her hair and shook her head. "Well...just keep me posted."

"Yeah" was all Cragen could utter as he walked back to his office to contemplate both the possible burial of one of his detectives and the murder conviction of another.

When Elliot first stepped into his apartment after spending the morning with his family, he felt fresh, rejuvenated and ready to tackle anything, yet the moment he entered his bathroom and faced the harsh bathroom light, the mild happiness seemed sapped from him and depression overwhelmed once again.

Lying on his couch, with "Lately" playing softly on his radio in the background, Elliot racked his brain for anything that might give some kind of insight on who could have taken her.

If it was Morse, he would've cracked by now. There was no telling if Jonathan had anything to do with it. That smug bastard had the means to pull off something like this just because she bruised his ego... What was I thinking? I didn't know I could even get that angry. How could I've done that? She was my partner. No. She is my partner.

As Morse's video played through his head again and again, Elliot wondered if Cragen and the others had made up their minds about him. While Fin still seemed undecided, Cragen and Munch looked like they believed Elliot had probably killed her and buried her in the basement, and since he had been demanded off of Olivia's case, he held no recourse to clear himself.

He felt a burn worse than ever in his stomach, but could think of nothing to stem the pain. Had this been occurring at any other time, with any other person, at the very least, he knew he would have Olivia by his side to commiserate. Now, however, he had no one.

The telephone rang behind but he allowed it to ring into his voicemail. After it rang for the third time in four minutes, he groaned and reached to answer it.

"Yes," he said solemnly.

"Elliot? It's me."

"Diana...How've you...uh...how've you been?"

She sighed on the other end of the phone. "Fine, I guess. But, I was more worried about you. I saw on the news a woman from Special Victims is missing and I wondered if it was your partner."

"It was."

"Elliot, I..." She paused and Elliot put a hand to his forehead wanting nothing more than to hang up on her. "I don't know what to say. I mean...do you know anything? Is there anyone to talk to?"

"If there was, we'd already be talking to them."

"Oh...well, um..."

"What do you want Diana?" He had not meant it to come across so harshly, but the pain in his stomach and increasing ache in his temples had robbed him of what little patience he held.

"I just...I just wanted to know if you needed someone. Someone to maybe alibi you."

“Alibi me? For what?”

She sighed again. “Elliot...there’s this video. My son told me about it. He’s always wasting time on those video-sharing websites and I keep telling him-”

“What about the video?”

“Well,” she said after a minute’s silence. “It’s of you...and your partner. You’re fighting and it makes it seem like you did something to her. So, I wanted to tell you if you needed an alibi or something...I’m here.”

Elliot sat silent for a moment not sure of where to begin, shocked that Morse had been serious about the video.

“Elliot? Are you still there?”

“I’m here...Diana, I don’t need an alibi.”

“Elliot, I know you want to push people away, but now is not the time to do this.”

“No, you don’t understand. I didn’t do anything to her. We knew about that video and I’ve already explained everything to my captain.”

“But, I don’t think you’ve sat down watched this thing, Elliot. It makes it look like you killed her and it was caught on camera. And, now she’s missing. You need an alibi to keep you out of trouble.”

“Diana, I already told you I don’t need an alibi. I didn’t do anything...”

He wanted to say that he had not done anything wrong, but he could not force the lie. If putting his hands on a woman was not wrong, he did not know what was.

“If you don’t need an alibi, how come you’re home instead at the precinct trying to find out where she is?”

“Diana...”

“I know, I know. You don’t need an alibi...yet. Just, please...*please*, come to me.”

“Diana, I wouldn’t be able to talk to you about the case.”

“It doesn’t matter. I just want to help you.”

Elliot sighed, frustration with the conversation from its start. “I’m fine, Diana. I don’t need an alibi and I’ll be fine. But...thanks for calling to see how I was.”

“Okay,” she said quickly. “I guess, I’ll just talk to you later?”

“Yeah.”

He hung up the phone without waiting to hear if she had anything else to say. Sunlight peered through the blinds, highlighting his eyes and wondered how little it might take to throw him into a complete depression.

Instead of lying on the couch to wallow in depths of his own sorrows, Elliot grabbed his keys and coat and headed for the door, knowing that only the long drive to Bryce’s could raise his spirits at this point.

“No, that doesn’t really help us, Mrs. Owens, but thanks for calling.”

Munch took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. He had tried to sleep into the morning, but only tossed and turned in his bed. Deciding instead to make himself useful by taking calls on Olivia’s case, he realized he had made a mistake after the second call.

Aside from the crazies who just wanted a chance to contact the police, the perverts who wanted to know Olivia's phone number in case they found her and the seemingly distant Benson relatives who were now calling in from all over the country, Munch could only sigh after his last call with an elderly woman who claimed that Olivia looked identical to her daughter who had died years earlier.

"Don, go home," he said to Cragen as he came out of his office looking like he spent the night awake in the precinct.

"There's no point. I can't sleep when I'm getting calls every other second. How are the phones?"

"Absolutely nothing, but Liv will be happy to know that she's apparently got six cousins, three aunts and a grandmother scattered around the country."

Cragen crossed his arms. "There might be. You know her history."

"No," Munch said shaking his head with a sleepy grin on his face. "These are all Bensons. Just crazies trying to get their fifteen minutes. I noticed Holloway's gone. When'd you cut him loose?"

"When his lawyer showed up, but after he jumped me when I told him we were doing what we could."

"We are," Munch said. "If he wanted to help, he should get his rich ass in here and answer some phone calls."

Cragen shook his head. "I don't want him in here. Elliot'll will be back in tomorrow and this is already turning into circus without Holloway in his cronies in here causing even more drama."

"And speaking of drama," Munch said, picking up a stack of paper. "Today's lucky number is sixty-three for the number of times Evelyn Rivers has called asking about Olivia."

"Does she have any information?"

"Even if she did, I wouldn't've been able to get it out of her. Half the time when she called she was screaming something about Diorel into the phone and the other half, she was crying. I couldn't make heads or tails out of anything she said."

"She probably thinks Diorel's involved," Cragen said. "But, he was definitely sitting in a cell by the time she disappeared."

"What about this video though? I mean, if Morse is right, that means something happened to her minutes after Stabler had left."

"I know."

"Not even six minutes. It was six minutes when Morse got his cameras set back up. It was probably more like four or five minutes."

"I know."

"I mean how the hell could she disappear into the night in less than five minutes and Elliot not see what happened. It's impossible, it's-"

"I *know*, John. I know. But, Elliot says he's not involved and my gut tells me he's telling the truth."

"Cap," Munch said softly. "You saw what I saw. He attacked her."

"No," Cragen said crossing his arms. "He just jumped on top of her. If he was really out of it enough to actually murder her and hide her body, he would've been doing a lot more than just feeling her up for those keys."

"And, meanwhile, no one's even driven by his apartment...just in case."

Cragen stared at him for a long time, the sound of phones chirping in the background. "You said you didn't want to rat on him."

"That was before I saw what he did to her. If something happened in that apartment in less than five minutes, there's no way I'm going to be able think straight until we at least take a peek in his apartment."

"John... You've been looking at too many conspiracy theories. This is Elliot we're talking about here. Elliot Stabler. A cop with a good head on his shoulders and a family. There's no way, he could orchestrate something like you're suggesting."

"Why not?" Munch said. "We've seen doctors implant someone else's blood in their arms to avoid capture. If the fight went down like it did and she said or did something to get the rage flying, there's no telling what he would do if he panicked."

"But for this long? There's just no way. If he'd had her holed up somewhere why even bother going into her apartment. You should go through those tapes with Brown and you'll see. He's in her apartment the day after, looking for her. There's no way he's involved."

"You keep saying that, but wouldn't you like to have the peace of mind of knowing for certain she's not just lying somewhere waiting for help."

"I'd rather Olivia be somewhere calling out for help than lying somewhere dead."

"Me too. Either way, we're out of possible suspects and Elliot's the only person we haven't followed up with. Before Fin left to get some sleep, he checked up on Halloway and he's clean. Morse has been here this whole time. We tracked down Drover, Kreider... We've talked to friends, neighbors, everybody. He's the only one left to check."

Cragen rubbed a hand over his face. "And, what do we do, if we spy on Elliot and he's clean too?"

"Then, we sigh in relief and keep searching. She couldn't've just vanished into thin air. She's somewhere, Cap, and we'll find her. I just want to make sure we've looked into everything, but we start to grasp at the straws we've got left."

Cragen nodded, but still his mouth still held a frown. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Maya Shah standing in the precinct speaking to another detective, but pointing to Olivia's empty desk with tears in her eyes.

"Ms. Shah," he said approaching her.

She turned toward him and he could see her eyes looked nearly hazel from the spray of red across the whites of her eyes.

"You...you can just call me Maya," she said.

He ushered her toward his office and Munch sat next to her as she dabbed her eyes in front of Cragen's desk.

"I just...I just came back because I wanted to know how the case was coming. No one's called me or said anything about what's going on and Livia's always left me in charge of her things when she's been gone, so I figured I would come back in because, like I said, no one's called and I'm really, really worried about her and I just wanted to know how the case is coming because I haven't seen her and no one's seen her and I'm hearing all these things and..."

She finally took a breath as a sob caught in her throat and Cragen handed her his silk handkerchief.

"Thanks," she said smiling weakly.

"Maya," Cragen said as stern and sincere as he could manage at the same time. "We're talking to everyone in Olivia's life. If you have *any* information, anything at all, we need to know. Even if it seems small and trivial, we need to know."

Maya pursed her lips and nodded. "I...I talked to Livia that night."

"Okay," Cragen said. "What time?"

"I called her 'bout...maybe nine-thirty?"

"Are you sure," Munch said knowing they had already received confirmation from Morse's videos. "You need to be sure of the time."

"I...I don't know. It was kind of late...Nine-thirty...maybe closer to ten?"

"All right, what did you talk about?" Munch asked.

"Nothing. J-just stuff."

"Stuff?" Munch said raising his voice in frustration. Maya was proving to be far less helpful than he was wanting and he knew time was pressing. "What kind of stuff? You need to be specific?"

Maya started breathing hard as tears formed in her eyes once more. "I don't know! Just...stuff. Things we always talked about. Our other friends, me not working, her job, Jonathan, her partner..."

Maya's voiced trailed and she began to shake as the tears which had been threatening began to fall.

"What is it?" Cragen asked.

"Livia...we just talked."

"What were you going to say?" Munch asked trying to regain serenity in his voice.

Maya sniffed and ran her fingers through her hair.

"Livia was..." Maya took a deep breath.

"What?" Munch said impatiently.

Maya started to hyperventilate, but closed her eyes and took another deep breath. "She said she was scared."

"Of what?" Cragen asked, his voice now filled with Munch's same impatience. "Of who?"

Maya put her forehead in her palm and started to cry.

"Maya, please," Munch said, this time calmer, as if speaking to a rape victim. "We need to know what you and Olivia talked about."

She raised her head, her face now completely tear-streaked. She could not look either detective in the eye, feeling that if she did, the tears would just continue spilling over her face.

"Livia said..." She spoke slowly and hesitated. "...that she was scared about what her partner was gonna do once he found out that she took some file."

Munch and Cragen took a glance at one another.

Cragen spoke first. "You're telling me Olivia told she was *afraid* of Elliot?"

"Ye...N-no," she said crying again. "I mean she wasn't *afraid* of Elliot. It's...it's just that this case she was on...She said she took this file. She took it because Elliot was...I don't know...going about the case wrong or something."

Both officers were silent and Maya's eyes grew wide. She started breathing harder, fearing that she had said too much. "But, I *know* Livia...and Elliot. I mean she

said she was scared, but it was like a figure of speech or something. I mean she wasn't *actually* scared, you know-

"Maya," Cragen said. "We need to know exactly what was said. As it stands right now, you were one of the last people to talk to Olivia before she disappeared."

"What about Elliot?"

Cragen and Munch shared glances again and Maya continued. "I mean I...I saw part of that video. It was on YouTube. Fucking YouTube. Some stupid site for teenie boppers. It wasn't even on the news."

"So, you understand why we need you to be honest and specific," Munch said.

"Look," Maya said, trying to regain composure. "I know what she said that night, but she didn't really mean it. Okay, yes, she did say that she was scared of what Elliot was gonna do when he found out about that file, but she didn't mean it like she was scared for her life or something! She said it...like joking or some crap! Okay? I know both of them and I know he wouldn't actually hurt her and I know for damn sure that she wouldn't go out without a fight. I mean, if he really did try to hurt her, he wouldn't be standing, okay? There's just no way!"

Cragen nodded at Maya, not in agreement, but with a finality of the questioning. Munch sat back in his chair and sighed. Maya was now crying again and she continued looking between the officers in front of her.

"Please," she said. "Look, I know it sounds bad for Elliot, but he...he's a good guy. Whatever was happening on that video...I don't know what was up, but I'm telling you, regardless of what Livia said to me, he wouldn't have really hurt her. I mean, what does Elliot have to say about it?"

"Detective Stabler is saying just what you're telling us," Cragen said.

Maya sniffed and gave a tearful smile while nodding. "See...he...we...I..." She paused, trying to find the right words. "Look, I know that something happened to her, but I'm telling you, Elliot didn't have anything to do with it."

"You do realize that your statement says otherwise?" Munch said.

"Yeah...okay, yeah. But, I've known Olivia Benson for over thirty years. If there's anyone who knows her, it's me and I'm telling you, if she really thought that her life was in danger because of Elliot, she wouldn't have just calmly said it on the phone... she'd have had her gun out and she'd be meeting him head on. Okay? I told you what we talked about on Tuesday because it was the truth, but I promise you, it's not what it sounds like."

Cragen ran a hand over his head. "Well, it's comforting to hear that you believe that so vehemently, especially considering what's on that video."

Maya nodded and Munch stood to leave as he looked out the office window.

"They're trying to flag me down out there. I'll be back."

"I guess I should go too," Maya said and Cragen stood as well.

"One sec," he said and Maya paused.

Video or not, testimonial notwithstanding, he needed to know who was telling the truth.

"Did Olivia..." he began and then sighed, not really wanting to know the answer.

"Yes?" Maya said looking up at him expectantly with wet eyes.

"Did she have a miscarriage a couple years ago?"

Maya swallowed and her eyes fell. "The only thing she kept saying was 'Don't tell Elliot. Don't tell Elliot.' She never did tell me why. I didn't think she was going to keep it because the father was this guy she barely liked, but she did. I went to the ultrasound with her and everything and then one night, she just shows up at my apartment crying...She didn't really elaborate, but she'd lost it. Why? What would that have anything to do with this?"

"I just need to corroborate something that was told to us."

"About Livia? Well, if they knew that you should probably trust them. As far as I knew, she only told me about it. But...if you need anything, anything at all...Please let me know. I'll give you everything you need to find her."

Cragen sighed deeply and guided Maya out of the office.

"Did she have anything else to add?" Munch said once Maya had left.

"Just another confirmation about what Morse has been telling us."

"We need to at least talk to Elliot, but someone definitely needs to go over there. I don't want to think it, but if we find her...and we didn't even look at him. I don't know if I'll ever be able to live with myself."

Cragen stared at the wall behind Munch as the memory of when he introduced Olivia as Elliot's new partner years earlier played through his mind.

"Do it."

Woodside, New York

7:53PM

Elliot sighed as he parked his car a block away from his building and rested his forehead on the steering wheel.

The drive to Bryce's house had been pleasant and he had a good time talking with his brother and hanging out with his nephews, but the trip home reminded of the loneliness awaiting him at his apartment.

"This will work out," Bryce had said. "I'm sure she's fine. She seems like a fighter. I'm sure she'll turn up..."

Turn up where? was what Elliot had wanted to ask, but instead he tried to change the subject with no success. Bryce's wife continuously insisted that Kreider must have had something to do with it and that she hoped he had not killed her. Regardless of how many times Bryce and Elliot had tried to lift her spirits, she was still on the verge of tears as Elliot was leaving.

He sighed and got out of the car, suppressing a shiver as a blast of cold evening air hit him with full force. As he walked down the street, Munch stepped out from a car parked directly in front of the building.

"Have you been waiting for me?" he asked.

"Yep."

"How long have been out here."

"Not long."

"What's going on? Have we found anything yet?"

"Let's talk inside," Munch said.

“Why? What do you have to tell me?” Fear raced through him as disjointed thoughts ran through his mind.

They found her. She’s dead. Why didn’t they tell me? Maybe she’s being held ransom. Maybe it’s somebody coming back against us. Who could that be? Why would someone want to hurt her? Why is he looking at me like that?

He squinted at Munch who stood stoic in front of him.

“What’s going on?” he pressed.

“C’mon,” Munch said. “We need to talk inside.”

Elliot stared at him looking for some sign of the same fear and dejection that he was feeling in Munch’s eyes, but he saw neither. Munch was there for another purpose.

“You’re here to spy on me,” he said. Munch sighed, but he continued. “Why didn’t you just say so? You can come on up. I don’t mind being spied on by other cops. Hell, I’d probably be doing the same thing.”

Inside his apartment, Elliot continued his sardonic speech while Munch blatantly looked about the apartment.

“So, did Cragen put you up to this? Are we so out of leads that we’re actually thinking I did something to her?”

As Munch stepped into the second bedroom, his telephone rang, but he did not move to answer it.

Munch paused at Elliot’s bedroom door. “You know what’s on that video. You knew what had happened, but you didn’t say anything about it. Morse is right. If you weren’t a cop, we wouldn’t even be giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

Elliot crossed the room to stare Munch in the eye. “I did *not* hurt her.”

“That’s not what I saw.”

“Why would I just...take her? Huh? If I was going to do something to her, I’d’ve made it seem like self-defense or something. I wouldn’t have just-”

“Just what?” Munch now towered over him, furious. “Dumped her in the Hudson or in a landfill somewhere. Morse’s video cuts out for six minutes, Elliot. Six minutes between the time you were seen with your arms around her throat and the time she disappeared. Six minutes.”

“I don’t care how long it was,” Elliot said taking a step closer. “It could’ve been six minutes, it could’ve been six seconds. I don’t care. I did not hurt Olivia! When I left her apartment, she was standing in the middle of her living room, perfectly fine.”

“Then where is she?”

“John, if I had the slightest idea, I’d drag her to the precinct myself and have her tell you, all of you, that she was fine when I left. I know what that video shows, but I swear on my life, I did not hurt her.”

Munch sighed and took a step away from Elliot as he shook his head. “I just... Right now, it’s just your word against Morse’s tape and you know we’ve got to go where the evidence points us. This is all going to get worse before it gets better.”

“Don’t say that. I’m still hoping she’s just...I don’t know. But, I think she’s okay.”

Munch nodded and headed for the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Cragen says you’re off Liv’s case for now, but I’ll have a nice shining report on your desk letting you know how we’ve written you off as a suspect.”

Elliot gave him a small smile as Munch closed the door behind him and a moment later, his cell phone rang from his coat pocket.

"Stabler," he said, but could hear someone yelling at a distance from the other end of the phone.

"You have to call him again! Mom! Call him again! You have to talk to him!"

"Hello?"

"Elliot?" Kathy's voice said strained and with someone still yelling the background.

"Kathy, what's wrong?"

"Is that him? Is he there?" ...Yes, just a second...Elliot, Kathleen...she just saw this video...I'm talking to him, Kathleen...Okay...Elliot, hold on a second."

He heard shuffling on the phone and then his daughter's frantic voice.

"Dad?"

"Kathleen. What's wrong?"

"Daddy, how could you?"

"How could I what?"

"You...you hurt her! Dad, it's on MySpace. Three people sent it to me! You're rolling on the floor with her and then it cuts out and now she's gone. Dad...How could you?"

Elliot sighed as Kathleen cried on the phone. "Kathleen...I know what you saw on the video and I know it looks bad, but...I didn't hurt her."

"Dad, it's on the video. It's on the video!"

"I know, Kathleen, but you have to trust me."

"Was it about the pills?" she said still crying. "Dad, I told you, I'm sorry I kept it from you and Mom, but that wasn't her fault."

"Kathleen," he said calmly. "Olivia and I had an argument that got a little out of control. But, you have to trust Dad. Okay? I didn't hurt her and no one else thinks I hurt her except for the guy who made that video. I promise you. We're all looking for her and we'll find her."

She sniffed into the phone. "Dad, I just...I just..."

"I'm coming over," he said. "I'm coming right now."

Kathleen nearly knocked him over as he entered the house and was crying his arms for a full minute before separating from him. Kathy stood on the other end of the room with her arms crossed and shaking her head. She ushered Lizzie, who was on the phone in the other room poking her head into the living room, upstairs and told Dickie to remain in his room as well.

"It's okay, Kathleen," he said into her hair. "I promise, it'll be okay."

An hour had passed before he was finally able to calm her and after she decided that she just wanted to go to sleep, he and Kathy simply sat in silence on the couch.

"What happened that night, El?" Kathy asked concern overwhelming her.

He shrugged. "I'm still not sure. She was holding the information about the guy who tried to get at Dickie."

"Dickie's fine."

"Yeah, I know he is or...at least I'm sure he was before he saw that video. But, Kath, she had his file and she wouldn't give it to me and I just...snapped. It was like she

was the only thing in his world keeping me from righting all the wrongs this guy Drover had done and I lost it.”

“But, what happened to her? I mean, El, she’s been gone for almost a week. Where could she be?”

“Kathy...I’ve been asking that question every hour on the hour since Wednesday morning. I don’t know and I’m...”

Elliot took a deep breath and closed his eyes knowing he was on the verge of tears, yet trying to compose himself. He felt Kathy’s arm slide across his shoulder as she pulled him toward her and he allowed tears to escape from his lids as she cradled him to her chest.

He had been telling himself for days that she was fine, but it was only after facing his crying daughter that the reality of the situation hit him. With each day passed and each hour gone, there was a stronger and stronger possibility that his partner of eight years had been murdered and that they would never find her.

The tears continued to flow and he squeezed Kathy as she whispered to him as he had done previously with their daughter. Though he wanted everything to be “all right,” the growing tension in his chest reminded him that this would not be the last time he cried for Olivia.

Unknown Time and Place

The grey blur before her eyes seemed, at last, to be taking shape as her face pressed against something hard and unyielding. The stagnant chill that covered her body seemed to lift slightly with entrance of the new noise and she willed every inch of her soul to move toward it, but her body did not obey. Nausea instead welled within her, but her lungs would not expand properly when she attempted to draw breath to quell the sickness.

No part of her body would respond to any command. *Move arm, no.*

Twitch foot, no.

Close mouth, no.

Blink eye, no.

Stir finger...yes!

A finger trembled and as she willed her eyes toward the extremity, the pain from behind returned in full force. She wanted to cry out in pain, but even her larynx rejected orders. The blur in her eyes lost its form and she gave another unsuccessful attempt at drawing breath to ease the agony.

The new noise appeared once again and she could feel her finger twitch as the first recognition of her surroundings enveloped her in a new warmth she had not felt since before...

The noise was moving somewhere outside her reach and as it moved she felt shifts in the resistance beneath her. It was close, so close, and if she could just draw its attention, the voice could save her.

With a last surge of every will in her body, Olivia pressed air through her throat to call out toward the voice she recognized nearly as much as she did her own.

“Eh...ee...it...”

Chapter Nineteen

Monday February 5, 2007
Woodside, New York

Elliot rose from his bed after watching his alarm clock change from early morning hours to simply, morning hours. Six days had passed since he had had a good night's rest and as his eyes spotted the sweater Olivia had given him lying on his dresser, he acknowledged he would not gain such a luxury for a long while.

A bustle of voices outside of discernible pedestrian traffic could be heard from outside his bedroom window, but he did nothing to inquire further about it, preferring instead to go through as much of his morning routine as possible. With Kreider in prison awaiting trial, life in the SVU would go back to “business as usual,” only with a major spoke in the unit's well-oiled cog.

He dressed quickly, obtained his first jolt of caffeine from the black coffee maker in his small kitchen, and headed out the door. As he walked down the last steps to the bottom floor of the apartment, his thoughts regarding Olivia's disappearance were interrupted by the growing sound of the disturbance outside the building.

By the time he had reached the bottom landing, Elliot could see a tumult of activity by the front door of the building. Numerous reporters and corresponding cameramen stood flashing in front of the door and all were speaking in quick voices as if preparing themselves for something.

The shortest of the reporters caught sight of Elliot through the door and her eyes widened.

“He's there!” she shouted and Elliot took a step back from the door.

Activity burst from those standing outside the building as Elliot continued to backtrack down the corridor. The faint memory of Morse's video floated into his mind as the cameras flashed through the transparent door and he pulled his coat tighter around him, stepping outside the back door of the building.

Two reporters were waiting for him there, but he brushed past them quickly and made it into his car before the others in front could catch up with him.

It was going to be a great day.

SVU Squad Room
8:11AM

Fin increased his grip on the large black mug in his hand as he prepared to pour the hot, black liquid from the coffee pot and into his mug. His eyes were coming in and out of focus and he could feel the cup falling from his grasp as he poured. Behind him Munch stretched after having spent the night in the “crib” upstairs and Fin put a fourth

sugar in coffee hoping the extra boost would keep him from having to take a nap in the crib as well, not that he would be able to sleep, regardless of fatigue.

His thoughts for the past few days had been solely on Elliot and Olivia and even when he had had opportunity to rest, he could not. Fin had been trying to think the best about Elliot, but as the sun rose on Day Six since they had seen Olivia, doubts were beginning to run amok in his mind.

Weren't we just making fun of Helena Fayden the other day, he asked himself. *How the hell did all this happen?*

Fin returned to his desk as Munch, across from him, reviewed the details of a case that had come through to them overnight. While he, Fin, knew he had been on Elliot's "side" since Olivia first went missing, Munch appeared distrustful from the start. Fin had watched Elliot and Olivia work for years and just could not bring himself to believe that Elliot would somehow hurt Olivia. Any other cop in the precinct? Absolutely, but Olivia? Not possible. He would have sooner believed that a token office relationship had erupted between the pair before he could conceive of Elliot taking out his anger on her.

As Fin considered the implausibility of Elliot hurting Olivia, Elliot walked into the precinct, sporting just one remaining light bruise high on his cheek. He was forcibly cheerful and joked as he asked Munch about a report from the previous day. Munch gave him a nod and a small smirk and Fin repressed a sigh.

There had been few witty retorts coming from Munch in the past few days and he wondered if Elliot and Munch would ever be right again, especially if something had happened to Olivia.

"You see what was going on outside?" Fin asked as Elliot rose to get his second cup of coffee.

"Yeah," Elliot said with a smile that did not reach his eyes. "That's my entourage. No one can get enough of me lately, but it's nice to be wanted."

They all chuckled, but all smiles faded quickly once they each noted the missing female voice in their company and glanced toward Olivia's desk.

Munch updated Elliot on the new case he had caught the previous night and several hours later, Elliot nearly ran into Casey as she walked into the squad room on his way out of it.

"Morse is now at Bellevue," she said, frowning, "being treated for several of his psychoses."

"Oh, that's bull," Elliot said. "He was perfectly fine was he was talking about Liv and pointing fingers at me, and now he needs treatment?"

Casey shrugged. "Greyson and the rest of Morse attorneys argued it well and Morse was looking every bit the part."

"How so?" Munch said.

"Well, I'd say he's aged about ten years between last night and this morning. He looks like he's coming off of some kind of high, at best."

"How long's he gonna stay there?" Fin said.

"At least the next thirty days, though I'm sure the family lawyers will push for more time. Anything to keep these charges from sticking."

"What about Kreider and Drover?" Munch asked setting down the files in his hands.

“Jury selection for Kreider’s case begins next Monday. Arthur Branch wants to put this away as soon as possible.”

“Is he asking for a plea again?” Elliot said.

She shook her head. “And, even if he was, there’s no way McCoy’s going to take it. The people want to see him tried, so he will be.”

“Are you at all peeved that McCoy’s getting the case?” Munch asked.

“Not even. There’s no way, I’d be able to give Kreider sole attention with everything else on my caseload and I’m just glad to be second-chairing. Besides, if this was a New York of three years ago, this would’ve been a capital case, but I guess that’s just one less thing we have to worry about.”

“We’re about to get another shit storm,” Cragen said marching toward them.

“What’s going on?” Fin said standing.

“I’m expecting another wind of calls coming since the news just aired the beginnings of Kreider’s trial and included Olivia again, in case people missed it over the weekend. There’s also another station threatening to air Morse’s video tonight.”

“How can they air it?” Munch said. “How’d they even get it?”

“Probably his friends who uploaded it in the first place,” Fin answered.

“Either way,” Cragen said. “You’d better get anything you need because once that thing airs we’re all in for the long haul. I just got off the phone with commissioner and he’s not pleased.”

“What’s he got to be ‘not pleased’ about?” Fin said. “We’re the ones missing our detective.”

“He’s upset about Halloway being kept in a cell for the night.”

“He wanted to stay!” Munch yelled.

“But, every Halloway that’s ever walked these streets has been calling about it and the Morses are also closing ranks around the baby of the family. There’s also all this mess over Morse’s video.”

They each glanced at Elliot who continued staring straight at Cragen.

“Well,” Cragen said, turning back toward his office. “This is gonna get a lot worse before it gets better.”

Silence fell over them as they each tried to avert their eyes from Elliot.

“Stabler,” Munch said standing. “I’m about to hit the phones again, but I’ve got this case file I started about week ago. Some guy brought in this tape. He thinks someone’s actually killed on it.”

“Are they?”

Munch shrugged. “Haven’t watched it, but he says it’s porn, so who knows what’s on there.”

“Yeah, I’m sure we’ll be able to find *lots* about that one.”

Silence fell over the five and Casey announced that she was due in court to escape the tension in the squad room. Munch and Fin stood a moment later; Fin to relieve Alexa who had still been working Morse’s tapes and Munch to catch incoming phone calls about Olivia’s case.

Elliot stared at Olivia’s cold coffee cup and turned to leave, asking Casey to hold the elevator for him. He did not look back, but he was certain all eyes in the squad room were squarely fixed on him.

SVU Squad Room

6:10PM

Eyes burning and body aching from having sat in the same position for hours on end, Elliot sighed deeply and rubbed his eyes. He was putting the finishing touches on a report to keep the case file Munch had handed him open, yet at the bottom of an ever-growing pile, and the sound of phones ringing constantly for Olivia, had developed into a piercing headache.

He had watched the tape Munch had handed him with the file and one of the girls on the tape did appear to be killed rather literally, but there was simply no way to be sure. Much of the day had been spent trying to analyze it with a specialist, Ruben Morales, yet he came up with nothing.

Elliot looked up and saw Cragen through his office window. He stood with a phone to his ear, his eyebrows furrowed and the crease in his forehead deeper than Elliot had ever seen it previously. As Cragen put a hand to his forehead, his face contorted into a grimace, signaling that he was receiving loud, strong words from the other end of the phone. Elliot knew the conversation was either about Olivia or about him, since Cragen had been correct in his assumption about the increase in calls about Olivia's case.

A glum relief waved over him as he brooded over the fact that if Olivia had not looked so very attractive in the photo he had given Cragen, they might not be receiving as many calls. All the calls notwithstanding, he felt overwhelmingly frustrated that he could not do more to assist with her case.

Every case was important, but he knew just as well as any detective that some took precedent over others. Even though he knew he should have been out on the streets trying to track down possible witnesses for cases caught over the weekend, he could not chance being away if there was a break in Olivia's case.

As he leaned back in his chair, Fin appeared in the main squad room, looking every bit as tired as Elliot assumed he was.

"You in the mood to stretch your legs for a bit?" Fin asked with a sigh.

Elliot squinted at him. "What?"

"I know, officially, you're not supposed to be working Liv's case..." Elliot's ears piqued at Olivia's name and Fin continued. "...but, I need your...opinion on the something."

Without hesitating, Elliot left his chair and followed Fin to a back room where Alexa still sat going through Morse's videos, refusing to leave.

"Show him," Fin said.

Alexa queued several videos and showed Olivia, with much shorter hair, yelling at a tall man in her apartment. Cragen, now off the phone, but looking flush, had entered the room as well to view the tape.

"You know who he is?" Fin asked pointing to the man.

Elliot squinted at the screen. "Yeah, Matt. Matthew...Matthew Something. I think it was a W...Liv dated him for a few months a while back. What's special about him?"

With a frown on his face, Fin nodded at Alexa.

“Okay,” she said preparing to commentate. “There’s three of these that I found. This is the first one...So, they’re talking...they’re talking, then *Wham!*”

Elliot jumped in his seat with the sound of Alexa’s voice in conjunction with Matthew’s hand coming out of nowhere to slap Olivia across the face.

“And then there’s this one,” Alexa continued, as if nothing significant had happened on the screen. “They’re together...they’re talking...they’re talking...they’re yelling...yelling some more, then again: *Wham!* Right across the face!”

“Could we do this *without* the sound effects?” Cragen said glaring at her with his arms crossed.

Alexa seemed to grow very small in her chair. “Sorry...I, um...”

“Just show the next one,” Cragen said quickly.

“And then he does it again here,” Alexa said in a substantially dwarfed voice. “But, this time he does it...really hard and she doesn’t get up for a second. But...then she goes and she gets her gun...and then he backs out and then we don’t see him again.”

Elliot ran a hand through his remaining hair. “I can’t believe it. I mean, she...She said he was a jackass when she broke up with him, but she didn’t even...God, there was even a day when she came in, and I couldn’t stop looking at her because she looked so weird...so made up, but I didn’t say anything about.”

“It’s not your fault this guy was beating on her,” Fin said.

Elliot sighed remembering how unsympathetic he had been and how vigilant Olivia had been regarding Evelyn Rivers. “I still wish she would’ve told me.”

“We need to figure out who he is,” Cragen said. “Elliot, you don’t remember anything else about him?”

He shook his head. “No. And, he’s not in her address books or I would’ve remembered calling him about her.”

“Go talk to Morse,” Cragen said.

“Morse?” Elliot said, eyebrows high. “Why the hell are we talking to him? He’s supposed to be too crazy to sit in a prison cell where he belongs.”

“*Because*,” Cragen said, “Morse has been taping Olivia for years and if there’s anyone who might know what all this is about, he would.”

“Cap...Liv’s got other friends. She might’ve told-”

“Do you want to waste time probing every single person in her life again? Airing her dirty laundry to the world and risk the chance that this guy catches wind that we’re looking for him?”

Elliot remained silent.

“Go to Morse,” Cragen repeated. “Both of you. I want to know who this is and what he’s been up to lately.”

The white, heavy metal doors leading to the upper levels of the clinic clanked and shuddered in place as Elliot and Fin were lead down a third corridor. When they finally approached Morse’s room, they saw all that came with the power of the Morse name. Instead of a simple padded holding cell, Morse had been situated in a room with a large Plexiglas window that over looked the river and they learned that he had been assigned a personal psychologist to care for his mental health.

A broad orderly unlocked the four-inch lock on Morse's door to reveal the young man crouched in the far corner staring out the window while rocking on his feet.

"Morse," the orderly said. "You have some visitors."

Morse did not respond and only continued rocking in his corner.

Casey was right, Elliot thought when he got a clear look at Morse. He looked as if he had lost some weight since Elliot had last seen him and his hair seemed paler and thinner.

Elliot and Fin stepped softly into the room, the light pads of the flooring squeezing out air under their feet. Morse glanced toward them and stood immediately.

"Why'd you bring that killer in here?" he whispered pointing at Elliot.

"Now, let's just keep calm," the orderly said. "These are some detectives, Morse. They're just here to talk to you."

"I *know* who they are," Morse said through his teeth. "I don't need some loser oaf who's too stupid to find a better job to tell me that these are detectives. I spent half the night talking to that one, and this other one...we're well acquainted with one another."

The orderly glanced at Elliot and Fin and leaned against the opposite wall with a sullen expression on his face.

"We need to talk to you," Fin said.

Morse took a step backward. "I gathered that. I assumed that's why you came here. You obviously didn't come just to check on my well-being...to make sure they were treating me right in this hellhole."

"It's your own fault you're in here," Elliot grumbled.

Morse crossed the large room in half a step to stare directly up at Elliot. He barely came to Elliot's shoulder, but his piercing eyes seemed menacing enough to make the orderly jump from his position on the wall.

"I wouldn't be here," Morse hissed close to Elliot's face. "If you hadn't killed her."

"C'mon now, Morse," Fin said stepping toward the pair. "Everyone here knows that he didn't do anything to her."

Morse turned toward Fin. "How can you defend him after you saw what was on that tape? How can you stand there and act like he's still...Whatever. This is bull and you both know it. He should be sitting in a cell somewhere, not me."

"What're you talking about?" Fin said sardonically. "This place is better than my own apartment."

"You still think this is all a big joke! He murdered her and he's gonna get away with it because the NYPD doesn't want the world to know they've got a *murderer* carrying a badge!"

"Morse, you are the only one who thinks she's dead!" Elliot yelled. "No one wants to think she's been murdered. Just you! If you're so sure she's dead, that tells me you're the one who probably killed her!"

"Fuck you!" Morse said and spat in Elliot's face.

Fin took a step between them and the orderly pulled a struggling Morse away from Elliot.

"Let go!" Morse shouted.

"Not 'til you calm down," Fin said.

Morse's small eyes grew wide. "Me calm down! What about him? He's the one who's ready to put me down just like he did with Olivia. He's ready to kill me just because I stood up to him, too."

"All right, just shut up and listen!" Fin said. "Let's pretend for second that you're not a goddamn lunatic and Olivia's just holed up somewhere. Now, nobody really believes Detective Stabler did something to her which means we need to start looking at other people for this."

"It's a waste of time," Morse said. "I bet he just sits at home with a beer and the remote control laughing to himself about how he got away with it."

"You're so full of it," Elliot said approaching Morse again.

"*I'm* full of it?" Morse yelled.

"Yeah, did I stutter? You're full of it. You come into my precinct and claim to know my partner better than anyone else in the world--"

"I do. I've been watching."

"Then you would've seen the two of us together and you'd know that I'd never do anything to her. So, when you're screaming that I must've killed her, I'm just thinking that you're either the one who did or you're covering for someone. Either way, you are full of it."

"I swear on my life," Morse said. "The second I'm outta here, I'm going slit your throat."

"You go ahead and you do what you have to do, but that still doesn't change anything. Instead of watching her, you should've been doing something to protect her. If you were a real man you wouldn't've let this happen. You'd've been there to see what went down after I left instead of dicking around taking your *walk*, and if you really thought I was responsible, with or without proof, not ten orderlies would be able to keep you from killing me. Now, I *know* you don't really believe I did anything to her. So why don't you just cut the bullshit and let us get on with our investigation."

Morse glared at Elliot for a long time before snatching his arm from the orderly and sauntering across the padded room to lean against the wall near the window.

"What, then? Why'd you come to talk to me?"

Fin pulled a manila folder from his coat pocket. "We're looking at someone for her case and we need your input."

"You people are ridiculous," Morse said, laughing. "You throw me in here and now you want my help?"

"Just look at the guy," Fin said handing him the folder. "Tell us what you know about it."

Morse glared again at Elliot before opening the file. His eyes squinted at the images in the folder as his memory played the scene for him.

"Yeah...Matthew...I can't remember his last name though. I was never able to get a lot of the last names of the ones who weren't around too long."

"You've been following her," Fin said. "You haven't seen him around even? Maybe just dropping by to catch a visit?"

"You've got my damn videos. You tell me."

"They're edited," Elliot said. "There's stuff missing."

"Yeah...yeah, I guess they are."

“Told you this was a waste of time,” Elliot said turning to leave the room. “He doesn’t know anything and he’s just a prick who’s trying to pull something.”

Morse crossed the room again. “What crossed your mind first when he slapped her senseless, Detective?”

Elliot paused at the door and closed his eyes, attempting, unsuccessfully, to keep the memory from returning.

“What hurt more?” Morse continued. “The fact that he did it or the fact that you didn’t know about it?”

Elliot turned around with a fire in his eyes Fin had only seen when the two of them were about to fight, but Morse just snorted.

“I’ll tell you what. How about I tell you where I taped from and you people talk to the judge about getting me into minimum security.”

“You’re already getting off light as far as I’m concerned,” Elliot said.

“And no one asked your opinion! Do you want to know where I taped from or not?”

Elliot glanced at Fin who shrugged and took out a notepad.

“Who’s he talking to?” Fin said as he and Elliot returned to the 1-6.

Cragen stood in his office speaking to two men seated across from his desk. The frown on his face appeared deeper than ever.

“Missing Persons,” Munch said. “He’s briefing them. They’re acting like they’re about to snatch the case from us. What’ve you two got?”

Elliot lifted the first of two large plastic bags onto his desk. “The fifteen hidden cameras Morse had around Liv’s apartment.”

“How’d you find all these?” Munch said now sifting through the other bag Fin had placed on his desk.

“Morse led us right to them,” Fin said as he turned on his monitor. “He didn’t have anything more to give us, but he told us about the cameras in exchange for us giving the word to Casey to bring him out of maximum security.”

“Not that we will though,” Elliot said. “Morse told us he only put up twelve cameras in place, but we found fifteen.”

“He probably thought he could just continue his little reality show after we find her,” Munch said examining one of the small cameras, but Fin shook his head.

“That don’t make any sense, though. I mean, we found the other three in the same place as the others. Like he doubled them up or something.”

“Did you map out where you found them?” Munch asked.

Elliot pulled some papers out of the bag on his desk. “Yeah, we pulled some guys from downstairs to help us and they mapped out everything...I think he might’ve just forgotten about the others. Maybe they broke and he didn’t bother to take them out. Either way, he wasn’t honest and he still belongs in jail cell for what he’s been doing, so he’s not going anywhere.”

The door to Cragen’s office opened and Cragen and the two detectives left, each looking irritated.

“What’ve we got?” Cragen said approaching the desks.

“Morse gave up the cameras he used,” Fin said.

“In exchange for what?”

“Us talking to someone about getting him into minimum security at the hospital.”

Cragen shook his head. “He’s admitted to breaking and entering and stalking at least. The only reason he is where is, is because of his family’s connections.” He paused, taking a moment to stare at each of his detectives. “You should all go home and try to get some sleep. I shoved Brown into cab a few hours earlier and it looks like only the crazies are calling in about Olivia now.”

They nodded at one another and Cragen went back to his office, visibly preoccupied with something else.

Munch sighed as silence descended upon them. “Maybe we should extend the case to Missing Persons...”

“You’re kidding, right?” Elliot said with his arms crossed.

“In a few hours, it’ll be Day Seven since Liv’s been missing,” he said shrugging. “Her face has been all over the news and still there’s nothing. There’s no ransom note, no nod from the mob... We’ve tracked down every single person who might related-”

“No, we haven’t,” Elliot interrupted. “There’s this Matthew we need to look at, plus we’re still going through those tapes. Who knows what else we might have missed.”

“I’m just trying to be realistic here, Elliot,” Munch said. “She’s been gone for seven days and it still looks like she vanished into thin air.”

“Well, how ‘bout trying to be a little optimistic here,” Elliot said. “I’ve been checking hospital reports and homicide logs and no one’s brought in anyone even close to Liv’s description.”

“I’m just trying to prepare for the worst.” Munch stood from his seat, his eyes heavy and tired, and grabbed his coat. “Well, the triple espresso I had earlier isn’t doing anything for me. I’ll see you two in the morning.”

Elliot and Fin watched him and as soon as the elevator doors closed, Fin nodded Elliot towards the video room. Inside, he handed Elliot two of Morse’s hard drives as well as bag containing a small laptop, a set of cords, and a copy of the notes Alexa had been making.

“I don’t think I can handle anymore today, but I know you won’t be sleeping,” Fin said, “and we still need to go through all these as quickly as possible.”

“Cragen might want Missing Persons to look through these,” Elliot said still taking the set.

Fin shook his head. “Even if they did, they don’t know Liv and they don’t know what they should be looking for. You’d know for sure if something seemed out of the ordinary or if there was someone else we should be looking at that we just overlooked at first.” He paused, sighing. “The setup hooks straight from the laptop into a TV, so you shouldn’t have any problems with it.”

Elliot nodded and they parted ways silently, Elliot praying that no one would question what happened to two of the drives before he could bring them back to the precinct. He catalogued Morse’s cameras and checked his phone messages at his desk, noting that he had received half a dozen calls from Evelyn Rivers, all inquiring about Olivia’s case and also about some video she heard about on the news. Before leaving, he called into Olivia’s voicemail and listened to a last hopeful message left by her friend, Sarah, and all seventeen desperate messages Evelyn had left for her.

As the lights from the expressway hit his windshield, Elliot's thoughts remained on the video Alexa had shown them. The image of Olivia stumbling backward as Matthew's hand flew from his side to strike her across the face played in front of his eyes like a marionette show and his hands shook, though he did not know whether it was from sublime anger and extreme sorrow since he so clearly remembered the day Olivia had come to the squad room hiding more than hints of wrinkles under her makeup.

"Hey," Elliot had said to Cragen who sat in his office. "I just need Liv to do the last sign off on the Balthus case and we'll be able to close the books on that one."

Cragen nodded in his chair. "Are you going to be all right...considering?"

Elliot stared at him for a moment, picturing the young girl who had lied incapacitated in her hospital bed, while her mother told lie after lie.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll be fine."

"Okay," Cragen said, doubt etched in his voice.

Elliot turned from the office and gave Olivia a smile as she entered the squad room.

"Morning," he said. "How was your night?"

She glanced across the desk from him and her eyes fell immediately back to the files spread across her desk.

"Fine," she said quickly.

Elliot scrutinized her face, not liking the answer he had received. Her face looked oddly fuller than normal under what looked like several layers of makeup more than he had ever seen her wear for an ordinary day. She had liberally applied a pink blush to her cheeks and her eye makeup gave her a fatigued appearance.

"You have a hot date or something tonight?" he asked playfully with a grin on his face. "You're so made up."

She shook her head. "I'm...I'm off dating for awhile. Do you have the Balthus case file? I know we need to get that wrapped up."

He handed the file to her, a bit caught off guard by her sudden change of topic and watched as she briskly brushed past their desks to deliver the file to Cragen a moment later. When she returned, Elliot stared at her once more.

"Why are you staring?" she said as her finger flew across her keyboard.

"Is something going on, Liv?"

"I suppose I could ask you that question since you're the one boring your eyes into me."

"I'm serious."

"So, am I."

"Olivia...did something happen last night?"

"No, everything's fine."

"Why are you suddenly off dating? Did something happen with Matthew?"

Olivia stopped typing and glared at him, her eyes appearing violent under the heavy eye makeup. "Everything is fine."

"I'm just asking what might've happened."

"Matthew's an asshole. That's what happened. 'Kay? He's a bastard and it's over and everything's fine."

"Did something specific happen that makes you think-"

"You know what? I'm not really in the mood to talk about it."

"C'mon, Liv," he pleaded. "I just want to make sure that you're okay."

"Elliot...I'm fine. Nothing happened and everything's fine."

He nodded, still unconvinced. "But, you would tell me if something did happen, right?"

Olivia stood and walked toward the ladies room, but Elliot could see the slightest nod of her head in his direction.

The moment he walked through the door of his apartment, Elliot headed straight for the phone and called his old home. Kathleen answered the phone first and sounded as if she had been crying for most of the day. She told him how the other kids in her school were looking at her because of the video and Elliot did what he could to placate her, but to little avail.

Sitting with his head in hands after speaking to each of his children much later, Elliot sat in the dark wondering how one life could affect so many people in so little time. Most of the phone messages he had received that day had come from people who knew him well who, while they had not seemed ready to accuse him of murdering his partner, still sounded apprehensive at what one of the smaller news stations had been airing. His brother, Nolan, had sounded more perplexed than any of the cops and other friends and family who had been calling.

"Just...just tell me honestly, El," he kept repeating. "Please tell me you didn't hurt her."

No matter how hard he attempted to press the fact that he had not hurt Olivia, Nolan continued asking. Elliot figured he would probably get at least a call a day from Nolan and Kathleen and at least three from Evelyn Rivers.

The image of Matthew with the unknown surname hitting Olivia sprang to mind again and Elliot sighed into the night. Olivia had seemed so fixated on helping Evelyn Rivers and Elliot had never stopped to even question why. From knowing Olivia as long as he had, he imagined that Matthew would have had just the one opportunity to hurt her before she threatened with him a loaded weapon. Three strikes within two weeks' time simply made his stomach burn.

Elliot rose from his sofa and set up the hard drive to play through his television. The work was quick and monotonous allowing him time to further despond over what had happened. He would most likely need an IAB lawyer soon once Morse's video hit the masses and public outcry became too great and he nodded to himself once he realized that Olivia's possible death was going to break him in every way possible.

The night hours ticked away as he sped through Olivia's days over the past month in case Alexa had missed anything. As he watched, Elliot noticed small idiosyncrasies between he and Olivia each time Morse had taped them together. The gap between them when they walked down the streets was noticeably small, clearly more than a fraternal bond between the pair. The smallest of smiles nearly always spread across his face each

time she came across his line of sight. When the sun was just so high in the sky, she really did have a sparkle in her eyes when she laughed with him.

Elliot's television replayed the night he had arrived at her apartment after learning that she had taken Kathleen to get birth control behind his back and he gave an involuntary shudder at the sight of the pure anger in his eyes. He wanted to turn off the video and pray for sleep, but he felt mesmerized by what he saw, and first the first time since he had encountered him, Elliot understood why Morse was deteriorating in the hospital. He, Elliot, had been without working beside Olivia for just seven days and he could not force any of his thoughts to concentrate on anything else without drifting back to her. He could only imagine what horrors would be going through his mind if he spent every second of his day focused solely upon her.

Unknown Time and Place

The air is cold, and then is hot.

The air is cold, and then grows hot.

The air around her body shifted continuously, but any concept of time evaded her thoughts as there was no way to tell for how long the air had been changing. Every several rotations of cold and hot, the pale and wet, cold hands would appear from nowhere, touching her. She did not want to be touched, but the hands would continue. As the air turned cold and then grew hot, the hands continued. Always high on her body, but they still continued.

At times the fierce will not to be touched intensified and she managed to shift away from the hands, but then the pain returned like it always did, occasionally across her face.

The air grows cold around her and her body is moving, unwillingly. The unyielding force from beneath her slides...

No, *she* is sliding, moving, sifting through space with the cold, pale hands upon her at all times.

The air grows colder, too cold, far too cold as her skin tightens and she begins to hear the new murmur. The grey shadows are now darker than ever in the cold, but they move about her as her own body moves against her will.

The voices begin coming in quick bursts from all around her. The deeper murmur, the new voice, is coming from the larger shadow, while the familiar voice is from the smaller of the two. The voices hiss; shouting almost. She can almost make out the words again, but she has trouble understanding them as they fade in and out, like static on a phone.

"...just...can't...keep...her...-more...got to...please...take...find...here...then...screw-..."

Her left hand, the strong hand whose finger moved first, reaches toward the masses, but the cold hand slaps hers out of the air. The new voice resounds, loud and angry, like a piercing wind.

"...thought...put...out..."

The cold hand grabs her skin and it feels like ice compounded. Something long and thin slides against her skin, close. Too close. Far too close.

Pain sears from Olivia's neck and all shades of grey close to black.

Tuesday February 6, 2007

Woodside, New York

Violent hunger shook Elliot from the first REM sleep he had had in days, he rose quickly from his couch on Tuesday to find something to settle his stomach. The combined stress and lack of sleep had proved detrimental to his normal habits and the ulcer that had been steadily increasing over the past month was exacerbated further from Elliot simply forgetting to eat through the day.

As he pushed two slices of bread into his toaster, Elliot caught a glimpse of himself in the overhead microwave and realized that he had lost some weight. His face appeared gaunt from constant stress and exhaustion and he simply shrugged, figuring his outer appearance was just beginning to reflect the distress within him.

His cell phone chirped from the coffee table and he crossed the living room quickly to answer it. He looked at the display, half expecting to see Olivia's name, and felt his body grow tense as he read his eldest daughter's name.

"Maureen?"

"Dad?"

She sniffed into the phone and Elliot closed his eyes, knowing precisely what was wrong and knowing that there was nothing that could be done, but wishing he could instantly dry his child's tears nonetheless.

"Dad...", Maureen said, "somebody e-mailed me this...this video. I couldn't figure out what was going on at first, but then I kept getting all these IMs and things from people about it and then I watched the news and..."

Her voice faded into a broken sob and Elliot sighed.

"Maureen, that video is not what it looks like."

"I know, Dad. I know you wouldn't *really* hurt Olivia, but why did I have to hear about it from the news? I mean...has she really been missing for a week?"

"Yes, and like I told Kathleen and Lizzie and Dickie, not a second goes by when we aren't trying to find out what happened to her."

"It just doesn't make any sense. Dad, I just don't know how to feel."

"What do you mean?"

"Olivia...she's been your partner forever. I mean, she feels like family and to hear that she just disappeared in the middle of the night, and then with that video-"

"I know it looks, sweetie, but this is all going to be all right."

Maureen sighed. "Just...Please just let me know if you find out anything."

"Trust me, Maureen," he said, a small smile tugging at his lips. "I've told a lot of people they'll be first to know, but I *promise* you, the second I hear something, I'll let you know."

"Okay, Daddy."

They talked for several minutes more about the video, specifically what it did not show, and by the time Elliot returned to his toast, it had only popped up, but had grown hard and cold in the time he had tended to his daughter. Dumping the cold toast into the garbage, he shrugged and turned on his coffee maker, deciding instead to grab something on his way to the precinct. From the corner of his eye, the laptop setup Fin had given blinked and he turned on the current video of Olivia's apartment.

Before he had gone to sleep, he had gone back through the tapes toward the very beginning of January and watched as Olivia had tossed and turned in her sleep, causing Jonathan to jump out of the bed, one of her pillows in hand, and fall onto the couch to sleep instead. The video was from the night Valerie Sennet had died and Olivia had tossed in her sleep for a bit longer before dressing and heading out into the night. She had gone to Elliot's apartment that night and so that they could talk about the downward spiral of their partnership. That night, they seemed to have driven themselves in the right direction, but Kreider's case proved they had not yet come full circle.

Elliot's thoughts drifted to Tessa Sennet, Valerie's daughter, and he wondered how she had been fairing these past few months. Her father was in prison and mother was dead, but Elliot could not find a spare second to check on her.

Liv might have, he thought, and a familiar burning sensation spurred in his stomach. Even if Olivia had contacted Tessa, the news of Olivia's disappearance had probably done nothing, but upset the girl further.

He sighed as he set the video to back to the Saturday before his last fight with Olivia and watched Morse's camera shot follow a taxi that screeched to a stop before Olivia's building. Elliot was about to disconnect the set when the video showed Philip Fitzgivens grabbing Olivia's arm in front of her building door. He had watched the same scene the previous night and thought nothing of it since Olivia had snatched her arm away from so quick and intrepidly, but as the event played before him again, his eyes narrowed at the television.

Philip had volunteered a statement and an alibi the previous day, but as Elliot watched him arguing with Olivia as they both walked into her building, Philip's statement suddenly seemed to have holes.

He dressed quickly and attempted to call Cragen with his newfound interest in Philip, but the line was busy on all three calls he had made. By the time he had come down the back stairs of his building, he had become so preoccupied that he did not notice the ever-growing noise that came from just behind the back door.

Elliot opened the back door quickly and was met by a barrage of reporters, each shouting questions and flashing cameras in his direction.

"Detective Stabler, do you wish to give a statement on Olivia Benson's disappearance?"

"Can you comment on the video circulating the Internet showing you brutally attacking her?"

"Is it true you were having an affair with her?"

"Did you kill Olivia Benson?"

"Where's the body, Detective?"

"Is Owen Kreider at all involved in Detective Benson's disappearance?"

"How do you think Harry Morse's video will affect your career?"

"How do the Holloways and Morses fit into her disappearance?"

“Does the Manhattan SVU have confirmation that she’s been murdered?”

His face stoic and his resolve set, Elliot pushed his way through the mounds of reporters without pausing to answer any questions. The group around him massed as he made it to the street and became even larger when the gathering from the front of the building had caught wind that he had snuck out the back door.

When he finally made it to his car, he was breathing hard, not from the exertion of pushing through the crowds, but from the questions the reporters had been posing: Where’s the body, Detective?

What if there really was a body? he thought. *What if she really had been murdered?*

Elliot took a deep breath and turned the ignition to the car, revving the engine twice as a warning for all those pounding on his car windows to step back or find themselves under his wheels.

His hands shook as he passed through the mass of reporters outside of the precinct and when he had stepped off the elevators, everyone paused briefly to stare at him. He walked through the squad room, heading directly for Cragen’s desk, when he heard footsteps from behind running toward him. He turned around just in time to see Jonathan Halloway’s fist swinging at his face.

Elliot ducked and grabbed Jonathan by the midsection to keep him from taking another swing and by the time he had wrestled him to the ground, three other detectives had come to break up the fight.

“You’re a bastard!” Jonathan screamed, still struggling to get to Elliot as he was being held by three people. “I saw what you did to her! You’re a lying, murdering bastard and I’ll get you if it takes the rest of my life to do it!”

“You okay?” Cragen said, handing Elliot a cup of water a while later as they both sat in his office.

Jonathan still yelled from the holding cell into which he had been thrown for attacking Elliot, yet again, and Cragen had ushered Elliot into his office while he caught his breath.

“I’m fine,” Elliot said shrugging. “He’s lousy in a fight.”

“He’s enraged,” Cragen said. “They’d been trying to get him out of here for the past hour before you showed. I figured he would probably react like that after the video aired, but I hoped we could keep him out of here until he had time to cool his head.”

“He’ll cool off in the holding cell and this time, I want to press charges. I know he won’t serve any time, but a nice fine might make him cool his jets the next time he comes in here gunning for my head.”

Cragen crossed his arms. “I don’t think he’d even care at this point. He was in tears when he first got here and it took twenty minutes just to get him calmed to the point where he was coherent again.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Elliot said. “He’s no more upset than any of the rest of us. He’s probably just angry with himself because the last words he might’ve said to Olivia were angry ones.”

“How do you know?”

“She told me the Monday before... She said they’d all but broke up. That’s the only reason he’s as angry as he is. And, with that in mind, I want to talk to this Fitzgevens

again. I was thinking it over and his alibi being at the library on Tuesday is just seeming kind of shaky for me.”

“Munch and Fin are already on it,” Cragen said. “But seriously. How are you doing with all of this?”

“As well as I can, I guess.” He took a sip of water from the Styrofoam cup on his desk. “I mean, I’m practically homeless at this point. I’ve got the press hounding me everywhere I go. They’re probably at the house bothering the kids too.”

Cragen sighed. “The deputy inspector is forcing us to give a statement in regards to Olivia and Morse’s tape.”

“What are you going to say?”

“Just the truth,” Cragen said quickly. “We’re just going to keep to the facts. We have other suspects and several theories of the case and also that there’s evidence including that video that supports what you’ve been saying all along.”

Elliot nodded and Cragen continued. “And, that you explained to us precisely what happened on the video before anyone had even watched. You’re an excellent detective and you’ve been the showing the cooperation and the honesty completely becoming of the NYPD.”

“What about the suspension?”

“I have to put through some papers, and I’m sure they’ll get buried under something else for a bit. But, I will mention that I expect you to be cleared of any suspicion soon and you’ll be assisting us with her case in probably a few days.”

Elliot sighed deeply and his eyes fell to the floor.

“Why don’t you take some time?” Cragen said, noting his expression. “It’s your partner who’s missing and you’re the one who’s been catching the most heat over the case.”

“I can handle it.”

“No one said you couldn’t. But, given all that’s happened...you might want to take some time off. Spend the evening with your kids. Talk to Kathy.”

Elliot rubbed a hand over his face. “It looks bad with me in here when the media’s pointing a finger at me, is that it?”

“You know I need you in here,” Cragen said.

“But, not if it’s going to cause more problems for us.” Elliot stood to leave. “I’ll just check my messages and I’ll be on my way.”

“Elliot...”

“No, Cap. I’m a detriment to the case. I’ve got it. Just let me check my messages and I’m gone for the day.”

Cragen started to respond, but Elliot had already left the office, drawing the stares of everyone in the squad room.

Staring straight ahead, Elliot walked to his desk and checked his messages. Three were from Evelyn Rivers, each sounding more desperate than the last and it was still morning.

“Evelyn?” he said minutes later after calling Evelyn’s halfway house. “It’s Detective Stabler.”

“Have...have you found anything out yet?” she asked. She sounded as if she had been crying.

“We’re still working on her case, Evelyn. We’re not giving up.”

"I-it's just that...I know you say that Micah was in jail, b-but I know he must've done something."

"Evelyn, I'm coming to see you," he said. "I'm coming right now."

He set down the phone and headed toward the elevators. As he passed by Munch's desk, they caught eyes for just a moment and the distrust Elliot saw shook him even as he passed through the swarm of reporters and sped through the city streets.

The hard-packed snow squeaked and crunched under his shoes as Elliot arrived All Saints House a half hour later. The modest building was unimpressive and one could have easily missed it if one did not know precisely where to look. Once inside the building, however, the mammoth security personnel guarding the front entrance seemed daunting at best. They refused to let Elliot through until he showed his badge and even when he passed the receptionist desk he heard the whisper, "Hey, isn't that the cop who just killed his partner?" as he walked toward Evelyn's room.

When he finally approached her, Elliot was struck by how similar Evelyn's demeanor seemed in comparison to Morse. Her room was painted in pale blue, but she sat, hunched and legs pulled to her chest, on the bed as she stared sadly out the room's sole window.

"Hey," he said softly, drawing a quick turn of her head.

"Detective Stabler?" she said, eyes wide. "Have you found her yet?"

Elliot stood silent and tears formed in Evelyn's eyes as she read the answer in his face.

"Micah's done something...I know it."

"Evelyn, Micah was on a bus to Rikers when she disappeared."

"Then he had someone else do it."

He stepped close to her. "Evelyn...we've looked at Micah and everyone he's related to. He hasn't done anything to her."

"Then where is she? She said she'd be here. She said she'd come by to check on me and make sure I was settled."

"That's why I'm here. You can talk to me."

Evelyn shook her head. "You don't understand. She...she made him so angry that day. I just know he's done something to her and it's only a matter of time before he comes through to finish me off too."

The tears that had been readily forming in her eyes, fell over the threshold of her eyes and she leaned, sobbing, against the wall. Elliot crossed the room to hug her and allowed her to wet his shoulder with her falling tears.

"He's coming for me," she said into his shoulder. "I just know it."

"He's not getting out of prison."

"Maybe not today, but he'll find a way if he hasn't already and he'll kill me. I told her he told me to stay right there and look what's happened. He said he would too. H-he said he was going to kill us both if she came to the apartment again and he has. I know he has. He's killed her and now he's going to kill me too."

Elliot did his best to comfort her and as she continued to cry in his arms, he suppressed the urge to cry with her. He knew that Diorel was sitting in a cell in Rikers before he, Elliot, had even gone to Olivia's apartment on Tuesday last, but he wanted to believe that Diorel had done something, just to put a face with the crime.

His partner had been missing for seven full days and with out any word on her whereabouts, he doubted if they would ever find her.

Unknown Time and Place

Olivia's eyes slowly opened, but all she saw was black. She blinked twice, and while she still saw nothing, she knew that she was lying on her side and her head was lying against something cold and hard.

Rolling forward, a shudder vibrated through her body as a violent cold brushed against her skin. She reached out in the darkness and deduced that she was lying on a cement floor, but there was something more than amiss about the situation.

Where am I?

After several minutes of blinking in the darkness, Olivia stretched out her arms to push herself into an upright position. Her head was pounding worse than it ever had in her life and every bone in her body ached simultaneously. She groaned at the pain echoing between her temples and tried to make out something in the black. Something large shifted in front of her and she tried to make out an outline in the dark, but her eyes could not differentiate in the chasm.

"Hello?" she said in a voice much deeper than normal.

The sound of movement fluttered before her and Olivia leaned backward away from the unknown.

She tried to move her legs, but as she unfolded them from beneath her, the piercing cold of the air overtook her and her body began to shake. Rubbing her arms to create some frictional warmth, she realized she was still wearing her pajamas.

How did I get here?

She shifted her legs again and heard a slight clink of metal shifting in conjunction with the sharp slice of freezing metal coming in contact with her ankles. Grabbing at her ankle instantly, she felt through the darkness and found that there was some kind of chain wrapped around her leg.

Olivia grasped around the frore chain and moved her hand along it, trying to feel if the chain was attached to something. Her hand quickly came in contact with a metallic pole, just as cold as the chain around her. The pole was not wide, though she could not wrap her entire hand around it and she could feel the exchanges of finish and bumps that indicated chipped paint along its sides.

Readjusting on the floor to situate herself closer to the pole, she ran her hands up it in an attempt to get her bearings. The pole ran higher and higher and eventually she was able to use it to pull herself into a standing position. She grabbed the pole, holding it between her shoulder and elbow and reached out again in the darkness. Having turned around, instead of coming in contact with nothing as she expected, her hand hit what felt like a wall.

Freezing to the touch, it felt like weathered stone and as she coursed her hand along its surface she realized it was not only cold, but wet with an unnerving ooze of slime over it.

Olivia waved her hand along the wall for a few moments more until she was able to make out something grey across the dark field before her eyes. She moved her hand again and recognized her own hand moving across a black wall. Turning around quickly, she peered out into the dark again in hopes of discerning her whereabouts. Though she could only see outlines, Olivia made out the shapes of what looked like other people in the dark room with her.

“Hello?” she called again. “Can you hear me?”

The several shapes scattered in multiple directions and she sighed, causing the cold chain to slide on her foot. She gasped at the cold and turned her attention back on the wall reaching as far as she could to see if the wall and pole intersected.

High in the air, her hand came in contact with a curvature in the pole that ran into the wall. She pulled at the bar to see if she was truly attached to the pole, but misjudged the strength in her arms. Falling back to floor with a smack as her arms gave way, she shivered in the dark until her chest began seizing into a fit of coughs.

Olivia pulled her legs to her chest and shook while she sat on the floor from combined cold, fatigue and fear. Her breath was coming in quick gasps as her mind raced, trying to remember what could have happened to get her into such a place.

She remembered Elliot; he was especially angry with her. The door to apartment opened again, but...Her mind drew a blank and another series of shivers, starting from her stomach muscles, cascaded through her body.

The sound of a door creaking not far from her caused her head to shoot up toward the noise and she quickly stood. The shapes in the room with her had now gathered into one corner of what she could see and standing directly in front of her, a new tall figure glowed a faint grey in the dark. She could hear the figure breathing and apprehension spread across her body.

“Hello? Is somebody there?”

The call was answered only with silence and she tried again.

“My name is Detective Olivia Benson. Who are you and what am I doing here?”

“You’re here to stay,” a deep, masculine voice responded.

Olivia felt her face scrunch at the absurdity of the idea. “Who *are* you? How did I get here?”

“You’re bought and paid for,” he said. “You’re mine now.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit,” she blurted out without a second thought. “Who the hell are you?”

Footsteps drew near toward her and before Olivia’s eyes could make out the outline of a pale face in the dark, she heard the swish of something moving through the air as a hard object came in contact with her head.

She stumbled backward, a painful white light now appearing between her eyes, hitting her head against the cold, wet wall and the grey before her turned once more to black.

Chapter Twenty

Wednesday February 7, 2007
Woodside, New York

Elliot sat straight up in the bed, his breathing haggard and covered in sweat. He looked about the room expectantly, not quite sure of where he was for a moment before settling back onto the bed's white sheets. As his breathing slowed, he remembered with a grimace on his face why his surroundings seemed so unfamiliar.

The walk to his apartment, after seeing Evelyn Rivers, had come to an abrupt halt by the mass of reporters and camera crewmen waiting by his front and back doors. He thought of going to maybe stay the night on the couch at his old house, but he did not want to bring that kind of mayhem on his children. It was only a matter of time before the press began to hound them as well, so there was no point in bringing that on them any sooner.

Instead he checked into a cheap hotel on Queens Boulevard and tried to get some rest. His head buzzed constantly with thoughts of Olivia and while he prayed for some sleep, he hated the thought of closing his eyes again. Each time he did, another dream plagued his thoughts like the one that had just ripped him from his slumbers.

It was very much like the one he had had weeks earlier about Dickie with some minor changes here and there. He was still running from his car in the dream, but this time officers made a path for him as he came closer and closer to the river's edge. As he had approached it, he could see something under a white sheet and Fin, instead, told him that he should wait before coming any closer. Again, he pushed passed the person keeping him from his quarry, yet when he pulled back the white sheet to reveal Olivia's bruised face staring up at him with blank eyes, he simply woke.

Elliot shuddered under the thin covers of the motel bed. The mere recollection of the dream was almost too much to take and there was no mistaking what had caused the dream. Olivia face seemed to haunt his thoughts and again, he found himself empathizing with Morse.

His breath caught in his chest as the dream's last scenes played across his memory again. He did not know what he would do if when they found her, she had been brutalized, but he was certain he would give the media a real reason to trail him and make proper use of their headlines of the cop who had lost it and murdered someone.

Sighing, he rose from the rock hard mattress and glanced at the television in the room. He had set up Morse's videos to run from it, but even after hours of watching Morse stalk Olivia through the city, he had found nothing of value.

Elliot turned the television onto the news and found, once again, that Olivia's was one of the biggest news stories. The red-haired reporter rambled in a forceful tone indicating that the police were still "baffled" as to what had happened to Olivia and that they would be showing a message coming directly from her captain that night at ten.

Having heard his fill of the media's commentary on his and the unit's actions, Elliot turned on Morse's videos again, forwarding to the last Tuesday Olivia was seen. He had watched that night more times than he could count at this point, yet each time he watched, he sat mesmerized by the images on the screen.

Questions swirled through his mind as he watched a previous version of himself pushing Olivia backward across her apartment.

Did I really do that to her? Was I really yelling that loud? How the hell did I break her lamp like that?

Elliot shook his head as he rewound the scene watching Olivia's bow and lamp re-form themselves and leap back onto her desk and watched the scene again and again. When he finally moved on other dates, however, Elliot felt his eye twitch as he watched the screen. Morse had edited the videos so that Olivia was always in view from one of the best vantage points of each of the cameras he had situated around her apartment.

He rose and dressed, prepared to go back to the 1-6 with a new theory on the case. Each tape was had been edited to near-film quality and purposely cut anytime Olivia's clothes slipped or she and Jonathan were together. As he walked toward his car, Elliot knew that as obsessive-compulsive as Morse had proved to be, somewhere there lied originals of his voyeurism and somewhere on those tapes, lied some inclination as to what had really happened that night.

SVU Squad Room
2:06PM

Cragen sat at facing his own desk with his head resting in his hands as he contemplated retirement. With one detective missing without a trace and another "unofficially" suspended for causing said disappearance, he realized he had reached the lowest point of his career. What made the situation worse were the itching fingers of ambitious younger cops who were anxious for a chance to prove themselves in the SVU and snatch a possible opening in a captain's position.

His office door opened behind him and jumped with a start.

"Look at this mess," Fin spat as he barged into the office, Munch following after him.

He grabbed the remote control off the small television and pressed three channels forward until he found what he wanted.

A blonde middle-aged woman was walking slowly through a small, seated crowd facing a stage with a stern expression on her face.

"So, you all say you're certain she's dead?" she said in the direction of four equally aged women sitting on a stage.

"Well," the woman sitting farthest to left said. "Everyone knows that telepathic clairvoyance is not an exact science, but all four of us are certain of that one fact, Tessa."

The announcer nodded, holding her microphone closer. "How can you be so certain? I mean, she's only been gone a week, and we've been hearing reports that Ms. Benson has been kidnapped by the occult to she's been abducted by aliens. The NYPD is getting calls about her being sighted as far away as Texas, but nothing comes of it and no one still knows what happened to her."

"Tessa," the woman second from the left said with a laugh. "No one on this stage would suggest something so far-fetched. Aliens...honestly. We all believe...*know* that Olivia Benson is dead, however there is something still unresolved with her soul. That's why people continue to see her about the country. She was a cop in her old life and she simply cannot rest until her murderer is brought to justice."

"And you all think this?" the announcer said.

The woman on the far right shook her head. “No, Tessa. I have sensed that she’s not at rest because of something going on with her former partner. It’s a well-known fact that she and her partner were close and that’s what is keeping her from moving on.”

“Mary?” the announcer said to the eldest of the women, sitting in the center. “Do you agree?”

“I can’t say for certain at this point, which means that this was truly a complicated woman. I believe it’s something between the two relating back to unresolved tension with her partner that might have had some something to do with why she went missing the first place.”

“Vanesse?” the announcer said, nodding her head to the woman on the left again. “Any other thoughts?”

The woman on the left sighed dramatically. “Many of my counterparts refuse to go into grim details because no one really wants to think that something terrible has happened to this beautiful woman, yet I am not one to skirt around the issues. I know what happened to Olivia Benson the night of Tuesday January 30th.”

“Care to share that information?” the announcer simultaneously ceasing her meander through the crowd.

“Her spirit came to me and informed me that she had been killed...by her partner.” The woman waited for a gasp to emit from the audience and then continued. “She came to me in spirit three days ago and told me everything, including where her body is buried and I’m willing to divulge this information should the NYPD contact me...for a small fee, of course.”

The announcer smiled and turned toward the television. “We’ll have more on the disappearance of Olivia Benson on The Tessa Show, right after this. Don’t go away.”

Fin flipped off the television in disgust. “I can’t even believe that. They got so-called psychics on TV already claiming Olivia’s dead.”

Munch scoffed, slightly delirious from lack of sleep. “We should give her a call. We’ll quiz her and see what she comes up with. Who knows? Maybe she got her wires crossed and we might end up finding Jimmy Hoffa.”

“This isn’t funny,” Cragen said.

“Who’s laughing?” Munch said defensively. “All this means is that I’m going to be doing double time on the phones and Elliot’s not going to be able to step anywhere in this city without tripping over a reporter.”

“And speaking of...” Fin said his voice trailing as he stared out Cragen’s window.

Elliot burst into the office, looking slightly disheveled, Cragen assumed from the harrying reporters outside the precinct.

“What’s up?” Fin said. “You find anything extra on those tapes?”

Elliot shook his head. “Nothing different except...Those videos are so edited and from what I know about Morse, that means there’ve got to be originals somewhere.”

“But where though?” Munch asked. “And, why would he keep them? He’s already got his ‘best-ofs.’”

“But as crazy as Morse is,” Elliot continued. “There’s no way he’s going to just toss those away. I’m thinking the originals have got to be somewhere and they’ve got to show more than what’s just on the tapes he’s given us.”

“But, the tape he gave us of that Tuesday isn’t edited,” Munch said. “It’s just a straight shot of the two of you.”

“We’re talking about a guy who’s walked around in drag to keep Olivia from noticing him. He’s tracked her down all across the damn city. How can we be sure he didn’t just doctor up that tape to hide something?”

Fin leaned on the edge of Cragen’s desk. “Why though? I mean, what’s the point? And, why now all of a sudden? What was special about that night that woulda made him snatch her in the middle of the night and blame you for it?”

Elliot, not having an immediate answer, ran a hand over his face. “All I know is that we found the tapes we have because Morse left them out in the open in his apartment. He came here with that video, knowing we’d hold him and knowing we’d go through his apartment. We found exactly what he wanted us to find. I’m just saying we need to find the originals. There’s got to be something on there that he edited out, but might help us figure out what happened to her. We need to look at him again.”

Cragen stared at him for a moment and then sighed. “Well, I would’ve said you could’ve just called this in, but seeing as I’ve been keeping my phone off the hook for the past two hours...”

“We need to look at Morse still,” Elliot repeated.

“But, we need to chase down any of the other leads we’re getting via the phones,” Munch said.

“Let Missing Persons handle it.”

“No,” Cragen said. “*We* need to handle it. Otherwise it’s looking like the feds are going to bring in their own people on the case.”

Elliot shook his head. “For our detective? First Missing Persons, now the FBI wants a piece?”

“Everyone’s just trying to get the same result.”

“And, the more exposure this case gets, the more people see it and the more likely, whoever’s got her right now is going to freak into doing something else to her.”

“Elliot...” Cragen said after a moment, noting the dark circles under Elliot’s eyes.

“I know,” Elliot interrupted. “I need to take some time...Get some sleep. I got it. I just needed to...”

He stared at each of them for a moment more and then quickly left the office and the squad room to face the hordes of reporters again.

“How are our other cases looking?” Cragen said in Fin’s direction once Elliot had left.

“They’re not. We got a lead on that subway guy from two days ago, but we haven’t had time to look into anything too deep yet.”

“Well,” Cragen said. “I’m sure that talk show’s going to elicit a whole new series of calls. I’m going to pull some people for over time. Maybe we’ll get some volunteers under the circumstances.”

Four hours after Munch and Fin had filed out of Cragen’s office, he heard a sharp rap on his door. When he turned, he found Jillian Harfort staring back at him, jaw set and eyes blazing.

“I heard,” she began, “that there’s a possibility that Olivia’s partner is responsible for her disappearance.”

“Please,” Cragen said extending his arm toward a chair. “Have a seat, Ms. Harfort.”

"I don't want to sit," Jillian said quickly. "I was told, by you, three days ago that I'd be the first person to be called if something new developed on her case."

"And we haven't found anything, or else we would've called you."

"Oh, that's bullshit. I told you *days* ago that you needed to look at her partner and now I'm finding out about some video circulating the Internet that shows him *attacking* her and you have the nerve to stand in front of me and tell me you haven't found anything?"

"We've investigated that video and we've talked to Detective Stabler. There's nothing that suggests-"

"This is such bullshit!" she screamed throwing her black Coach bag to the floor. "They've been arguing non-stop for weeks and weeks! She's telling everybody she cares about that she's leaving the unit because of him! Maya even tells me that Liv told her that she was *scared* of him and now there's this video that *shows* him doing something to her! What do you people need to see this for what it is? Murder!"

Cragen took a step toward the red-faced woman, having heard his fill of accusations toward Elliot for one day. "Elliot Stabler did *not* kill Olivia."

"What? Did he give you his word on that, Captain?"

"Yeah, actually he did. And, I trust *his* word more than anyone else's."

"Well, he can shove his word for all I care. There's a video that shows him trying to kill her! Why isn't he at least in jail? Is it because he's the big, male cop and she was just the little woman trying to make her way in the boy's club?"

"That's enough!" Cragen said. "No one in this precinct has ever once treated Liv like she's some kind of second rate detective. She's a good cop and so is Elliot. And if he says he didn't do anything to her, we have no reason not to believe him. *I* believe him. His co-workers believe him. The woman who's known Olivia since they were *children* believes him. Even the stalker who made that tape believes that Elliot didn't do anything. It's just the outsiders...the people who don't know Elliot or know Liv as well as they *think* they do are willing to believe that Elliot murdered her."

The last comment caught her attention and Jillian's lips pursed into a thin, pink line. "Look...Maya may have known Olivia since they were in grade school, but I'm the one she runs to when she wants reason. When she needs a normal, practical person to talk to, she confides in *me*. I'm not sure what Maya's been telling you, but the woman can be an absolute idiot. She always wants to think the best of people, even when there isn't anything good about them. Now, I spoke with Olivia a week ago and I spoke with her last Monday and both times she mentioned how angry her partner was with her. You are all detectives here! Do you really need someone to spell it out for you! He has anger-management problems, he's been angry with her for days and now she's disappeared! You can't honestly believe that he's not involved!"

Her breath was coming in sharp, haggard gasps and her eyes were wet and streaked with red.

"Jillian," Cragen said saying her name for the first time after he allowed her some time to catch her breath. "I had my doubts about Elliot when I saw that tape too. Okay? I saw him the day after. He had so many bruises on him he looked like he got hit by a train. But, I was also standing right here when that video was first brought to our attention. He told me everything, every single thing that happened on that tape *before* we watched it. Now, I know you're worried and you're scared. Trust me. I feel your pain, but you have

got to stop coming in here like this. We're going to find her. I've never been more sure of anything in my life, but you just have to have faith in us...and in Elliot."

"But that video..." Jillian said shaking her head.

"Yeah, it looks bad and believe me...I've already read him the riot act about his actions, but he did not hurt her. He says she was fine when he left her, and there's not one shred of evidence to suggest otherwise."

"And you just believe him? Just like that?"

"No. Not just like that. From years of working as his superior and knowing what kind of man he is. Now, you know Olivia and if you think hard about it, do you honestly think the Olivia that you went to school with would just stand by and let somebody do something to her without a trace of evidence? Do you think if he really roughed her up enough to do some real damage that he'd still be walking? The Liv I know would've kicked his ass even more than she had. And, if you're intent on watching that video, keep in mind what's missing from it."

"Like what?" Jillian said, much calmer.

"Like the fact that her gun and his were both in well in reach for both of them, but neither of them reached for one. At one point her gun was less than arm's length away, but she never reached for it. Do you really think if she thought her life was in danger that she'd just leave it on the table?"

Jillian did not answer, simply bent over and picked up her bag and brushed the dust off of it. "You make some good arguments, Captain Cragen, but I'm not sure if I'm convinced. I think about the fact that she's gone and I think about the safety of my own children. Is there some...monster out there waiting to snatch them in the middle of the night too? And, what about...what if s-she turns up in the East River? W-what if someone's...I don't know...raped her and strangled her and thrown her away like garbage? I mean I keep on having nightmares about it."

"It's no different than any of the rest of us here."

"I just...It's not knowing that's driving me crazy. She's a perfectly strong, capable woman and somehow, someone's just taken her in the middle of the night. It just doesn't make any sense. What am I supposed to tell my kids? They keep asking all these questions. I just don't know what to do."

"And Elliot's got kids too and they're just as attached to her."

"I know and I try to remember that every time I think about that video, but...I don't think I'm going to be able sleep right until she's found and we know what's happened to her."

Cragen reached across his desk and pulled out of his business cards for Jillian. "Here. I'm here nearly all the time now, anyway. If you're up at four in the morning, just like the rest of us, you can call me. Whatever it is, I'll know how you'll feel."

Jillian pocketed the card and gave him the smallest of smiles before silently leaving and heading toward the elevators.

Cragen fell into his chair, his eyes catching the bottle of "emergency" whiskey in the corner of his office.

It's going to be another long night, he thought.

“Dad!” Lizzie shouted as she crossed the living room in a flash to throw her arms around her father.

Elliot sighed with a smile, hugging her and having barely come through the front door frame. She and Dickie were playing a video game and Lizzie had dropped her controller the moment she saw Elliot come through the door. Dickie turned on the couch and gave a nonchalant nod in his direction, which Elliot returned still tangled with Lizzie.

“Are you okay?” Lizzie asked quickly after she let go of him. “Have you found anything about her yet?”

He shook his head and she gave a somber sigh, returning the couch.

“They were saying all those things about you on the news,” she continued as she grabbed the fallen game controller.

“Yeah,” Elliot said. “You know they always blow things up. Half the time they never have the real story.”

“We know,” Lizzie said.

He cleared his throat. “You kids see that video yet?”

“Yup,” Dickie said never taking his eyes off the television. “It’s one of my Favorites on MySpace.”

“Nice,” Elliot mumbled.

“Mom’ll be back soon,” Lizzie said. “You wanna watch me smoke him again in Mario Cart?”

“The controller stuck!” Dickie shouted and looked at his father. “She only beat me that *one* time.”

Elliot laughed and sat down in the chair next to them. “Where’s Kathleen?”

The twins glanced at one another, but Lizzie spoke, her eyes focused on the game screen. “Upstairs. She didn’t go to school today.”

Like with Kathy, the tone in her voice said far more than her words.

You should go talk to her.

Elliot quickly rose from the chair and headed upstairs.

“Kathleen?” he said when he reached the top landing.

He crossed the hallway into the room that Kathleen shared with Lizzie and found her lying on her bed with a despondent expression on her face as she stared at a spot where the ceiling met the wall.

“Hey,” he said. “How come you’re up here all alone?”

Without looking at him, Kathleen shrugged. “I just wanted some time to myself for a little.”

“Lizzie said you didn’t go to school today. How come?”

“Mom said I could stay home. You’re not going to give me that Education First speech again, are you?”

Elliot sighed. “No, but I still have a right to know what’s going on. You don’t look sick, so why’d you ask Mom to let you stay home?”

Kathleen sat upright and pulled her legs Indian style on the bed. “People at school...I mean people who are supposed to be my friends. They’re saying all these things about you. I just don’t get it.”

“What are they saying?”

“Crap like, ‘So when is your dad going to tell us where he hid her’ or ‘If your dad kills people, should we be scared of you too?’”

"I'm sorry all this is falling on you kids."

"What are you sorry about?" Kathleen said shaking her head. "You're not the one saying these things to me."

"Kathleen, you know how people can be. You can't lis-"

"How can I not listen to them, Dad? It's everywhere I go. People whispering things in the halls or stuffing notes in my locker and if I avoid the people saying these things, then I get twenty IMs or text messages saying the same stuff. I don't even want to go outside anymore. I just want to runaway."

"Tell me about it," Elliot said. "But, we both know that's not going to solve anything."

Kathleen leaned back against the wall next to her bed. "I just wish...I don't know. I mean, it's been a week, Dad. I watched this talk show today and they had these psychic ladies on there...They were all saying that Olivia was dead."

"Kathleen, they're *psychics*, on day-time television."

"I know, Dad. But, what if they're right? What if Olivia's...dead and the next call you get is to go identify her because she's been in the river?"

"That's not going to happen."

"But, how do you know!" she yelled more than asked. "Daddy, it's been a week. Nobody just disappears like that. How do you know you're not going to get a call that she's dead?"

"Trust me, sweetie," he said. "That's the same nightmare I've been having for days, but I promise you, it's not going to happen."

Kathleen nodded slightly, yet in that same moment, Elliot's phone chirped from his pocket. He and Kathleen both froze and locked eyes, hers growing wide and tearful. Elliot swallowed, glanced at the phone and let out a sigh upon seeing the display.

"It's someone from another case. She's just wanting to know if we have any more information."

"What's her name?"

"Evelyn and she got really attached to Olivia, so she calls all the time."

"Does she know anything, Dad?"

"She thinks...No. She doesn't know anything."

He broke eye contact with his daughter, not wishing to go into the details of Evelyn Rivers' case with her. She had enough time to discover the depths of humanity when she got older.

Kathleen stared at him for a long time, scrutinizing every curve of her father's face as he stared at the floor before her.

"What happened that one night, Dad?" she asked after a minute's silence.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "She was fine when I left."

"No. The night after you found out about the pills. What did you do?"

He sighed. "I went to Olivia's apartment and I screamed about it." Kathleen stared at him so intently, he saw a flash of himself within her and he continued. "I was just so angry that she'd keep something like that from me, but all I did was yell. Why are you asking now? You starting to believe the kids at school? Do you think I might've done something to her?"

"No," Kathleen said. "But...I just wanted to make sure."

A single tear that had been pushing its escape rolled down her face and though she wiped it away quickly, more formed at the brims of both eyes.

"We'll find her, Kathleen," Elliot said after another long silence. "We're all worried, but I know we'll find her and once we do...I'm sure she'll have a long captivating story for us."

Kathleen nodded and stretched herself across her bed again. "I hope so, Dad, 'cause it's really nerve-racking just thinking that she disappeared into thin air."

"I know, baby," he said standing. He kissed her once on the forehead. "Just have faith that it'll be okay."

"I will...Are you gonna stick around for a while?"

Elliot shrugged as Kathy came through the door behind him.

"Oh," she said sounding surprised, though he was certain Lizzie had told her that he was upstairs. "I just came up to see how she was doing."

"Dad was just telling me that he was going to stay for dinner," Kathleen said. "Right Daddy?"

He turned toward Kathy who nodded.

"Yeah, I'll just set another place. You feeling any better, though?"

"Starting to."

Kathy gave her a small smile and glanced at Elliot before leaving the room for the kitchen. Hours later, she and Elliot sat alone on the living room couch with the TV on, but muted in the background. After the kids had gone to bed, they sat down to watch TV together like old times, but after a while, Kathy picked up the remote and muted it to focus on him.

She had not seen him look so sickly in all her life and she knew that while the majority of his demeanor was because of Olivia, learning that his children were not fairing all too well, could not have helped.

"So, there's still nothing?" she asked.

Elliot shook his head. "We don't even have anything to go on."

"But, I'm sure people have been calling in and--"

"Yeah, they've been calling, but I don't know what they've said because Cragen's asked me off the case."

"Why?"

"I guess they don't think I'm up to it considering..."

"Elliot, that can't be it."

"Doesn't matter. I'm beginning to think we'll never find her alive."

Kathy took his hand in hers. "You can't lose hope. No one just disappears in the middle of the night. If somebody took her, I'm sure she'll show up fine and if she just left, I'm sure she had a good reason."

"Just left? C'mon Kath."

"I'm just trying to remain optimistic. I know how this is affecting you."

"I'm just upset that all this is affecting the kids."

"Well, of course it's going to affect them, Elliot. They all adore her. And Kathleen...she'll be fine in a few days. Maybe she'll develop a little more backbone against the kids in her school." She paused and rubbed his hand. "Where are you staying because I know you must be catching hell at your...apartment right now."

He shrugged. "I'm staying at this little slum of a place down the way. The press has been crawling all over my apartment for days."

"Oh...", she said pursing her lips. "Well, why don't you just spend the night? I could, um, make up the couch for you and we could all have breakfast together in the morning."

Elliot stared at her for a long while, as she continued to rub his hand with her thumb. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and hold her next to him while she whispered everything was going to be all right until he fell asleep, but instead, he allowed his eyes to drop the floor.

"Yeah," he said. "That'd be nice."

Thursday February 8, 2007
10:11AM

Fin rubbed a hand over his face and groaned as he stared at his computer monitor. His eyes burned from lack of sleep and his free hand shook from the amount of caffeine coursing through him, though it was not helping. With twenty-three open cases, eight of which were follow-ups from Olivia's previous cases, sleep was a commodity he could not afford and after a short and enervating nap, he came back to the floor in hopes of catching up on his caseload.

Volunteers had been coming by the dozens to assist with Olivia's case by answering phones and chasing down any possible leads, but the pile on his and Munch's desks grew steadily larger. The volunteers were eager to help find Olivia, but all suddenly held other obligations when it came to the grit of other SVU work. Suspects still needed to be grilled, paperwork still needed to be filed, court appearances still needed to be made and victims still needed a shoulder on which to cry.

As he leaned back in his chair, Alexa walked out of the small video room and headed straight for the coffee stand. The circles under her eyes were dark and her red hair looked flat and dull. Her entire body seemed slightly hunched like a wilting plant that lacked sunlight.

"How's it coming?" Fin asked.

"I'm almost done with my sweep of 2004, but I still haven't found anything too relevant." She sighed. "I think I've been at this a little too long. I'm getting kind of jaded by the idea that he follows her everywhere. And, I mean *everywhere* she goes."

"Up here even?"

"Twice so far. I think he must've had something in a jacket or something because he actually sat at Elliot's desk to report that he thought a friend of his might've been raped, but he purposefully left out a few details."

"That's crazy," Fin said. "For him to stand right here and no one even know it."

"If anything, he's brilliant. How are the phones?"

"Calls have doubled since yesterday, but no one's got anything to offer. Just wanting to know if we've found anything, which we might be able to do if they'd stop calling every other second about nothing."

As they nodded at one another, a small, rusty-haired figure stepped off the elevators. He looked around the squad room for a moment looking apprehensive. His eyes flashed to Fin, but once he spotted Alexa, he made beeline for her.

"I need to speak to someone about Olivia Benson's disappearance."

Fin's ears perked immediately and he approached the pair. "I'm Detective Tutuola. What do you have for us?"

He took a step backward and narrowed his eyes at Fin before speaking. "And who are *you*?"

Fin glanced at Alexa, his eyebrows furrowed. "Detective Fin Tutuola. Now, you said you had some information about Olivia. Care to share it?"

"Well, yes," he said after looking Fin up and down several times. "My name is Mark Landon. I'm not sure how much what I have will help, but I thought I should come forward."

"Have a seat," Fin said motioning to the chair near his desk.

Mark stared at Fin for a moment more before situating himself in the chair. "I'm Olivia's neighbor. I've lived across the hall from her for years. That apartment was originally her grandmother's and she left it to Ms. Benson, Olivia's mother, and when *she* wanted to move Uptown, she gave the apartment to Olivia. That was about ten years ago."

"That's nice," Fin said shortly. "Now, do you have anything about where Olivia is?"

"My point," Mark continued, "is that I've been around that building for a while and I know who's coming in and out and what it sounds like at night. That night...last Tuesday, I heard what was going on and I think I need to step forward and say something."

Fin glanced at Alexa again and as his chest tightened with unease, his mind immediately thought of Elliot. "Step forward and say what?"

Mark sighed. "I've been watching the news and...this is just unfair. Detective Stabler did not take Olivia from her apartment."

"You're sure?" Fin demanded.

"Yes, I'm certain. I heard them arguing that night, but I distinctly remember him storming out of her apartment and getting on the elevator."

"How do you know? I mean, what was she doing while he was getting on the elevator?"

"She was crying in her apartment."

"And you didn't hear anything else?"

"Well, I didn't stand right by the door to listen to everything. It sounded like a heated argument and I didn't want to pry. And, if I'd known she was going to vanish like this, I'd have paid closer attention."

"You don't know what happened after, but you're sure you heard him leave."

"I just said that," Mark said raising his voice slightly. "I'm certain I heard him leave and get on the elevator. The elevator on our floor's very noisy and he's a big guy. I heard him walk down the corridor and get on the elevator."

"While she was still in her apartment?"

"Yes. She was in her apartment and he got on the elevator."

"So, you heard all this, but you don't know what happened after that?"

Mark let out a deep breath. "Why are you quizzing me like I'm not telling the truth? I've told you already, twice, what happened. I heard them shouting. I heard him leave. I heard her crying in her apartment and then I went to the back room because I didn't want to pry into her private life. What's so hard for you to understand?"

"Now, just calm down," Fin said. "We're all trying to find her and we've been sifting through bogus reports for days."

"But, I'm not some crackpot just coming off the streets looking for their fifteen minutes of fame! I'm her neighbor. I know her well and I'm telling you all, you're barking up the wrong tree if you think her partner did anything to her. I'm seeing it all over the news and I know it's just wrong. He got on the elevator that night and left. End of story!"

"No! It's not the end of the story. If it was, she'd be sitting here taking your bull instead of me. You say you heard what went down and that you heard Detective Stabler leave, but you don't know what happened after that? He coulda jumped off the elevator at the last second."

"He didn't."

"But, you said you were in the back room, so how do you know?"

"Because I know!" Mark shouted. "I've seen them together and I know he got on the elevator. The press is trying to put everything on him, but I'm telling you, he didn't do anything!"

Fin sat backing his chair as Mark's breathing grew ragged. "All right. So, if you know them both, you wanna tell me what *you* think happened to her that night?"

"Well...I mean I don't know. If I knew...like you said, she'd be here right now."

"So, all you have to give us is that you think you heard Elliot get on the elevator that night, while Olivia was still in her apartment?"

"That, and I know of someone you people should be looking at."

"Who?"

"There's a guy in our building who's been...I don't know loitering around our floor recently. His name is Adam Jackson and as far as I know, he's probably one of the only people you people haven't bothered to talk to about all this."

"Adam...Jackson," Fin repeated as he wrote the name. "What's so special about him?"

Mark shrugged. "He's a big...guy who's always around. You know? Just dropping by randomly just to talk to her."

"Wait a minute. Aren't you the neighbor who said we should talk to Philip Fitzgivens off this same stuff? Why are you just now coming up with this info?"

"Because I figured if he wasn't involved, you'd definitely look at this guy after."

"But, how would we know?"

"Because you're *detectives*! I can't believe my tax dollars are going to people who are so inept at their jobs! No wonder Olivia's still missing!"

Fin rolled his eyes. "I need to get your contact information just in case we have any other questions."

Alexa shook her head with her arms crossed as they watched him leave. "I don't like him. There's something off about him."

"He's a creepy little man, but at least he's given us something."

“I still don’t like it. I mean, why’s he lurking by his front door in the middle of the night, anyway? And, why’s he so sure all of a sudden Elliot’s not involved. I just don’t like it.”

“At this point,” Fin said, “all I care is we got another confirmation that Elliot’s not involved. If this takes some of the heat off him, it’ll be all good.”

“Y’all’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Standing at six feet and three inches tall, Adam Jackson’s long frame seemed to tower over Munch and Fin in the Greenwich Village apartment. Fin had spoken to Maya Shah and Jonathan Halloway about him, getting mixed reactions from both. Maya burst into tears at the idea that Adam was as close as they had for a suspect when she was so certain he could not have been involved. Jonathan, having been released on his own recognizance for attacking Elliot, also rejected the idea that Adam could have hurt Olivia, but did so with a sullen attitude and immediately switched the conversation to what else they knew about Elliot’s involvement.

They had attempted to find as much information about Adam as they could, but upon not finding so much as a traffic ticket, they decided to speak to him face to face about Mark Landon’s comments.

“I mean, you’re actually thinking *I* did something to Olivia?”

“We’re looking at everybody,” Fin said.

“Like hell you are!” Adam yelled. “This is messed up! You’re giving me a full interrogation and I hadn’t talked to her in days before she went missing.”

“Like he said,” Munch said. “We’re checking into anyone who might’ve been a part of her life.”

Adam shook his head and crossed the room to sit on his sofa. “This is crazy. Olivia and I...I’ve known her for years. Why would I do something to her?”

“That’s the question of the week,” Munch said.

“Well, it’s bull. We talked every once in a while and hung out even less than that.”

“But, you’d call her a friend?” Fin asked.

“Well, yeah. Like *I* said, we’ve known each other for years, but I don’t know why you’d even come looking at me for this.”

“Maybe the last time you talked things got a little heated?” Fin asked. “Maybe you had an argument?”

Adam glared at him. “We *never* had an argument. In all the years I’ve known her, I never once even raised my voice with her. She was one of the few people in this city who was cool to me right from the start.”

“She was *cool* from the start?” Fin said.

“Yeah. She welcomed me to the building and told me if I ever needed anything, I could call on her.”

“So, you got close?”

“Yeah...We got kinda close. When she was around, I’d beat her at Madden or we’d just talk. I mean, what’s the big deal? If you’re looking at me for just hanging with her then you should prolly be looking at her boyfriend and some other guys too.”

"I think you know where we're going with this..." Fin said.

"Oh," Adam said in a deep voice. "I get it. A white girl goes missing and the first person ya'll want to bring in is the big, black guy from upstairs?"

"No one's saying-" Munch began.

"Bullshit! You're here 'cause of that mess. I know it! I betchu that piece of trash honky across from her told you to check me out, didn't he?" Munch and Fin glanced at one another, but Adam continued. "You know what? This is beyond messed up. How the hell could anybody take that little sacka nothing seriously!"

"Why wouldn't we?" Fin said.

"He's fucking crazy! You know what he did? He comes to *my* apartment a couple weeks ago and says I need to keep my black ass away from Olivia. He says he knows what's going on in the building and no one here would *approve*."

"Approve of what?" Munch asked.

"My question exactly! Look, Liv and I are cool, but we ain't *that* cool. She's a friend. That's it and he steps to me like he's her protector or some shit. If ya'll need somebody to look at, *he's* your man!"

"That's interesting," Cragen said when Munch and Fin reported back to him a half hour later. "Mark points the finger at Adam and Adam points it right back at him."

"Doesn't matter," Fin said. "As upset as he was, I doubt he's anymore involved than Elliot."

"Speaking of which," Cragen said. "I think we can at least use Mark's statement to pull Elliot off the bench on this. Getting some corroboration from someone who's not a cop will help. If Landon says Elliot got on the elevator when Olivia was still in her apartment, it's good enough for me."

Cragen reached for his phone, but Munch stood still, shaking his head.

"What is it, John?" Cragen said.

"There's just too many coincidences here. Morse's video just happens to cut out what happened that night. Landon just *happens* to go to his bedroom at the time when Olivia would've gone missing...Elliot just *happens* to be the last person to see her alive."

"I know," Cragen said, "but, we've seen worse and I don't see any reason to punish Elliot for coincidences. Do you?"

Munch nodded, but then left the office with a frown on his face and Fin followed after him.

As Cragen reached for the phone again, he saw Munch through his window pointing a woman in the direction of his office. He sighed as she approached the door and opened it for her.

"Captain Cragen?" she said quickly. "My name is Diana Willex and I desperately need to speak to you."

He ushered her into one of the chairs in front of his desk and she sighed deeply as she tucked her light brown hair behind her ears.

"What can I do for you?"

"I've been...I don't know how to say this...seeing Elliot Stabler. I guess you can just say that we're friends."

"Okay..."

"Now, I've been watching the news lately and I've been hearing all these reports about him."

“Do you know anything about the case?” Cragen asked.

The knowledge that Elliot had seemingly given up on reconciling with his wife was unnerving and he felt somewhat alarmed that the woman before him already comfortable enough to speak on Elliot’s behalf.

“The thing is,” Diana said. “I’ve seen this video that’s all over the place...It says it took place the night Elliot’s partner disappeared, but I know that just can’t be right.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because that night in particular...Elliot was with me.”

Cragen stared at her for a moment, unsure what to say. “Are you sure about the date? The videos were time stamped.”

“And, I’m saying the time stamp is wrong. Elliot couldn’t possibly have done anything to his partner because he was with me...the whole night.”

“I see.”

“I’m not lying.”

Cragen shifted in his chair. “No one’s saying you are.”

“I just wanted to come forward and tell someone so that you could set the record straight. I think that video is something old and I’m willing to swear openly if I need to.”

“Thank you, Ms. Willex. Let me just get some information from you and we can go from there.”

As Diana gave her written statement, Cragen suppressed a roll of his eyes thinking that Elliot finally had had a run of luck getting two different people randomly vying for him.

When she left, Cragen reached for his phone for the third time to call Elliot, but paused and pressed his speed dial button labeled “The Doc.”

Woodside, New York
1:09PM

Elliot squeezed the steering wheel tighter as he drove under Roosevelt Avenue. The snow had begun again and the fresh layer made the streets somewhat icy, but anger pushed the gas pedal harder. He was intent on getting to Diana’s apartment as soon as possible, regardless of the weather.

He had received a call from Cragen earlier with mixed news. Two people had contacted the 1-6 to clear Elliot’s name and after a talk with George, Cragen wanted to publicly dismiss the suspension and any doubts about his involvement in Olivia’s disappearance. The bad news was that Mark was a shifty character and that Diana was clearly lying.

Shaking his head at the thought of Olivia’s small neighbor, Elliot continued onto 43rd Avenue.

“She wasn’t crying when I left her, Cap,” Elliot had said when Cragen had called him.

“What difference does it make?” Cragen had said. “At this point, all I’m interested in is getting another body in here to work the case.”

Morse's videos sprang to mind and he sighed at the thought of Olivia nearly falling into Mark's arms after he, Elliot, had drilled into her over Kathleen. Elliot did not particularly like Mark Landon, but, having only met him a handful of times, he was still grateful for the gesture. Diana, however, was a different story entirely.

She had called earlier offering an alibi he knew he did not need, and took it upon herself to lie. Lies at this point in the case would only fuel the fire and that same fire bolted Elliot up the stairs in Diana's building and caused him to pound heavily on her door.

"Hi!" she said eyes bright when she opened the door.

Her hair was still in a ponytail from working at her school and her makeup looked slightly worn. He stepped into her apartment, thankful only that she had ended her day early and he had the opportunity to give his tirade in private.

"I told you!" he yelled. "I told you not to say anything!"

"Why are you so mad? I did it for you."

Elliot curled his hand into a fist trying to retain his anger. This same rage had already caused him to do something stupid and he did not want a repeat of the current problem.

"I don't need your help, Diana. This is already bad enough without you *lying* to my boss on top of it."

"You keep pushing me away, but Elliot, I just want to help."

"I don't need your help! How many times do I have to say it!"

"Fine! I'm done. I won't do anything else, no matter how badly you need it."

He sighed and headed for her door.

"Is that it?" she said as he reached for the handle.

"What else were you expecting?"

"You are just unbelievable, you know that!"

"What the hell did *I* do? You're the one lying to the police for no reason!"

"I stuck my neck out for you and this is how you're treating me? After everything between us?"

Elliot ran a hand over his face.

You knew this was coming, he thought.

"Diana...Look, I'm sorry about...what you think has happened between us. That first night, I was feeling lonely and I made a bad decision. We had a few good times and a couple great nights, but I think it's best if we just leave it at that."

Diana crossed the room in three steps and as her hand made contact with the side of his face that still hurt from the beating he had taken from Olivia, he remembered Olivia's words from what seemed like years earlier.

"You can't leave a woman out to dry, Elliot."

He stepped back as Diana stared at him with wet eyes.

"You bastard," she whispered. "You have no right to treat me this way."

"If I remember correctly, you made the first move. You were the one telling me that I shouldn't spend the night alone."

"But, you're a grown man. You could've said no!"

"Diana, I'm sorry-"

“You used me. After all I’ve tried to do for you, you just used me. I can’t even believe you. You know...you probably did kill your damn partner! Did you use her too? Is that why no one can find her?”

Elliot pulled himself to his full height and glared at her. “You’re out of line, Diana.”

“How can you say I’m outta line when you’re the one who’s so much as said you just used me for sex! How the hell am I supposed to react to that?”

“I can’t believe you’re really giving me grief over this.”

“You can’t put yourself in my shoes for a goddamn second! You’re a detective and you can’t figure out why I’m upset?”

“No, Diana. I can’t put myself in your shoes because you don’t deal with the same shit I face everyday. So, let me put this in perspective for you. For the past month, I’ve been trying to track down a killer who murdered eight people. Seven of them were kids. Children, Diana. Kids who were found brutalized and strangled and I had to look at every single one of them when they were left in boxes around the city once this guy was done with them. I had to look each parent in the eyes to tell them that they would have to bury their children and I’ve had to look this guy in the face as he confessed to murdering these kids just because he was crazy. This is what I have to deal with. So, no! I can’t even possibly relate to this piddling crap you’re throwing at me!”

Tears fell from Diana’s eyes, but Elliot could not stem the flow of words.

“And... To top everything off, my partner is gone. Vanished! No one knows where she is and when I’m dealing with the fact that half the world thinks I did something to her, I have to replay that night in my mind over and over and *over* again. If I never see her again, the last words I’ll have said to her were ‘I can’t fucking stand you.’ How would you feel if those were the last words you said to your son or someone else you care about? This is what I’ve got going on in my life right now and I can’t believe you’d even consider giving me grief because I fell during a weak moment.”

Diana bit her lip and wiped at her face. “I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry. I won’t bother you again.”

He wanted to apologize for yelling at her, but he could not stand the sight of her crying before him and quickly left her apartment hoping that those would not be the last words he said to her.

Bellevue Hospital
3:30PM

“What is wrong with you people!” a red-faced Morse screamed to Munch and Elliot. “You’ll never find her at this rate!”

“Calm down, Morse,” Elliot said, sounding uninterested.

After Diana’s, Elliot had gone back to the precinct to see if they had uncovered anything relevant on Olivia’s whereabouts. When Munch and Fin told him that Mark and Adam were pointing fingers at one another, he suggested they run the idea of both Mark and Adam across Morse.

“Why do you keep telling me to calm down, you imbecile?” Morse yelled. “You’re coming to me about this Adam Jackson? This just tells me that you people don’t have a fucking clue!”

“Well, why don’t you clue us in?” Munch said. “Apparently, you’ve got all the answers.”

Morse sighed as he shook his head. “You people...Adam Jackson didn’t do anything to her.”

“C’m on, Morse,” Elliot said. “First you insist that I did something when you didn’t have any real proof and now you’re saying the opposite about this guy, when again, you don’t have any proof.”

“I don’t need any goddamn proof when I’ve got common sense! Common sense tells me that any time I ever saw him with Olivia, everything was all smiles. They didn’t yell at each other or even throw each other dirty looks. He’s probably one of the most decent people in her life and I can’t believe you people could honestly think he’s involved. I mean, the man’s a choir boy. Church every Sunday and Bible Study on Wednesdays. I think he really does sing in the goddamn choir! And yet, you people are here asking me if you think he might’ve hurt Olivia. This is beyond ridiculous!”

“We’re here asking you about Adam because you’ve been stalking Olivia for years,” Elliot said, “and if there was someone who knew what was going on in her apartment, it’d be you. We just wanted to cross him off the list for sure.”

“Well, you can cross him off the damn list,” Morse spat. “Adam Jackson... Honestly!”

“What can you tell us about Mark Landon?” Munch asked. “Her neighbor.”

Morse shrugged. “Him I don’t know a lot about.”

“How can that be?” Elliot said. “He lives right across the hall.”

“If you’d let me *finish*...The only thing I really know about him is that he’s got it for Olivia.”

“Got it, how?” Munch asked.

“He’s got it for her,” Morse repeated. “He likes her and I guess he likes to take upon himself to look out for her.”

“Kind of like you,” Elliot said.

Morse sneered at him. “*Not* like me. I don’t go knocking on her door at random times during the night and asking if she needs bread and shit, do I?”

“No, you just stalked her from across the street. You never even had the balls to go and talk to her, let alone help her out.”

“You know, you can just go screw yourself, you bastard. I’m not like Landon. He’s a sad little man who never leaves his apartment and just ends up getting her door slammed in his face when he interrupts her and Holloway together. I never bothered her or did anything to interrupt her life.”

Elliot rolled his eyes, but Morse continued. “And, keep in mind, I never burst through her apartment door and *attacked* her for no reason.”

“Are we gonna go through this again, Morse?”

“No,” he said. “But, I still think you’re full of shit.”

“Likewise.” Elliot turned toward Munch. “We’re leaving.”

“When can I get out of here, goddamn it!”

“What?”

"I gave you the cameras," Morse said. "You're end of the deal was to get me in minimum security."

"You lied."

"No, I didn't."

"Yes, you did."

"Why the hell would I lie?"

"It doesn't matter," Elliot said. "You're in here because you belong in here."

"That doesn't make any sense! You're the one who attacked her and you were the last person to see her alive and yet, you're the one walking free! All I did was follow her a little and paint her picture! You threw her to the floor and jumped on top of her!"

"You belong in a prison cell. Stalking is still a crime in this city."

"And since when is assault not one? Is it because you're a cop? Was this a justifiable attack against your partner?"

Elliot took a step toward Morse. "You're in here because your daddy pulled some strings to get you in here or did you forget what went on during your arraignment. You're a multiple offender who had been stalking a cop for years. With a rap sheet like yours, you should be serving hard time, but instead you're here. A quiet room all to yourself and three squares a day."

"This is still bullshit."

"But at the end of the day, Olivia and I had a simple argument and you've got a stack of crimes a mile high against you. You should be happy I don't pull some strings of my own to get you thrown where you really belong."

"You can't threaten me," Morse said.

"Who's threatening?" Elliot said. "The only reason I haven't said anything yet is because I don't feel like driving all the way to Rikers if I need to ask you a question. You think about that the next time you start pointing your accusations."

"What kind of connections do you have to get a Morse thrown in prison for anything less than homicide?" Munch asked when they had left the hospital.

Elliot shrugged. "None, but Morse doesn't need to know that."

They both laughed, but the smile fell from Munch's face quickly.

"Look, Elliot," he began. "I just want to...apologize for the grief I might've been giving you this week."

"Don't even mention it," Elliot said shaking his head. "If I were in your place, I'd've done the same thing. In fact, I think the whole idea of it puts me at ease a little. At least I know you're not holding back from looking at everyone."

Munch returned his smile and they drove back to the precinct in silence.

Offices of Dr. George Huang
28 Federal Plaza
7:06PM

"How have you been feeling lately?"

Elliot stared at George for a moment as they sat in his office. He had hoped for a short talk with George regarding his "state" since Olivia had been gone, but when he

arrived at the office and saw that George had already set out a comfortable chair for him, he knew he would have no such luck.

"How do you think I've been feeling lately? My partner's disappeared off the face of the earth and everyone in the world seems to think I had something to do with it."

"Have you been sleeping?" George asked.

"Yeah. Long enough to have nightmares about what my life is gonna be like if we find her and she's been raped and killed.

"That's understandable, Elliot."

Elliot shook his head. "You're doing that *thing* you do when you're analyzing me and you know I can't stand that."

"It's normal to be upset over all of this."

"Let's just get to the point where you tell me I'm not adjusting to this so, Cragen will force me to do something other than Liv's case."

"What makes you think I'd do that?" George said though he did not expect an answer during the pause that came after his question.

Both he and Elliot remembered an incident with a case not too long past where George had done that very thing.

"Then, let's move onto that video," George said quickly.

Elliot sighed. "I got angry."

"That I could see."

"But, I didn't hurt her. I would never harm Olivia."

"I know that Elliot. We all know that."

"Then why do I feel like I'm repeating myself every ten seconds. Every time I turn around, I'm telling the same thing to someone else. I have to swear up and down and people still don't believe me. I don't know what I did to make people think I'd kill her, but it couldn't be that bad."

"You're not a bad person."

"Doc, you're doing it again."

"Okay fine. Let's talk about something specific in that video. Something, it seems that everyone is intent on avoiding."

Elliot felt his body tense as he recalled the last night he had seen Olivia.

He was lying, literally, on top of her and could feel every shift she made beneath him. His heart was pounding and he could feel hers pulsing through the bare skin that was coming in contact with his. Every thought that ran through his mind was focused on her and a yearning for her; want, need, desire. His mind was electric as his hands ran across her arms; her skin was so soft.

His mouth followed in place of his hands and everything in his being want to kiss her everywhere at the same time. He had started to pull at his jacket, thinking he might not be able to get off everything in time, when a thought crossed his mind.

What if she doesn't want me?

But, Olivia had not shuddered, nor did she pull away from him when his lips came in contact with her skin. She wanted him it as much as he did.

She shifted beneath him and he could hear the keys that lied somewhere hidden in her cami bra jingling and all thoughts of the feel of her skin against his crashed away in an instant.

"Elliot?" George said, breaking his reverie.

"I didn't hurt her," Elliot repeated.

"But, you know what I'm talking about."

"I did that...I admit it, okay? I wanted her. In that moment, I wanted her more than I ever had in my life...but I wanted Drover's file more."

"You say you admit it, but what are you admitting?"

"I admit that I...c'mon Doc. Why do we have to go through this?"

"You attacked your partner that night. There's got to be a reason why, aside from Jeffrey Drover's file."

"Why's there got to be another reason? She was the sole person holding the information I needed to go after the guy who tried to pull something on my kid. I'd've gone after her or anyone else holding that file."

George stared at him a moment, as if playing the video through his own sapient mind. "But you never struck her at any point?"

Elliot gawked at him. "Are you serious? You really think that I'd go so far as to hit her?"

"She hit you."

Elliot wanted to ask how George had known, but he turned his eyes toward the far wall instead. "That's different. I deserved to have the shit kicked out of me that night."

"So, you let her?"

"I didn't let her. She had the upper hand on me and she was pissed. What was I supposed to do? Hit her in the jaw to keep her from hitting me again?"

"You're a lot stronger than her. You could've stopped her at anytime, but you let her keep going."

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Again with this 'why.'"

"Everyone has a motive for the things they do."

Elliot's foot tapped nervously for a moment as he contemplated the question at which George had been hinting since the conversation began. "You think we were sleeping together?"

George's eyebrows lifted. "Were you?"

"No...we never had an affair. We never kissed, held hands or even looked into one another's eyes and had a moment."

"Eight years is a long time to work next to someone. Especially in this unit."

Elliot laughed. "You're tellin' me. Years ago, we were working this case, going through phone records trying to see if this guy was trying lure kids to his house by calling them at night. Anyways, it's two in the morning and it's summer and it's hot. The AC in the room we were in was broken and we just had some fans down there with us. I just kept looking at her over those phone records...And, there's this part of me that's just saying, 'Elliot, go home. Your wife needs you,' but there was this other part of me that's like, 'What about what *I* need?' Liv was sitting beside me and had ditched her jacket on the other side of the room and we were both so tired, we were delirious. She started laughing hysterically at this number she found that spelled out 'fat butt' and she had that smile on her face and she was sweating just enough...It was all I could do to keep my hands to myself and keep from just touching her."

"But, you didn't."

"No, I didn't, but the thought had crossed my mind. And, in hindsight, the only thing that probably kept me from doing anything was fear that...she wouldn't want me." He sighed after the revelation, unable to look at George.

"She's very pretty, Elliot. Any man can sympathize."

"She's my partner."

"Things have been known to happen between co-workers. You're not the first and you're not the last."

"But, I knew better."

George nodded. "Right, you knew better, but you thought about it anyway."

"Yeah."

"Like that Tuesday. You knew better than to jump on top of her..."

"...but I did anyway. So, the question is why'd I do it?"

George paused, waiting for answer, but Elliot stared at the floor.

"I honestly wish I had an answer for you, but I don't. Maybe it was just pent up frustration over the case and over the way things were going between us that made me do it. I don't know. I talking to Morse today and he said I belong in a cell. I'm beginning to think he's right."

"It's not the first time you and a partner have had a fight, Elliot. You think you should be locked up for one fight?"

"Maybe. I don't know." He stood and began to pace the room. "It's just...if this had been about any other person. Any other person in the world, I think I'd be fine because I know I'd have Liv right beside me telling me so. Telling me that she believed me right from the start and that this would work out. If this was anybody else, I think I'd be fine. How fucked up is that? She's the one I've come to depend on. Not my wife, not my brothers..."

"It's part of the job. If you couldn't trust and depend on her, then the two of you couldn't work together."

"Yeah...trust."

"Do you think that might have been why you reacted the way you did?"

"What? Trust?"

"Yes. You said Olivia was withholding the information you needed to investigate Drover. Maybe you felt betrayed by someone you trusted so much and that's why you did and said the things you did."

A vision of his past dream came to mind and Elliot closed his eyes momentarily to keep a tear from slipping from his lashes. "You know, when I was a kid, my brother Bryce and I would fight all the time and my mother always made us make up before we went to sleep or left the house. She would say that we should never leave angry because we never know if those are the last words we're going to say to someone. Her words just keep playing through my head when I think about that night. I was so angry with Olivia and I just left her thinking that I'd have all the time in the world to make up with her and tell her..."

"Tell her what?"

"Tell her...everything. I mean, I told her before, when Kathy left me, that she was all I had left to keep me grounded. I told her all I had left was her and the job and here I am...I've all but lost both and now, I've got nothing. And, what scares me most, is that I don't know how I'm going to survive is she's been killed. Each day, I wake up with just a

little less hope, wondering if this is going to be the day. If in the next hour I'll get the call that will end my life...If I had realized that one person could affect my life this much, then I would have told her every day what it meant to have her by my side."

"Elliot," George said softly. "What are you going to do if something has happened to her? What if you do get that call? How will you react?"

Elliot shook his head. "George...How will *you* react?"

"Olivia isn't my partner. I haven't been working directly beside her for years."

"But, you know her. What are you going to do?"

George leaned back in his chair. "To be honest, I'm not sure how I'll react. She's a good person and a good cop who I'm sure has a lot more planned with her life."

"So, you don't know how *you* 'll react, but you're asking me the question anyway?"

"I don't think I've given it a lot of thought as of yet. I'm still hoping for the best, but you on the other hand... You said it yourself. You have nightmares about what life is going to be like if she's been killed. So, what are you doing in those nightmares?"

"I don't know," Elliot said rubbing a hand over his face. "I usually wake up from those dreams after I start screaming over her body, but I suppose...I don't know. I'll probably fall apart for a long, long time."

"Do you think you could continue working?"

"Not in this unit. I mean, it'd be like, anytime I saw a victim, I'd see Olivia. No, I couldn't stay in SVU. Honestly, I'm not sure how I'll take it because she's like family to me, but I know for sure, I'd have to leave. Maybe take some time and maybe go to another precinct altogether...maybe another state."

"You think running away from all of it would help?"

"A few years back my sister was diagnosed with breast cancer and the whole time, my brother and I were just sort of bouncing around not knowing what to do. This same question kept coming up. What were we going to do if she died? I mean, she's our sister. The person we went to bat for anytime Mom felt like yelling at her for something. The person I'd beat up older kids for when we were young just because they looked at her the wrong way or said something to her I didn't like. It looked like my sister was going to die and just thinking about that made me want to pick up roots and get out of the city altogether." He sighed. "But, I don't see how any of this matters now. I mean, what's the point of all these questions. I feel like I'm wasting time just standing here."

"To put it bluntly, we need to make sure that some affair gone awry is not the reason Olivia's missing. I need to put to rest any fears that you might have...lost it and done something to her in a fit of rage and to make sure there's not another problem on the horizon."

"There's no affair and I didn't hurt her. In fact, she worked me over worse than I ever could've done to her. Besides, whether I'm working her case or not, I'm still going to have to deal with it if she's dead. I'm still going to have the same nightmares and I'm still going to wonder if there was something more I could've done to save her."

"Okay," George said. "That's all I really needed to know."

"Well, why didn't you just say that in the first place? You could've saved us both an hour."

Elliot left the office in a huff and George shook his head. He knew that Elliot had had a rough experience with psychiatrists in conjunction with his work and whenever his

own work led him too close into Elliot's life, Elliot pushed back harder than any of the detectives in the unit. That night, Elliot had opened up to him more than usual, but with the knowledge that whatever he had to say was going to be expressed to someone else, Elliot had also resisted harder than he had on any earlier occasion.

A part of George wanted Elliot as a patient, knowing that there were many layers involved with Elliot's sometimes cold and overly tenacious demeanor, but he knew short of an absolute catastrophe in his life, Elliot would vehemently refuse help of any kind.

George made his final notes on Elliot and reached for his phone to call Cragen.

"But you think he feels guilty?" Cragen asked several minutes into the conversation.

"Guilt because he think he's let down everyone around him. The squad, his family and especially her. But, there's nothing I can see that suggests he might have had some kind of episode and done something to her."

Cragen sat silent, still unsure of what to think.

"Quite frankly," George continued. "I think *not* being a part of the investigation is doing him more harm than anything else. And, if, God forbid, something terrible has happened to Olivia, we'd be dealing with a much worse version of his psyche if he didn't have a chance at trying to find her. At least if he were doing something to help find her, he could apply his focus on something tangible instead of just fear the unknown. And to be honest, it's not like he's going to stop asking the questions and searching on his own."

"Thanks," Cragen said after another moment's silence. "I expect you'll have something for me in the morning?"

"By nine o'clock."

"All right. You've been a big help."

"It's not a problem," George said.

As he hung up the telephone, he stared at the chair Elliot once occupied and repressed a shudder. While he did not think Elliot was capable of hurting Olivia, his experience told him that the person responsible for her disappearance most likely had a date with the end of Elliot's fist if they ever found him.

The elevator doors to the ninth floor corridor chimed as they opened and Elliot stepped off the lift following behind the broad orderly.

He figured his thoughts would be solely on Olivia when he first left George's office that night, but surprisingly he found himself focused on Morse. He could not chance leaving Morse to his own devices in his padded cell without pulling more information from him.

"Morse," the orderly said. "Wake up. You've another visitor."

"At this hour?" Morse's voice rang soft from inside the padded room. "It'd better not be you, Dad, because I swear I'll spit up all over your Barker Blacks."

His eyes narrowed to long blue slits when he turned to see Elliot standing in the room.

"And what do *you* want?" Morse said.

"Your videos. Where are the rest?"

"What rest? You've taken all my collection."

“No,” Elliot said pacing in the room. “You made a collection that’s edited. There are parts missing. Pieces left out. I want the originals.”

“What makes you think I’ve even kept originals? What makes you think I hadn’t just thrown them out when I got what I wanted from them?”

“Because, Morse...you’re obsessive compulsive and you’re crazy. Some people think those are one in the same, but I know they’re not. However, when you put them in conjunction you get one fucked up individual. Now, I know you’ve got the originals somewhere, so just tell me where they are.”

A sly grin spread across Morse’s face. “You’re just wanting to see her in the buff, aren’t you?”

“Morse. It’s late. I don’t have time for games. I need the originals.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you do. You want to have a look at that tattoo on her side up close, right?”

“I’ve already seen it and I want the damn originals.”

“Why?”

“I don’t have to give you a reason.”

“Course you do, Detective. They’re my private property and I’m not giving them up unless I see fit to.”

“Fine. The truth is I don’t think you killed her yourself, but I’m sure you had a hand in this and I know there’s something on the originals that’s been left out of the edits that’ll tell me what happened to her that night.”

Morse shook his head. “But, the video I gave you people wasn’t edited. It was a straight shot of what I took from the drives. There’s nothing more to it.”

“That’s for the police to decide.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Morse! We’re gonna find them eventually, so why don’t you save us some time and tell me where the damn tapes are!”

“Well, if you’re half as clever as you think you are, go find them yourself.”

“Every second we waste chasing down this bullshit is a second we waste in trying to find her.”

“I suppose you’re right, but I’m not giving you anything. Not after what I saw. Bring one of the other two back in here and I might tell one of them...*if* I’m in the mood.”

“Morse, if she’s dead because you stalled, I’m coming here to shove my foot directly up your ass *before* I go to work on you.”

“Yeah, well you do that. Maybe it’ll help my prostate examines go smooth when I’m forty.”

Elliot started to leave, but paused. “Don’t you want to find her! You made paintings of her! Followed her every footstep and now, you’re staring at me like you don’t even care. Like you don’t want her to be found.”

Morse rose from his spot on the floor and crossed the room to glare at Elliot closely. “Believe me, Detective. Every second I can’t see her is absolute agony for me and the only thing that’s keeping me from tying a rope around my neck and giving this world my own ‘fuck you’ is that I’m praying...I’m actually praying that you people can pull your heads out of your asses for long enough to find her. I need to see her again. I need to see her not being set upon by some brute, Irish savage with anger management

problems. I just want to see her smile one more time. That's all I'm living for at this point."

"Then, why won't you help me find her?"

"Because *you* don't deserve it! You attacked her like you were attacking some rapist on the street."

"That's a lie."

"Like hell it is. You tackled her and you had her by the throat."

"For a second! I just grabbed her and that was it!"

"It was a second too long, Detective! I've been watching remember! I know how you operate. You give her these long looks, but get all pissy when she talks about other men with you. I don't care what you say. Even though *you* didn't kill her, you're still a bastard and I won't give you anything."

Elliot turned on the spot, but Morse called out to him.

"Why do you insist on coming here? I know that you know I didn't hurt her. And, you know that I know you know I know *you* probably didn't hurt her. So, why do you keep coming?"

"You say you know me and Liv so well... You tell me."

Morse laughed. "You think I've got the answers to all this locked up in my brain somewhere or on my videos. Well, I'm telling you now, I don't. Otherwise, she'd be here right now and I could keep living my life just the way I want to."

He took another step closer to Elliot. "The more I talk to you up close, the less I think you might have done her *intentional* harm, but I'm still not sure about you."

"I keep telling you, I didn't do anything to her."

"Uh-huh. That's what all the guilty ones say, though, isn't it Detective?"

Elliot rolled his eyes.

"You know," Morse said softly. "That night...the Monday before she was gone. I saw the way she looked at you and I'm telling you...If she hadn't been so tired that night, she would've asked you to stay."

"I did stay."

"I mean personally asked you to stay...with her...alone...in her apartment... Don't tell me I've got to spell it out for you."

"Is that a fact?" Elliot said flatly.

"Absolutely. It's me, remember? I know everything about her. I saw the two of you in the car, I saw her asking you to come up and I saw the look on her face when she let you in the apartment. She only gets the special spark in her eye every once in a while and I knew what it was. If she hadn't fallen asleep, she would've nailed you."

"Well, I guess that's good to know," Elliot said as he turned to leave.

"Hey, I'd be happy, if I were you," Morse shouted. "If you could just get her away from that Halloway fellow, you'd probably be in like flint. Must be fate, I guess."

"Must be," Elliot mumbled as he walked back down the corridor.

Chapter Twenty-One

Friday February 9, 2007
SVU Squad Room

The alternating sequence of black words and white spaces on the series of reports relating to on Harry Morse burned across Elliot's retinas and he wiped his eyes with the balls of his hands to rub away their burn. The better part of his morning had been spent trying to obtain warrants for and going through anything associated with Morse and his family, his goal being to find something that might suggest where Morse was keeping his original videos.

Not for the first time, he tossed and turned in the bed for hours the previous night before giving up to stare at the motel's ceiling and that was until images played in front of his eyes as if his nightmares were dancing on the serrulated plaster. When he finally drew himself from the dank room, his thoughts were fixed on Morse.

The Morse family tree could be traced back to the Mayflower and there seemed to be no limit on their hold over the city. Through his research, Elliot found Morses everywhere from the city council to distant cousins sitting on the bench for New York State Supreme Court and also in the US Senate. The Morse name could also be found on the titles of five percent of all New York businesses, which did not seem like much when Elliot had first read the statistic, but when he began to run the names of the many firms and ventures, he simply gave up counting. Collectively, Morse assets were in the billions and he knew somewhere in those billions lied the objects he so assiduously sought.

Elliot stood, stretching over his desk and his eyes fell on the most recent list of entitlements attributed specifically to Harry Morse. While most of the women in the Morse family married into wealthier New York families, increasing the overall girth of the Morse name, the males all went into either business or politics. Harry, it appeared, was the first artist found in the affluent family, and, even though Morse had been afforded every luxury life had to offer, for a brief moment, Elliot found himself pitying Morse.

Living in the shadow of his own father and brother most of his life was difficult enough for Elliot and they were simply a family of Stablers in a smaller neck of Queens. Growing up with the name Morse having over his head was probably unbearable and Elliot was not surprised that Morse had become slightly unbalanced in his thirty years.

He glanced over the report again as it listed several cars in Morse's name, the apartment he held across from Olivia's, a studio near the Meat-Packing District and a small yacht that rested up North. His eyes paused over something in the middle of the list he had seen twice, but had not given much thought.

In the middle of the Hamptons, clearly away from the water, but still in the area, Morse held what looked like a small cottage in his name. The square-footage did not seem very substantial when compared to other dwellings owned by the Morses, but it was but it was the subtlety of the place that piqued Elliot's interest.

"Hey," Munch said walking in the squad room with a Styrofoam cup of coffee, though he looked fatigued. "How long have you been in?"

"Hours."

"Find anything?"

"Maybe," Elliot said still staring at the list. "You in the mood for a road trip to the Hamptons?"

Munch shrugged. "Of course! It's February. Why not? Let me just pack my swim trunks and some sun block and we're off."

Elliot tried to stifle another shiver that ran through his body, but was unsuccessful. He was quite cold from his and Munch's foray to Morse's cottage, though he had had plenty of time to get warm in the seven hours it took to get there and back again.

Harry Morse's Hamptons home held the charm and quaint appearance of something half of its 2200 square feet, but when they first arrived, it was clear that it had not been used in years. They had shuffled through the snow drifts on the grounds trying to see any signs that Morse had been there recently, but found none. It was only when they were about to give up on the idea entirely that Elliot spotted the shed that sat near the edge of the lot, half covered in snow and with its peeling white paint, nearly invisible.

He and Munch had approached it cautiously, not knowing what to expect given the last time they had entered a Morse premise and found that the inside of the shed, though heavily insulated was just as cold as the surrounding area. The shed was, in fact, a large refrigerator in which Morse had installed rows and rows of shelves to house his thousands of hard drives and Elliot's sense of self-satisfaction had warmed him throughout the entire time it had taken for him and Munch to pack away Morse's uncut videos. Hours later however, the exertion in the cold that had entered his bones was seeping out from Elliot's clothes and even taking another sip of hot coffee did not quell the next shiver.

Cragen had assigned another female detective, Andrea Cooke, to watch the new tapes with Alexa once they returned as the captain knew no one in the squad could, in good conscience, watch Morse's possessions.

Fin sighed as he watched yet another cart pass by filled with Morse's videos. "Are we even sure we're gonna find anything off all these?"

Elliot shrugged and rose from his desk. "Who knows? But I feel better knowing we've looked into all his assets and we can pretty much cross him off the list."

"I wouldn't say that too loud," Munch said. "His team of attorneys might hear and try to use that to get him out of the loony bin."

"Not a chance," Elliot said. "I got word they recovered some stolen artwork in Morse's apartment. If he's lucky, Team Morse can keep him there instead of Rikers."

"Who've we got left?" Cragen said, solemnly keeping the topic to the subject at hand.

With Olivia missing for eleven days and with no strong lead on a suspect, the heat he was taking from his superiors was not what was keeping him up at night. The possibility that they would never find her was becoming more real with each minute that passed and even Missing Persons' investigation was coming to a halt.

"What do we know about Liv's neighbor?" Munch said.

"Who?" Elliot said. "Landon?"

"No, the one down the hall from her. The first apartment on the left when you first get off the elevator."

"He said he just heard some noise that night. Same as everyone else."

Munch shook his head. "He might be worth looking at though. If memory serves, that building has a crazy numbering system."

“What d’you mean?” Cragen asked.

“Instead of alternating with odds on the left and even on the right or vice versa, it just starts right down one side, then up the others.”

“But why would that warrant us looking at the guy down the hall further?” Elliot asked.

“Because Liv’s apartment is eighty-four, but in any other building it would be eighty-eight. The guy at the end... Sam or something. He’s in number eighty-eight. What if someone was looking for *him*, but got Liv’s apartment instead?”

It was Elliot’s turn to shake his head. “No, that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well,” Munch said. “Olivia just disappearing in the middle of the night doesn’t make any sense either, but here we are.”

“What I mean is we would’ve seen something in her apartment to show that and we didn’t. Plus, even if Sam was into something, how would anyone have locked her door from the outside? I mean, let’s say Sam owes people money and they came after him. How would they get her door locked when all her keys are either in her apartment or accounted for otherwise? No, it just doesn’t fit.”

“I still think that theory might be worth following up,” Munch said.

“I’ve already looked at the guy every possible,” Elliot said. “He’s an artist and sells his stuff by the river. The apartment was his grandmother’s and he’s just barely scraping by, but he’s making it completely clean. He’s not involved.”

“What about Diorel?” Fin said.

“He was at Rikers,” Elliot said. “We’ve already checked.”

“But, the reason he’s in there is ‘cause he tried to get at Evelyn Rivers.”

“Yeah, but that was before Liv went missing. He would’ve already been in a jail cell waiting for the bus up there before I even got to her place last Tuesday.”

“But still,” Fin said. “How’d he even know where Liv had taken Evelyn? He was in a cell the whole time we whisked her away, so how’d he even know where to go in the first place?”

Silence fell upon them as Alexa slid toward their circle. Cragen glanced at her, trying not to stare at her as if asking, “What are *you* doing here?”

“Andrea said she’s got it on her own, so...” Alexa crossed her arms and stared at Cragen in return.

“We checked his connections, though,” Elliot said, ignoring Alexa. “He’s being moved to Sing Sing to do six years for the assault and battery on Evelyn. And, there’s nothing on Morse’s tapes that shows anybody out of place coming in or out of Liv’s building that night.”

“Which leaves us back where we started,” Munch said.

“There’s got to be someone we didn’t look at enough,” Cragen said.

“What about Jonathan Halloway?” Alexa said in an unusually high-pitched voice. “I mean, he’s been in here more than enough times, but we’ve never really taken a good look at him. And, he’s got a set of Olivia’s keys.”

“You want us to look at Halloway?” Elliot said. “He’ll be harder to dig into than Morse. At least Morse’s family wants to just wipe him from the books altogether. Halloway’s got his own money to push around *and* his family’s.”

“But aside from Drover and Kreider, who else haven’t we looked into?” Alexa said. “If I remember correctly, he was in here accusing you of doing something before

there was any real word that something bad might have happened. I think that warrants a little more investigation.”

Elliot opened his mouth to retort, but Cragen interjected. “That sounds good. Alexa, you and John dig up what you can about Halloway. Nail down his every movement from the last time he’s seen on Morse’s tapes until he showed up here. Elliot, Fin. I want you two to talk to both Drover and Kreider again.”

“They’re not involved, Cap,” Elliot said. “And we’ve already nailed down where Drover was that night.”

“Talk to him anyway. We’re just guessing where he was that night and we still don’t know what Kreider might’ve been doing. Go.”

The five parted ways and forty minutes later, Elliot and Fin were facing a pale and subdued Jeffrey Drover inside a barred, meeting room.

“I can’t believe you people are still thinking that I did something to her. Don’t you think I would’ve said something by now?”

“Maybe not if it would add to your sentence,” Fin said.

“This is crazy. Let’s say I took her, okay? Just for the sake of argument. Wouldn’t it make a lot more sense for me to use her in some kind of... I don’t know bargaining deal to get me out of her earlier?”

“Is that what you’re about to do?”

Drover ran a hand over his face and squeezed his eyes shut. “I can’t... I can’t even believe this is my life. I’m in here about to be tried for doing something to little kids and you people are asking me questions about that crazy bitch.”

“Crazy bitch!” Elliot shouted. “You’re the one who’s fucking crazy! You followed her and jumped her in a goddamn alley!”

“She practically did the same thing to me! What was I supposed to do? Just let her get away with it? No! No one pulls that kind of shit without retaliation.”

“So, is that what you did?” Elliot said taking a step toward Drover. “Did you *retaliate*? Is she lying somewhere dead because of you?”

Drover ran a hand over his long face again. “Look, I don’t know how many times I have to tell you, but I did not do anything to her. Aside from that one night, I haven’t even seen her without you hovering around. If she’s missing it means, she probably pissed off someone *else* one too many times and they’ve got her. Not me.”

“You mind tellin’ us where you were last Tuesday,” Fin said before Elliot could respond. “At least what you remember?”

“I’ve already told you people! I don’t remember. I’d been drinking all night. They thought I was gonna slip into a coma and die in the hospital! Why do you keep asking me the same goddamn questions!”

“Because she’s still missing,” Fin said. “And, we know for a fact that you already attacked her once.”

“Look, I’m telling you for the last time. I didn’t do anything to that cop. I’ll own up to the fact that I grabbed her in that alley, but that was it! I never even saw her again after that.”

“Maybe,” Elliot said. “Or maybe you just don’t remember... or want to remember.”

“I didn’t...” Drover sighed. “You know, I don’t need this. I’m already here until some judge *gets* to my case and I’ve got three hundred pound guys wanting to take off

my head because some new station just hinted to the fact that I did something to her. I didn't do anything to her. I don't deserve to be here with these...people and I don't need this bullshit."

"You deserve every second you spend in here," Elliot said shaking his head as they turned to leave. "We'll see you at your eventual trial."

Elliot began to leave, but Drover called out to him.

"Hang on a sec."

"What?"

"Can you...I mean is there someone who can...?"

"Can what?" Elliot asked irritated.

Drover waved his hand and shook his head. "Nev...never mind. Just forget it."

"Forgotten," Elliot said and he followed Fin out the door.

"What d'you think he wanted?" Fin asked.

"Don't want to know and what's better is that I don't care. I'm calling Kreider's attorney now just to let them know we're coming."

SVU Squad Room

8:16PM

"It'll be okay, Evelyn. I promise you. It'll be okay."

Elliot hung up his phone and rubbed the back of his neck with the grievous need to break something in half. He had not been so frustrated in weeks and wondered if he could find some time to go to the gym to beat the faded punching bag until his knuckles grew sore.

Kreider had been eerily pleasant when Elliot and Fin came to see him and after they quizzed him about his whereabouts on Tuesday past, he inquired about a plea for his case. Fin had told him what he could do with his plea, but Kreider remained smiling and upbeat.

Elliot had figured it was just a show he was starting in order to help his case as his attorney was attempting to get him acquitted by proving mental disease, but his frustrations came later when they were able to corroborate Kreider's alibi. He was too busy retrieving his treasure from Roy's storage locker to have done anything to Olivia that Tuesday.

He rose to stretch watching Andrea Cooke, newly pulled to comb through Morse's unedited videos for evidence, pour herself a fresh cup of coffee with a bereft expression on her face. In just a few hours, her normal mahogany-coloured skin had taken a yellowish appearance and her dark brown eyes were laced with strips of red. As she nodded at him and returned to the small room, Munch and Alexa stepped off the elevator arguing loudly.

"Of course we weren't going to get anywhere with him!" Munch yelled. "You were standing there looking at him with some little fan girl look on your face. I'm surprised he didn't throw us out sooner."

"I did not! Excuse me if I don't think the best approach to questioning is staring a guy down like he's already guilty."

"If you didn't think he was guilty then why even suggest him? We could've been looking at his phone records or just retracing his steps, but you wanted to talk to him."

"Because I know you can gauge a lot about a person by just talking to them. I don't see what the--"

"A cop is missing! There's no time to prance around the issue. Now, it's going to be even harder to track down where he was last week."

Munch brushed past Elliot and headed toward Cragen's office, leaving Alexa standing in the middle of the squad room with her hands on her hips and a frown on her face.

"I take it the trip to Halloway's didn't go well?" Elliot said.

"No," Alexa said. "It didn't. I tried to just ease into the subject, but John got in his face almost immediately. Of course, Halloway threw a fit and told us he'd file a report if he caught us around his apartment or his office."

"File a report with who? If he's a suspect, he can be under observation just like anyone else in this city."

"But, he's got connections. He's a Halloway."

"You know, you keep saying that like it should mean something, but it doesn't. Rich bastards like Halloway are just as capable of committing crimes as anyone else and being a part of a family like that doesn't exempt them from investigation and especially punishment."

"Well, regardless...I don't think he did anything anyway. He was sitting alone with a half empty wine bottle when we saw him. His eyes kept going in and out of focus every few minutes. I'm sure he's just been staring at the ceiling, wondering if...Hey, where are you going?"

Elliot had turned away from her as she spoke and quickly ran to the tables that held most of the paperwork and files they had made regarding Olivia's case.

"Six minutes," he said softly.

"What?" Alexa said now standing next him.

"Six minutes. There were just six minutes between the time Morse's tape ends and the time his next camera sets up."

"Yeah, so?"

He shook his head as Fin approached them.

"Why didn't I think of it earlier?" Elliot mumbled.

"What're you thinking?" Fin asked.

Alexa shrugged as if the question was directed at her. "Something about six minutes on Morse's tape."

"There were six minutes," Elliot repeated. "The gap between Morse's tapes is just six minutes long."

"Right," Fin said. "We knew that earlier."

"But, we didn't take a step back to really think about it. I'm still...holding her when that tape went out. The whole thing between me and Liv last for maybe five minutes altogether."

"There's about four full minutes of you two going at it on the video," Alexa said. "I remember putting it in my notes."

“Right, so there was another minute between the time Liv had me on the floor, the time she made herself a drink and the time she eventually let me up. Which leaves probably less than four minutes for her to vanish out of her apartment.”

“But, how is four minutes any different six?” Alexa asked. “It still doesn’t leave any time for something to really go down.”

“Exactly,” Elliot said, his eyes blazing. “If Olivia disappeared in just four minutes and no one saw a damn thing that means-”

“...she went somewhere in her building,” Fin finished.

Elliot nodded. “This whole time we’ve been going at this like someone snatched her out of her apartment, but if she’s gone that quick, she had to still be in her building. We need a warrant to search her whole building.”

“I’ll tell the cap,” Fin said walking toward Cragen’s office. “You find Casey.”

Elliot grabbed his coat and stuffed some papers he thought might help Casey persuade a judge, who was probably well into his dinner, into a manila envelope. He wanted to be right next to her the moment the judge signed the warrant.

His eyes glanced toward Alexa who was busy putting on her coat. She looked so ready and eager and he suppressed a roll of his eyes as he walked toward the elevators.

He glanced toward his side and noticed that Alexa was still a step behind him instead of directly beside him like Olivia would have been since she was a good six inches shorter than Olivia.

Elliot held the elevator for her a second after he’d already stepped on it and he closed his eyes for a moment at the thought of even possibly dealing with a brand new partner.

The judge had been quick to act, though only enabling them to search Olivia’s floor, and Elliot and Alexa arrived at Olivia’s building at the same time as Cragen, Munch and Fin.

From Elliot’s urging, they began first with Mark Landon’s apartment. Mark stood steadfast in his doorway for several minutes, arguing that they had no right to even suspect him and that he was the least likely person in the world who would’ve done something to her. Elliot had stared him down throughout his tirade before pushing past him with the girth of his broad body, handing Mark a copy of the warrant and the others followed in trade.

Just as cold and sparse as he last remembered it, Elliot stepped through the apartment, his senses piqued and searching for the slightest trace of Olivia. His eyes went to every place one might conceivably hide a body, but to no avail.

“See!” Mark said as Elliot leaned against his wall having recovered nothing. “I told you!”

Elliot only shook his head, but Fin beckoned him toward a spot near the door.

“Who’s do you suppose that it?” he said point to the floor.

They both bent at the knees.

“Looks like hair,” Elliot said loud enough for Mark to hear. “Long brown hair, that’d probably come to a little longer than, say, shoulder length.”

“Yep,” Fin said, taking out an evidence bag as his voice echoed Elliot’s sarcasm. “And Landon’s got short reddish hair, like a rusty nail.”

“Hey!” Mark said stepping toward them. “What...what are you doing over there?”

“We noticed some hairs on the floor over here,” Elliot said. “They might be Olivia’s.”

“Well, if they look like it, they probably are.”

“You don’t sound worried.”

“Why should I be? She was my neighbor, remember? I’m sure some of her hair has floated on over here at some point over the years. That doesn’t prove a damn thing.”

Fin and Elliot glanced at one another as Fin grabbed a set of hair and dust and pulled them into the evidence bag.

“Are you people done now?” Mark said, arms crossed. “I think you’ve offended me enough for one night.”

Begrudgingly, Elliot left the apartment last, staring at Olivia’s door covered in strips of yellow crime scene tape for a moment before they moved onto the other apartments on the floor.

Finding nothing outside of irritated residents in the other apartments, they returned to the precinct to have an analysis run on the hair found in Mark’s apartment and Elliot began a detailed search on Mark Landon. Within the hour, he discovered that Mark maintained a series of small websites for a living and hardly ever left his apartment. The last time any of his credit cards had been used in a physical location as opposed to online was in 2004 and that was only at the corner store less than a block away from the building.

Odd living habits notwithstanding, Mark was a very boring person. Outside of occasional 1-900 calls, it seemed his every moment was spent maintaining the thirty sites of which he was Webmaster. He did not have cable, but several of his credit cards appeared dedicated to soft core pornography websites and various penile enhancement drug endeavors.

Elliot yawned as he went through another list of Mark’s credit charges and Alexa padded softly to his desk as if wondering if too much noise might elicit one of the arguments she had seen erupt between he and Olivia weeks earlier.

“Finding anything?” she asked and Elliot shook his head slightly.

“We’d pulled a set of his prints from the apartment,” Alexa said. “Landon matches some of those found on her door when CSU first went to her apartment.”

“And, I’m sure mine were lifted off that door too,” he said without moving his gaze away from the computer monitor.

“Well, are you interested in trying to look further into this guy or not?”

Elliot finally turned in his chair and glared at her. “I’m interested in finding Olivia. Prints on a door are not going to lead us to her.”

“How ‘bout this?” Alexa said edging closer to Olivia’s desk. “He matches several sets of prints found inside the apartment too. But, I’ve fast forwarded through the past five years of Olivia’s life in that apartment. I’ve only seen him in there a handful of times and he never once came any further inside than the edge of her open door.”

Elliot glanced at her again, this time with a severely softened expression. “You’re sure you haven’t seen him inside her apartment?”

Alexa shrugged. "I know what I saw and I know what notes I took and I didn't see him. Of course, those were Morse's edited videos, so there's no telling what he's taken out for his own sake, but I think I'd rather just ask this Landon guy up close and personal instead of hoping to find something on the thousands of hours left of Morse's tapes. I would want him to tell us how his prints wound up in Olivia's apartment when we've practically got surveillance that says there shouldn't be a trace of him in there. Wouldn't you?"

He stared at her for a moment longer before marching toward Cragen's office, the captain sitting in his chair while on the phone and in the midst of a heated discussion with the police commissioner over Olivia's case and the lack of evidence.

An hour later, Mark Landon sat red-faced and visibly shaken on the far side of an interrogation table across from Elliot and Fin.

"You've no right to demand that I be here," Mark said, nearly shouting. "I've done nothing wrong."

"No one said you did," Elliot said nonchalantly. "We just said we had some questions for you that would be easier for you to answer down here."

Mark shook his head. "This is some kind of mistake."

"It's no mistake, Landon," Fin said. "Now, why don't you tell us how you spend your time in your apartment."

"Spend my time?" Mark said, his small brown eyes narrowing at Fin.

"Yes, spend your damn time. We know you don't leave the place, so what are you doing in there when you're not working?"

Shaking his head at Fin, Mark crossed his arms and glared at the table. Elliot and Fin glanced at one another and an idea struck.

"You don't like me, do you?" Fin said.

Mark pursed his lips and turned his gaze toward the ceiling. "I prefer not to deal with blacks and...others if I can."

Fin nodded after a moment of glaring at Mark. "You know, you seem like you're kind of attracted to Olivia. Didn't she mind your little problem with *others*?"

"Well, she was very attractive and if I've learned anything in my life, attractive women are always more forgiving than people should be."

"Forgiving of what? You're not even making any sense."

"Look! I don't have to give you details about my life!"

"A cop is missing! You're going to give me every damn detail I ask for. Why are your prints in her apartment when we've got tapes that show you weren't there?"

Mark looked at Elliot, pleading with his eyes. "Make him stop."

Elliot shrugged. "Stop what? He's asking valid questions and if you don't want any further interruptions in your life, it's best that you answer them truthfully."

"Fine! Yes! I liked her! Is there something wrong with that? Does finding a woman attractive all of sudden make me some kind of suspect?"

"Actually, it does," Fin said and Mark's eyes grew wide. "Now, we know this is probably the first time you've left your apartment in a good three years-"

"That's not true. You're trying to make me sound like some kind of freak."

"Well, maybe you are," Fin said. "I mean from what I'm looking at, you're some little man whose only contact with the rest of the world comes from phone sex girls...and his neighbor across the way. The neighbor who's all of a sudden gone missing in a matter

of minutes and the neighbor inside who's apartment we have found your fingerprints even though we've got video tapes saying that you have never been inside that apartment."

Mark stood quickly, though standing he was barely taller than either Elliot or Fin still seated.

"That's enough," he whispered. "That is enough. I don't care what your video tapes say. I've been in Olivia's apartment loads of times and there's a million reasons why her hair might be in my apartment, too. Now, I'll not sit here and take accusations from some cops who are so clueless as to what happened to her that they're looking at me as a suspect. Me! Look at me! I'm practically half her size. Do you think, even if I wanted to, that I could do anything to her? She's a goddamn cop for crying out loud. I'd have to be a total idiot to try something like that."

"Not if you planned it right," Fin said. "You don't have to leave the house and you can always hear her coming and going. You could easily take your time, count down the days and plan out everything, so you could execute to a tee."

"Enough!" Mark shouted. "I won't take this from a black man who has no business wearing a badge! I'm leaving!"

Mark rounded the table, but Elliot turned in his seat stretching out his legs, causing Mark to trip over them and fall flat on the floor.

"Oh, let me help you up," Elliot said softly.

He bent down and clenched his hand tight around Mark's arm as he pulled him off the floor.

"Don't leave the city, Mr. Landon. We may need to talk to you again and I'd hate to have to hunt down your little ass to ask you a simple question."

A scorn fell over Mark's face and he snatched his arm away from Elliot before storming out of the interrogation room.

Fin sighed. "You still think he's involved?"

"I don't know," Elliot said. "I don't like him, but I want to know more about the hair on his floor."

"They were neighbors," Fin said. "It could've been like he said. She just floated over there."

"Are," Elliot corrected. "They *are* neighbors, though I'm sure...once we find her, she'll be wanting to move when we tell her how crazy her neighbor is. How long d'you think before Melinda will get those results."

Fin glanced at his watch. It read a quarter past four in the morning. "Probably not 'til eight, earliest."

"All right," Elliot said, rubbing a hand over his face. "I'm going to try and get some sleep in the crib, but uh...Keep an eye on Brown, will you? She keeps looking at Liv's chair the wrong way. If she needs a place to sit, bring her up another chair, but I don't think I can take her sitting at Liv's desk."

Fin shook his head. "I'll give her a friendly reminder, but I'm pretty sure Munch will keep her in check. After that falling out they had earlier today, my guess is she'll be back scanning the videos with Andrea."

Unknown Time and Place

"It's called a christening," he said into the darkness.

"Stay the fuck away from me!" Olivia shouted with her back against the wet wall.

Her eyes still darted about the room trying to make out something more than his shadow, but only in vain.

"It must be done," he said calmly. "Every other one has gone through it and I can make no exceptions."

Olivia heard a scurry of movement from her left and could discern a dark shape slinking against the far wall and could swear she heard what sounded like the voice of a young boy calling for help. They probably all had to listen to the others go through this same ordeal, but she refused to allow it.

"I'll hurt you again," she said in as strong a voice as she could muster.

"Come now. That hurt you just as much as me. Your poor shin must still be throbbing."

She swallowed and limped slightly on her left leg, wincing from the pain. The last time he had come for her, she had kicked at him until her shin came in contact with his hard bones and she was just able to scramble away from him in the darkness while he lay gasping for air. When he had finally lifted himself, he left all of them alone for what she thought were days. Time had all but come to a stop for her.

"Just don't come any closer," Olivia said, but heard him take a step toward her regardless.

"We can do this one of two ways. You can either be a good girl and take it quietly, or you can be bad, and we fight for a bit, and then *I* take it quietly. It's up to you. We should've had this done a while ago. I've already wasted too much time on you as it is."

Her breath caught in her throat as she ran her hands along the back wall searching once again for the metal pole. He had unhooked the chain that had nearly worn her ankle raw and Olivia knew an opportunity lied in wait if she could just find something to stabilize herself.

"What kind of girl are you going to be?" he asked softly.

"Let me out of here!" she shouted, her voice echoing back to her in every direction through pure black.

"That's not the answer I was looking for." She heard him take another step closer to her.

"Look," she said as her arms reached farther for the pole. "*We* can do this one of two ways. Either you let me go now or let me go after you're bleeding on the floor. It's up to *you*."

He came to a stop and Olivia was certain he was staring at her clearly through the darkness.

"I'm beginning to think it's no wonder, he wanted to give you up so quickly. There's a special zest about you that I'm sure he couldn't handle. Pity, really."

"Let! Me! Go!"

His growing laughter replaced the echo of her voice and her breath caught again as her hand finally made contact with the icy pole.

“Go? Go where? Even if I did, you’re still mine. You belong to me and you’ll stay here with me until I’ve had my fill. But for now...For now, we must do a christening. I won’t be able to use you to your full potential until it’s done.”

She heard him take another step and the dark before her faded slightly to show the long outline of a pale figure.

“I’m a cop,” Olivia coughed. “I’m a cop and I know I’ve been gone for days. People will be looking for me. They’re going to find you and you’re going to have a whole host of problems. If you let me go...I haven’t seen your face and I don’t know where I am. If you let me go, I won’t turn you in.”

“Does that little speech work? Perhaps to the ignorant, I guess. Yes, I suppose only the ignorant would believe that a cop would not turn them in.”

“I’m serious,” she said clutching the pole that burned cold into her bare arm. “Just let me go and I won’t say anything.”

He sighed and she could feel his breath on her face.

God, he’s so close.

“See?” he said. “So much vigor. So much life. I’ve all but forgotten what a new one felt like. That is why I must have you.”

He reached out fingers that grazed across her chest and she swung away from him, clinging to the pole.

“Why must you resist? None of the others ever resisted this much or even this long. Why must you make this so difficult?”

She felt his cold, pale fingers brush against her shoulder and she kicked into the dark, hoping to make contact.

His breath let out again as her foot hit his midsection, but he quickly grabbed hold of her at the knee and pulled.

“Get off!” she yelled as she clutched the pole holding on for dear life, his hand pulling at her leg from higher and higher on her thigh.

He snaked an arm around her waist and she let go of the pole to strike him across the face and swing her free leg around to come in contact with a shoulder.

She fell against the cold floor as he released her and she struggled back to the pole.

He came at her again, this time, his arms sliding across hers until she used the full force of her body to kick at his midsection.

He released her again and Olivia heard him collapse to the floor, his breathing ragged. He lied on the floor, several feet away from her, she gathered from the sound of his breath, and she managed to wrap both her arms and legs around the pole determined not to be wretched from it.

After several minutes, she heard him rise from the floor and her arms tightened around the pole.

“Perhaps,” he said in a voice that was still soft though far more guttural. “Once you’ve had another day or two without anything to eat and once that spirit dies down a little. Maybe then...we’ll try the christening again.”

She heard his feet shuffle away from her. Her arms remained tangled around the pole as if frozen there by the cold and the sweat from her skin until she could only hear the sounds of the others in the room with her.

“Next time he’ll take you away to the room,” a young woman’s voice whispered in the dark. “He’ll take you there and he’ll kill you. Then, he’ll kill us all just out of anger.”

Olivia closed her eyes as tears began to spring forth from them, wanting nothing more than to call out for help, but not wanting to give him any reason to come for her again. When the shaking that rocked her body subsided, she finally let go of the pole, her stomach raw from where the cold of the pole had burned her hot skin through her cami.

She allowed herself to yield to gravity’s pull and crumpled to the floor in a heap. As she lied on the ground, her mind flashed to a memory that could not have been so old.

She had had the feeling that something perfect and comforting had just left her presence when another force had knocked her backward and everything before her eyes turned into a swirl of colour.

Olivia gasped as the tears still slipped from her eyes and as her body began to succumb to hunger and exhaustion, she whispered out loud the last words she thought before she awakened in the dark.

Elliot, don’t leave me.

Saturday February 10, 2007
SVU Squad Room
8:20AM

Elliot jumped from the small cot with a start, his eyes darting in every direction of the small room as perspiration slipped from his brow. When the sensation of danger seemed to pass, he let out a breath and rubbed his hand across his face.

He had managed to fall asleep for the first time in days, yet Olivia’s voice plagued his dreams worse than ever and he was actually thankful to be wretched from sleep. It was better to be awake and useful, than asleep and replaying that Tuesday over and over again until it unhinged him.

Minutes later, he had changed his shirt in the locker room, unable to drive out the memory of holding Olivia momentarily several aisles away from his own locker, and was pouring a third sugar into his coffee in the squad room as Melinda stepped off the building elevator.

“Do you have the results yet?” he asked immediately.

She nodded. “It’s hers all right. Where’d you find it?”

“In the apartment of the guy who lives across from her,” he said shaking his head.

Melinda pursed her lips and her eyebrows fell. “Well, I’m not sure how much it’ll help, but they’re newer. I’d say they’ve probably been away from her less than two weeks top.”

“You sure?” Elliot said.

“Yes, granted, if they live across from one another, it could’ve been tracked in at any point.” She handed him a report and an evidence bag. “I know it’s not really the answer you’re looking for, but at least it’s something, right?”

He sighed as he quickly leafed through the report. “It is... Thanks Melinda. I know you probably got to this early on and I appreciate it.”

"Just let me know if you've got anything else," she said. "I'm... I miss her, and I want us to find her safe and sound."

Melinda turned to leave and Elliot set his coffee on his desk before striding straight into Cragen's office where he, Munch and Fin stood conversing.

"It's Liv's," he said as soon as he stepped into the office.

"Melinda's come back with the analysis?" Cragen said.

"It's Liv's," Elliot repeated, nodding. "We need to bring him back in here."

"Landon is her neighbor though," Fin said. "And, he's right. There's dozens of reasons why her hairs would be in his place."

"No," Elliot said. "From what Alexa's been telling me about the tapes, Mark comes to see Olivia all the time. I don't think *she's* even been in his apartment. Something's off with him."

"But, we were there," Cragen said. "We were right across the hall from him the night after she disappeared. You even went into his apartment, Elliot. She wasn't there."

Elliot shook his head. "We barely even looked at him because he's been feeding us other people this whole time."

"But," Munch said, "are we really entertaining the possibility that Mark Landon, a guy who might weigh a hundred pounds soaking wet with a rock in his pocket and who's probably classified as dwarf... Are we really thinking he took down a seasoned cop?"

"We've as much as determined that Olivia disappeared in the space of four minutes," Elliot said. "And she left without a trace. No one anywhere heard or saw a damn thing. If he jumped across the hall and grabbed her, the whole thing could've gone down in less than a minute and no one would know."

"Look," Fin said. "I don't like Landon either, but we were just there. Olivia is not in that apartment."

"She might not be now. Maybe he did something else to her. Maybe when he saw that we were getting too close, he... dumped her somewhere."

"All right," Cragen said. "Now, we're getting ahead of ourselves here."

"Why's that?"

"Because we're jumping on him like we jumped on the Drover bandwagon and it got us nowhere, fast. We still had other people check out. There was that Matthew person and Andrea's come up with a whole list of people we should probably look into. Now, I know we checked into Landon's alibi. What was it?"

Munch rifled through some notes in his hand. "Said he was on the phone half the night."

"Was he?" Elliot asked quickly.

"Yep, on the phone with a 1-900 number from a little before eleven until one-thirty."

"So, he was home right about the time Liv disappeared."

"He never said he wasn't," Fin said.

"But, he was there."

"He's always home," Munch said. "He never has to leave his apartment."

"Which means Olivia's probably the only person he sees on a daily basis and gives him plenty of reason to lust after her."

"I think we're reaching at straws, Elliot," Cragen said.

“We might be, but I think this is the one, Cap. We’ve followed up every single angle and this is the only one left. Think about it. He told you yesterday that he heard me get on the elevator, but how’d he hear this if he was on the phone? He lives right across the hall and they’ve got the two end apartments. No one would know if he just jumped right over there and snatched her.”

“But how?” Munch said. “He’s two feet tall.”

“When I left Olivia...she was upset. If Landon, came at her and she had her guard down...it might’ve gone quick.”

Cragen shook his head and started walking back to his office. “I want to check further into his alibi first.”

“And waste time doing that?” Elliot said. “He could have her right now.”

“Where, Elliot? We all just walked through the whole damn apartment and we didn’t find her.”

“We didn’t go through the place with CSU. We only noticed the hair because it was right by the door.”

“And there’s millions of reasons why that might be,” Cragen said. “Poke holes in his alibi first and then, only after we look at him some more, do we make a move.”

Elliot followed Cragen into his office. “I don’t like waiting around for Landon to get scared and run. What if he’s got her somewhere and all he needs to do is give the okay to have her executed?”

“You’re rushing this, Elliot.”

“Don, it’s been twelve days. I say we haven’t rushed this enough.”

“I don’t want another repeat of Drover.”

“Drover turned out to be a pedophile. Now, when was the last time my instincts were wrong?”

“If we hadn’t been fawning all over him, we might’ve tracked down Kreider faster.”

“But he was still doing something to those kids. I knew it. I knew it the second I saw him he was involved. So, no. He wasn’t the one killing those kids, but my gut told me he was still sick and I was right.”

“Let’s say you’re right. Let’s say, he’s got her somewhere and all he has to do is call someone or press a button and it’s the end of her. What makes you think he hasn’t already done it after we looked at him yesterday? The more we look at him, the better our case against him will be.”

Elliot stared at Cragen for a moment. “You’re trying to make the *murder* case as solid as possible. You think she’s already dead.”

“You said it yourself. It’s been twelve days.”

“I’m not willing to just write her off as dead and move on with life, Don.”

“And, neither am I, but we have to face reality here. I want to find her alive and well as much as you do, Elliot, but if she’s not...if she’s been murdered by Landon or someone else, I don’t want there to be the slightest chance that he walks. I want a case so solid that the trial would be over before it starts. If Olivia’s dead, I want to do everything possible to make sure her killer doesn’t go free and that means we can’t leave any loopholes. Nail down Landon’s alibi. If it’s faulty, we bring him in, after he’s advised of council, and we shake the truth out of him.”

Elliot walked out of the office trying to keep his composure as he headed for his desk. Cragen, it seemed, was not only preparing himself for the worst, he had resigned himself to it.

Andrea Cooke stepped out of the small video room in three terse stomps and nearly knocked into Elliot as he crossed the squad room. She rubbed a hand across the back of her neck with an irascible expression on her face.

“You find anything?” he asked her quickly when he regained his balance.

She shook her head with sleepy yet irritated eyes and spoke in a sardonic tone. “And, I haven’t been losing any sleep over it, obviously.”

“What’s wrong, besides the obvious, I mean?”

“Well, I was doing okay until about eight o’clock when Alexa insisted on showing me how the videos should be run. I’d been going at a good clip from six, and then she showed up. You all need to find something else for her to do besides bug me.”

Elliot cracked his first smile in days. “Why do you think we threw her back in with you?”

“I doubt it matters in the long run, though,” Andrea said. “I bet she won’t make it through summer.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She’s not cut out for this. I can tell. She’s one child molestation case away from being driven out of here. You can always tell the weak ones. They’re way too jumpy and far too emotional.”

“I’d take that bet,” Elliot said, “but I’ve got too much else going on right now.”

“Well, I’ll let you know if I find anything significant. And I’ll, uh...let Alexa know you’ve been looking for her.”

Elliot opened his mouth to protest, but with a quick flash of black hair, Andrea had gone back into the room and had left Elliot with a smirk on his face.

“What’d you need?” Alexa asked minutes later at Elliot’s desk.

Andrea left the room again as he began to speak, looking very innocent as she walked toward the coffee stand.

“Yeah,” he said giving Andrea a sideways glance. “I need you to help me go through some more of Landon’s phone records from last Tuesday. I’m trying to track down the address for the place he was calling that night.”

“I’m guessing 1-900-HOT-CHIK isn’t in the phone book?”

“No, it’s not,” he said absent-mindedly ignoring her attempt at humor.

She sat at the other end of his desk, careful not to drop even an errant sheet of paper on Olivia’s desk.

“What did Cragen have to say about the hairs in Landon’s apartment?”

“He wants to make sure that if Landon took her, we’ve got the most solid case possible.”

Alexa nodded silently, but spoke again after a few moments of silence between them. “Do you...do you think she’s dead?”

Elliot set the documents in his hand down in front of him and sighed. “I don’t know and I really don’t want to think about it right now. I just want to concentrate on finding her and then we’ll worry about the aftermath. Okay?”

Alexa nodded her head furiously. She opened her mouth once more to continue her line of questioning when Fin stepped toward them pulling on his jacket.

“We got problems,” Fin said.

“What kind of problems?” Elliot asked through furrowed eyebrows.

“Big problems.”

The newest layer of pure white snow was disturbed in long stretches creating paths from the small gathering of trees to the paved walk that curved through Tompkins Square Park. Flashing lights of red and blue sprayed blotches of purple in harried intervals along the new snow paths and seemed to make the sudden grey overcast seem darker than normal.

Elliot’s shoes were sodden and irriguous by the time he had trekked through the snow behind Fin and Munch and he threw a glance backward at Alexa as she was just barely able to keep herself from slipping in his footsteps.

Melinda was bent in an odd crouch, standing in large footprints made by another officer, close to the ground yet still above the drift of snow that covered the area. In front of her, the large cardboard box was darkened by the surrounding snow, yet stiff from the continuous cold, and inside of it, Melinda’s body cast a grey shadow over the pale form that rested within its bounds.

From his viewpoint just behind Fin, Elliot saw that the boy that lied scrunched in the box and could not have been more than thirteen years old. His light brown hair lay matted against his head, a fresh layer of ice sprinkled throughout the short locks and the dark smudges of bruises that had just begun to heal were visible along a broken collar bone and across his jaw, yet his face was oddly calm; almost at peace.

Elliot heard Alexa unsuccessfully attempt to abort the gasp that sprayed from her mouth as she caught sight of the body from just behind him. A gust blew from the west, bringing a flash of white falling from the surrounding trees with it and Elliot wiped his bare forehead momentarily wishing he had brought a hat with him. They would most likely be spending the remainder of the day canvassing the crime scene of the boy in the box and his body had still not fully recovered from the attack of chill he had experienced the previous day.

Silence fell over the group surrounding the boy and even the sounds of the city seemed drowned out by the newest tragedy to befall such a young life. Elliot squinted around the area with a small hope of seeing something; some sign that Owen Kreider had somehow sprung forth to effectuate his heinous crimes again, but found nothing to suggest any such thing had happened. Outside of their footprints, each detective and officer standing in the pre-made prints of an earlier officer, the only evidence that the boy and his box had not simply fallen out of the air was a light indentation in the snow leading toward the nearest path, proving that the box had been dragged to its destination, but covered by a thin layer of ice that had formed from snow melting in a quick blast of sunlight and refreezing once the sun had hid itself within the clouds once again.

Elliot looked at Melinda who rose from the body and simply shook her head with a dismal expression on her face. She said nothing to him in that moment, but he had seen the same expression on previous occasions and knew that her eyes said what her voice would not.

It just never stops, does it?

Sunday February 11, 2007
Chambers of the Honorable Judge Horace Farrow
2:23PM

“Your Honor, this is absolutely ridiculous!”

“The only thing that’s ridiculous here is that an innocent man is sitting in a cell for something he did not do.”

Casey could feel her face turning slightly red from the exertion of arguing in front of Judge Farrow for the last fifteen minutes. She had intended to spend her Sunday afternoon with her boyfriend after a long week and weekend of trial preparation, yet there she stood in front of a judge who seemed just as miffed by the idea of sitting in chambers on a Sunday. Beside her, Owen Kreider’s lawyer, Shaina Flint, stood stony-faced and determined.

“We have the defendant’s DNA,” Casey pressed. “And, his written confession to the murder of all seven boys and his neighbor.”

“And, I’ve got two psychiatrists lined up who will testify that Mr. Kreider was not in his right mind when he signed that confession.”

“Our Dr. Huang says Kreider’s newfound mental apathy is a farce,” Casey said. “And, we’ve still got his DNA.”

“On *one* victim,” Flint argued. “One who just happened to be a blood relative. Your Honor, I’m willing to argue all day over what could have happened between Mr. Kreider and the first victim of these tragic crimes, but not over any of the remaining seven victims and certainly not this last one.”

“No one’s saying that Kreider’s involved in this newest murder,” Casey said.

“But your evidence says otherwise, Counselor. Everything in Ryan Daly’s murder is perfectly reminiscent of what we saw in January.”

“The police haven’t even finished their investigation on this latest murder.”

“She’s right,” Judge Farrow said, shifting in his seat toward Flint again. “How can you argue for a dismissal saying that your client isn’t involved in murders he confessed to based off this newest one when the police aren’t done with it yet?”

“With all due respect, Your Honor,” Flint said, “everything in Ryan Daly’s murder so far points to the same crimes of which my client has been accused. If the People want to finish their investigation and *then* bring charges, they are free to do so, but my client should not have to suffer because of their blunder.”

“You may call it a blunder if you want, Ms. Flint,” Judge Farrow said, “but, I’m not comfortable with the idea of dismissing the entire case against Owen Kreider when it stands as it is. Motion denied.”

Simultaneously irritated and satisfied, Casey left the judge’s chambers and found herself Uptown in thirty minutes staring at each of the remaining SVU detectives.

“He denied Flint’s motion to dismiss,” Casey informed the silent five, “but it’s definitely going to put a damper on our case.”

“How?” Munch said. “It’s a copycat. It has to be.”

“She’s going to argue that this new murder is evidence that we didn’t get the right guy and that might just be enough to lead them to an acquittal.”

“That’s bull,” Fin said. “Kreider confessed to all of them. Elliot and me were there when he did. He picked out those kids specifically because of Drover.”

“Well, she was planning to go the mental defect route anyway and we still only had DNA from Jacob Lewendale to go on.”

“DNA that was a perfect match,” Cragen said.

“But, the details from this newest murder are damn near the same as with the other seven boys,” Casey sighed.

“Again,” Munch said. “It’s a copycat.”

“That may be, but the longer Ryan Daly’s murder goes without a suspect, the more Flint can use the murder to say that Kreider isn’t involved with any of the others.”

“So,” Alexa said, arms folded across her chest. “Basically, you’re saying that if we don’t find whoever killed Ryan Daly as soon as possible, Kreider might go free on all eight murders?”

Casey sighed again. “The case we have against Kreider is strong, but this murder creates doubt that Flint is going to exploit at every opportunity. Kreider only needs one juror to think Ryan Daly’s murderer and the person who killed those seven boys is the same person.”

Silence fell over the lot as they stared at one another, the impact of Casey’s words still wafting in the air around them.

Elliot, having said nothing throughout the interlude, rubbed a hand over his face and turned his gaze to Olivia’s empty desk.

If she were here, he thought, she’d probably be arguing that Kreider might have had a hand in the new murder, even from within Sing Sing.

The newest victim, Ryan Daly, like the others, was thirteen years old and had been killed in precisely the same manner as Kreider’s other victims. He had only been missing a day and his parents were simply numb when the news of the son’s death was delivered to them. Elliot knew the realization would hit eventually and he just hoped he would not have to see it when it happened.

There was usually something in Olivia’s eyes that would elicit the emotions from parents straight away instead of having them bottle it until it exploded, normally at one of the detectives working their child’s case, and when Peter and Michele Daly only held one another without any kind of outburst when they were told how their son had been murdered, Olivia’s absence pressed strong over Elliot.

Everything in his being wanted to look further into Mark Landon and Olivia’s disappearance, but as much as he hated to admit it, the possibility of Kreider walking free on eight murders seemed unavoidable in trumping his necessity to continue searching for Olivia.

He had hoped that Saturday would bring some clairvoyance into Olivia’s case, but the remainder of the day had been spent interviewing potential witnesses and detailing the crime scene with Alexa.

Elliot glanced at Alexa who shifted on her feet as Casey reiterated the impact of the newest murder on Kreider’s case. Each time he looked Alexa straight in her eyes, he could not help but notice that they were not as dark as Olivia’s. Alexa’s were lighter and closer to the colour of her own red hair, not nearly as warm and comforting as Olivia’s,

and he also noticed how his eyes had to fall significantly to meet her eyes whereas he was so accustomed to staring Olivia directly in the eye when she stood by his side.

They had regrouped at the precinct when Cragen informed that Casey was fighting a Sunday morning motion with Kreider's lawyer and Elliot noticed, on more than one occasion, how comfortable Alexa seemed to be getting as she edged closer and closer to Olivia's desk.

Casey's news was most uninviting as the new case was not as cut and dry as Kreider's originally murky ones were. While the details such as the box and the lack of evidence were found in perfect stride with Kreider's case, smaller specifics differed.

Unlike the previous victims, Ryan Daly was not an active youngster who had had some contact with Jeffrey Drover. Ryan was an average student and also unlike the previous victims, he was not the shining star of his peers. He preferred to be alone, spent most of his time reading and did not like loud noises. Ryan Daly was nearly the opposite of Jacob Lewendale and Connor Whickfield, yet he was murdered in the same way, by apparently the same hand.

What set the case apart, however, and what caused all five officers to stand stoic and overly concerned were the details of the case that had not been released to the media. The formation and location of the ligature marks on the boys' necks and around their bodies had never been mentioned outside of the squad room, yet Melinda had informed them that from her preliminary examination, every detail was precisely like that of the previous murders. Kreider, having been forced into a solitary confinement in Sing Sing, was in lonely cell further upstate and could not have had any involvement with their current murder, yet his flair was all over the case.

The sheer clout of Kreider's atrocities was pulling him, unwillingly, from Olivia's case and he suppressed a sigh as he stared at her empty chair, all the while wondering if her case really would get shunted to the bottom of the pile.

The media circus that had surrounded Olivia had shifted overnight back onto Owen Kreider and the newest victim in a line of similar murders. Calls about Olivia's case had slowed to a small trickle to the point that officers were being moved around to handle the surmounting calls about Ryan Daly's murder instead. While he abhorred the thought, Elliot knew the public was fickle and would soon forget that a detective named Olivia Benson had ever gone missing.

"All right," Cragen finally said and turned toward Munch and Fin. "You two. I want you pinning down everything possible on this case. I want you to track down Ryan Daly's movements for the past seven days. Find out who his friends were and what he was doing Thursday before he went missing." He turned toward Elliot and Alexa. "I want you two to talk to Roy again and press him for anyone else Kreider might have been involved with. We need to make sure he didn't have a hand in this from the inside. I want you to make sure that Donough's been sitting tight *and*," he added noting the expression on Elliot's face, "I want you to finish looking into Landon's alibi. Missing Persons is knee deep in their own messes and I don't want Olivia being set aside. Even for a second." He then nodded at Elliot before motioning for Casey to follow him to his office.

Elliot looked at Alexa as Munch and Fin stood to leave. She stared back at him expectantly as if waiting for instruction and even bounced on her toes slightly in anticipation. He noticed how young she looked for the first time since Cragen had pulled her onto Olivia's case. She could not have been older than twenty-eight or twenty-nine,

yet she looked so eager and so ready to please. The pure ardor embodied in her face was nearly overwhelming and Elliot found himself annoyed simply by looking at her.

No wonder Andrea wanted to get rid of her so quick, he thought.

“Why don’t you pick up where we left off yesterday on Landon. I think we were still trying to find a location for the people he was on the phone with.”

She nodded and quickly found her notes she had placed on what was becoming her corner of Elliot’s desk.

He glanced at her balancing a clipboard over her crossed leg as she sat dutifully next to him and he thought of the woman he had been assigned to work with after Olivia had left to work with the FBI.

Dani Beck, with her long golden brown curls and bright blue eyes that softened her face, became his partner at a time when he was most vulnerable and had allowed things to get too complicated between them before she eventually left the SVU. He had only seen her once afterward, mostly because he had had no way to remedy the fact that he had called out “Olivia” when they fell into bed together a month after Olivia had returned to the unit and of course, Dani had told him she did not want to see him again.

Alexa sniffed away the beginnings of a cold and Elliot glanced in her direction again as she shifted her chair slightly towards Olivia’s desk to make some room between them. A part of him wanted to let down his guard with her and allow her to “borrow” Olivia’s desk, but the unyielding side of his brain thought better of it.

I’m not gonna try replacing Olivia again.

Within the next hour, he and Alexa discovered everything there was to know about Mark Landon’s solitary life and yet they still had nothing linking him further to Olivia’s disappearance. While they were certain the call Mark had made the Tuesday Olivia disappeared went someplace in the city, they had hit a proverbial brick wall in their attempts at finding the exact location.

To Elliot’s further annoyance, Alexa reminded him that they still had to find Emme Donough and speak to Lucas Roy once more.

Pushing himself from his desk with an antipathic shove, Elliot retrieved his coat and allowed Alexa to follow as they headed for Emme Donough’s residence. Alexa had tried to make small talk with him as they drove through the city streets, but after a series of grunts and nods of the head, she gave up on conversation for the duration of the ride.

“You know,” she said, as they got out of the car near Donough’s home, “I know you miss Olivia, but I don’t deserve to be treated like some second class officer.”

“What?” he said squinting at her.

“You know what I’m talking about. This whole thing with Olivia’s desk...I don’t mind it out of respect for you, Fin and Munch, but you can all still treat me like any other detective instead of just some young kid who doesn’t know what she’s doing.”

Elliot stared at her over the roof of the car for a moment ready to respond by reiterating that she *was* just a young kid who did not know what she was doing, but hesitated.

“Fine,” he said. “Just keep up.”

“Oh, I will.”

Talking to Emme Donaugh through her power of attorney, Elliot thought, was akin to speaking to a rock and expecting water to pour out of it. Though the power of attorney, a close relative who was making every attempt to keep his inheritance from being squandered, had tried to elicit information from Donaugh, she kept herself in a waft of stupidity and aloofness.

The talk with Lucas Roy in Rikers fared no better as he insisted on telling them how his wife and children had to move in with her mother because she couldn't pay the bills to keep the apartment and was now threatening him with divorce papers. Elliot offered the name of his divorce lawyer, but Roy did not enjoy the gesture.

With no new information coming from either Donaugh or Roy, Elliot rounded them across the city stopping briefly for coffee, but not at the coffee shop he and Olivia frequented and eventually ended at Mark's apartment once again.

The knowledge that Mark was most likely innocent still aggravated Elliot and against Alexa's wishes, he had the need to stare down Mark in the Village apartment.

"I've told you already," Mark said. "I haven't done anything to her."

Elliot stepped about the apartment searching for something that might tell him where Olivia had gone.

"This is borderline harassment, you know!" Mark said. "I'm getting a lawyer first thing tomorrow!"

Elliot, however, ignored Mark as he ran his hands along counter tops and couch cushions. Within five minutes, he was looking through closets and behind the shower curtain of the bathroom. By the time he caught a whiff of something familiar under Mark's bed, he was nearly tearing through the apartment pulling open cabinets and dresser drawers.

She was here, he thought.

His hands shook with frenzied motion and his eyes darted about the apartment as if panicking. There had to be something; some trace of her in the apartment. There just had to be.

He stood ready to flip Mark's mattress off the box spring, when Alexa pulled at his shoulder.

"What are you doing?" she said, nearly yelling. "Stop it. She's not here."

Breathing hard, Elliot shook her off his shoulder and set down the mattress. Just before they left the apartment in an array of scattered clutter, Mark shook his head at Elliot.

"As if *I'd* do something to Olivia."

After dropping a silent and annoyed Alexa off at the precinct, Elliot drove to the Upper West Side with the faint memory of visiting Maya's apartment just once a year earlier.

"Mark who?" Maya asked through furrowed eyebrows.

"Landon," Elliot repeated. "Mark Landon. He lives across the way from Olivia."

"Oh yeah," Maya said, her expression relaxing. "What about him?"

"Do you think he'd have any reason to hurt Liv?"

"That guy? I don't think she even knew him all that well. I mean, I never really talked to him myself, but anytime I saw him, he was always looking at me weird, like I was about to do something wrong. I don't know. Are you really looking at *him* at this point?"

“We have to look at everyone,” Elliot said.

Maya nodded as she sighed. “I guess it’s better than you telling me you’re just setting her aside until you can come up with something.”

Elliot stared at her sad form for a moment before she spoke again. “Can you let me into her apartment?”

“What for?”

“Because I need into her computer. I’ve got to...I’ve got to pay her bills and I know she does everything online, but I don’t think I can figure out all her passwords.”

“You pay her bills?”

“I do when she’s away. Technically speaking, I’m her attorney-in-fact and also her only beneficiary at this point. Anyway, how’d you think she kept her apartment when she left last year?”

Elliot shrugged having never given it thought before Maya had mentioned it. “How’s her computer going to help you?”

“Well, the passwords will be saved in her Firefox, wouldn’t they? Can you let me in or not? I’d go with my own key, but you’ve got that police tape across her door still and I don’t want to mess anything up.”

A half hour later, Elliot paced across Olivia’s apartment as Maya tidied as best as she could. CSU had lifted as many prints and taken as many pictures of the wrecked apartment as they needed and Elliot had received clearance to allow Maya to clear up the apartment “just in case.”

Behind Elliot, Maya squeezed the brown afghan her mother had made specifically for Olivia in her hands for a moment before folding it neatly and setting it across the back of the couch as she had seen Olivia do many times.

“What’s this one from?” Elliot asked as he stared at a framed photo on Olivia’s bookshelf.

There was a plethora of photos of Olivia’s past sitting on her bookshelves and hanging on her walls, mostly of Olivia in groups of people he had never seen before, with either her and just Maya or just Jillian or with Olivia and Jillian’s sons. In the picture in question, both Olivia and Maya, dressed in Indian saris, looked to be in their teens, but he especially noticed that Olivia’s was the only Caucasian in a mass of Indians.

“Oh, that one?” Maya said appearing by his side. “That was at my older sister’s wedding. She’s such a brat. She demanded that she wanted to be married in Ramanathapuram even though none of us had ever even been to India at that point.”

“Rama-what?”

Maya rolled her eyes and smiled. “Just call it Ramnad. It’s in the south of India.”

“And you all took Liv there for your sister’s wedding?”

“Of course. It took weeks and weeks of begging Ms. Serena, but she finally let her go. I remember, Livia freaking out on the airplane because it was the first time she’d flown anywhere.”

“She never told me she’d been to India.”

“Well, I don’t suppose it comes up in everyday conversation all that often. I can just see it: ‘Hand me that case file. Oh, by the way, did I ever tell you about the time I went to India...?’”

“Still though,” he said. “That’s a long trip for a wedding and to bring a friend with you...”

“For Indian weddings you invite practically everyone you know anyway and Livia’s like family, so...” Maya sighed and pursed her lips as her large eyes became wet. “What am I gonna do if you guys don’t find her?”

“I promise you. We’ll find her.”

Maya nodded and let a single tear escape from her eyes as she turned to the door. “I have to go.”

“I’ll drive you.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll just take a cab.”

“You sure?” Elliot asked. “I drove you down here. I don’t mind at all.”

“I’ll be all right...I just need to be alone for a little while.”

She stepped out of the apartment quietly, but he could sense a definite shift in her mood. Despite the sardonic joke before she succumbed to sadness again, there was no longer an air of surprise and hopefulness in her eyes. She was beginning to show the wear of constant fear and growing anger and Elliot stared with a sigh at the twenty-year-old image on the shelf as he listened to the elevator doors open and close. The teenaged Olivia’s eyes shined back at him through the large photo and his stomach burned at the idea of informing Maya if they found Olivia murdered.

His cell phone rang from his pocket to break his reverie and he answered it softly, knowing who was calling regardless of the unrecognized number.”

“Evelyn?” he said.

“E-Elliot? Yes, it’s me. Have...have you...”

“We’re still looking, Evelyn.”

“Like always, right?”

“Until we find her.”

“Did you find out what Micah was doing that night? I’m telling you he’s probably done something.”

“We’ve looked at him up and down, Evelyn. Micah’s not involved...”

SVU Squad Room
6:31PM

Though the squad room was still familiar to him, Elliot was slightly shocked at the view of unit from Olivia’s desk. Hoping for a moment of clarity, he had taken to sitting in her chair across from his desk and was opened to new view of the mundane. Everything on her desk was nearly arched at what would be perfect arm’s length for Olivia and through the stacks of files, she had kept an opening toward the middle but offset just to the right of the desk almost completely clear of obstructions. A smirk pulled at his lips when he realized that he normally sat just to the left of his own desk directly across from her.

Olivia’s chair had a clear view of the elevators and his eyes continuously flitted to them each time they opened. At one point, Alexa stepped off them, frowned the moment she saw him and brushed quickly past toward Cragen’s office.

When Elliot was just about to pull himself from Olivia's chair, which he found far more comfortable than his own, the elevator doors opened once more and he felt his heart leap into his throat.

A woman stepped off the lift and looked around the squad room for a moment before heading into the unit. She still had the glow of a recently pregnant woman, her green eyes were large and focused and her strawberry blonde hair, pulled back in a loose ponytail, shimmered slightly in the harsh squad room lights, but the shape of her eyes and curve of her jaw line were so familiar to him that he nearly fell out of his chair.

"I'm looking for a Detective Stabler," she said approaching him.

He stood quickly. "Yes?"

"I'm Allison Whitmore," she said offering her hand to him. "We spoke on the phone a while ago. I'm Olivia Benson's cousin."

"Yes," he repeated as heart pounded.

He had not realized what not seeing Olivia in person for days had done to him. His hands felt like they were vibrating at the wrists as he shook Allison's hand, his mind unable to grapple with the idea of a woman who looked like a costume-make-up version of his partner. Tall and slender, like Olivia, but several years younger, Allison stared him directly in the eye with the same expression that Olivia gave him when she was upset about something.

"I...I thought it best for me to just come here in person and see how the case was going. I was in the city visiting my mother and we talked about Aunt Serena for a bit and of course, Olivia came up." She bit her lip. "It's just that I've been obviously paying closer attention to the news lately and I can't help noticing that there is less and less being said about her, but I know she's still missing."

"That's the media," he said. "They're only interested in the next biggest thing."

"But, I think she should still be the biggest thing. I mean, I know Olivia and I haven't been all that close over the years, but she's still my family. Outside of my mother, she's the only family I've got and we just said that we were going to try harder, you know?"

"I know," Elliot said, every part of him wanting to reach out and hug her. "I understand. But, trust me. No one's giving up or setting her case aside. Me especially."

Allison nodded at him, her eyes beginning to grow wet. "Well...I just needed to make sure that the case was still open. I left my baby with my boyfriend and he's still not that excited about being a father, so I should probably be getting back."

"Okay. Do you want me to get you a cab?"

"Could you?"

"Yeah, it's no problem." He walked to the elevators with her. "You know...you and Olivia look a lot alike. I mean the colouring is off, but you can just tell you're family. I nearly fell out of my seat when I saw you."

She gave him a small smile that pulled at his heart. "Yeah, one of my friends called me the night she saw...everything on the news. She said my long-lost sister just went missing in Manhattan. I thought she was full of it and then I remembered your call..."

"We'll find her," he said thinking that the phrase should be on recording so that he could play it over and over at a moment's notice.

Allison looked at him with an unconvinced expression very reminiscent of Olivia and the elevators closed on the pair of them.

Elliot's foot slipped on the half shoveled steps that led to the Queens house. He wondered which one of his children had performed the half-assed job, neglecting to salt the stairs and allowing a new layer of ice to form over them. As he reached the front door, his stomach burned at the thought of knocking at his old house. Each time he arrived, it was beginning to feel less and less like home and more like simply the place where his children were kept for the time being.

Kathy had called him that morning and asked him to spend dinner with them as Maureen was bringing her boyfriend for the first time. It was his "turn" to have all the kids this weekend, but as usual the job ended up coming between him and his family, but he appreciated the gesture from his ex-wife.

He cooked dinner with his family just like old times and sat directly next to Maureen's boyfriend to quiz him like he was interrogating a suspect. When Justin left his chair after dinner, his shirt was slightly wet from sweating under Elliot's intense glare. Kathleen was still usually quiet, choosing to simply poke out at her food instead of eating, but Lizzie made up for her silence by talking non-stop about school and her upcoming recital. The conversation rounded to Olivia, but Elliot kept it as upbeat as possible and quickly changed the topic to Maureen's upcoming graduation.

After dinner, Kathleen quietly helped with the dishes before going to room, leaving her cell phone on the table. Elliot looked at Kathy when he noticed the item that was normally glued to the side of his daughter's head lying, forgotten, on the table, but she just shrugged. Lizzie grabbed the house phone and began chatting about the newest boy in their school, Kyle, and Dickie sat in the living room to play Madden '07 as Elliot and Kathy made small talk over coffee.

Elliot stood to leave after he had finished his coffee, but as he passed the couch on his way to the front door, he noticed Dickie simply staring at the television. The video game was paused, yet Dickie was only staring at the screen.

"Dickie," Elliot said. "Why are you staring at the pause screen?"

"No reason," Dickie said softly.

Elliot stared at him a moment more before sitting on the couch beside him.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

He suppressed a roll of his eyes, having heard his fill of the word "nothing" for the rest of his life. Elliot ran through a quick list of what could be troubling his son and Drover's name popped up instantly.

"Look," he said. "If you're feeling worried or anything about what that guy-"

"What guy?"

"The man who...approached you a couple weeks ago..."

"Oh...yeah. I almost forgot 'cause of everything that's been going on."

"Well, if it's not that, then what's up?"

Dickie sighed. "It's Jessica."

"Ah," Elliot said. "The infamous Jessica. What's wrong with her?"

“She’s got a boyfriend now.”

“I take it you’re not him.”

Dickie shook his head and crossed his arms. “This stupid basketball player. Raleigh. Raleigh Stratenbury. Who the hell names their kid ‘Raleigh’ anyways?”

Elliot nodded relieved that his son had bounced back so quickly from Drover’s perversion. “I agree. Sounds like a stupid name.”

“It *is* a stupid name, and the guy’s a jerk too.”

“I’m sure she’ll come around, though,” Elliot said. “And, if she doesn’t, there’s plenty of fish in the sea.”

“But, it’s not fair. I liked her first. I even told her that and then, like a week later she’s walking down the halls with him. I think it’s just ‘cause he’s the tallest kid in school right now and his dad has a motorcycle.”

“A motorcycle, eh?”

“Yeah...*it’s* stupid too.”

Elliot shrugged. “I don’t know what to tell you, Bud. I’ve been around women my whole life and I still can’t understand them.”

“Girls are crazy.”

“Tell me about it. Sometimes they’re almost more trouble than they’re worth... Why don’t you hand me the other controller and we’ll see if Dad can still own you in Madden?”

Dickie beamed at him. “No way. I played like every day over Christmas Break and I’ve been playing a lot since then too. You’re going down.”

“Yeah, we’ll see.”

They played for a solid two hours, during which Elliot had let his son make major gains and score several times, but when Dickie began to proclaim that he would be able to beat his father at anything eventually, Elliot put him in his place by winning 108 to 35. Dickie went to bed a short while later and Lizzie followed suit, giving him a big hug before she went. There was a great pang in his heart when he saw her run up the stairs with a flip of her hair as her nighttime ritual when she was four was to leap from the third step into his arms before bed.

“Are you leaving?” Kathy said as Lizzie disappeared upstairs.

He had reached for his coat, but paused. “Yeah, I was, uh...I’ve got a lot to do still.”

“I see.” She had folded her hands behind her back and with her hair pulled back, looked very much like she did when they had first moved into the house.

“You know,” she continued, “the kids seemed really glad having you over tonight.”

He could tell there was something else veiled behind the comment, but the constant stress over Olivia and his newest case had blocked his ability to read her.

“This weekend was just so crazy, it got away from me. I’ll make it up to them next weekend.”

Kathy nodded and they stared at one another for a moment before he reached for his coat again.

“Well,” Kathy said. “Since you didn’t get to spend a lot of time with them this weekend, maybe I can make up the couch for you again and you can drop them off at school in the morning.”

Elliot rolled his thumb over the leather coat in his hand and tried to read her large, worried eyes. His mind pressed that he would probably be spending the night on the couch if he chose to stay, while his body wanted to cross the room and scoop her in his arms and into their bedroom.

He remained silent a minute more, but Kathy made the decision for him and opened the blanket that rested on the couch.

"I'll bring you a pillow in a sec," she said heading for the stairs.

Elliot nodded silently and rested on the sofa.

So close, he thought, and yet so far.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Monday February 12, 2007

328 East 4th Street

Tiffany Bairstock's one bedroom apartment had both the appearance and smell of the neighborhood crack house and Elliot threw Alexa an annoyed glance at she bounced on her toes, clearly uneasy about her surroundings.

The early morning hours in the squad room had finally proved beneficial when he and Alexa were able to find not only the location of the call center, but through some light coercing and the threat of further police investigation, had found the very girl on whom Mark had spent nearly four hundred dollars conversing.

She was skinny with deep set hazel eyes and a liberal use of sunless tanners gave her an orange glow as she sat on her tan Pleather couch. Elliot knew she could not be much older than Maureen, but the track marks on her arm and bags under her eyes made him wonder about the girl's father and whether he knew how his daughter was living.

"I talk to lots of people, you know?" Tiffany said in a sultry voice. "How do you expect me to remember some random guy?"

"This would've been about two weeks ago," Elliot said. "You were on the phone with him for about an hour and a half."

Tiffany shrugged. "You have any idea what he sounded like? I mean, maybe if I had a clue or something...Still don't know how you two found me."

"We talked to the right people. Now, he sounded...I don't know. Like a normal guy, I guess. His voice was a little higher pitched than mine. A little uppity?"

He glanced at Alexa who nodded in agreement.

Tiffany stared back and forth between them for a full minute, before she jumped in her seat, her eye lit.

"I actually do remember a guy from like Tuesday who I talked to for a while."

"Good. What can you tell me about him?"

She shrugged again. "He was just a guy. I mean the whole time he'd get real quiet for like a long time, but then again...so do a lot of people when they go...relieve themselves, or whatever." She rolled her eyes. "The only reason I really remember him was because he just seemed *real* distracted. Most guys who are on with me for that long are usually completely focused on whatever I have to say."

“You know what she said isn’t not going to make one bit of difference, right?”
Alexa said an hour later in the squad room.

She stood several feet away from Elliot as he pounded the keys on his computer keyboard.

“We have some new evidence,” he said. “I’m gonna run with it.”

“Why? I feel like we’re wasting our time here.”

He stood from his chair, case file in hand, and turned, but grimaced slightly when he had to rotate his head downward to meet her eyes.

“We’re bringing Landon in. I want him to know that the NYPD is looking at him.”

“After everything we’ve learned, or *didn’t* learn about him, I’d say he’s probably innocent.”

“So you’re flip-flopping? A couple days ago, you didn’t like him at all. Or was that just because he was saying that I was innocent?” Alexa’s eyebrows flew toward her hairline and he continued. “Oh yeah. Fin and I talk, so I don’t understand why all of a sudden you’re so sure Landon’s not involved.”

“I didn’t say that I didn’t think he wasn’t involved.”

“Did you or did you not just say Landon’s probably innocent?”

“Look!” Alexa said. “All I was trying to get at is you have to get your priorities straight. Ryan Daly might be the sole reason Kreider gets off and whether you like it or not, we have an obligation to his city to find his killer.”

Elliot glared at her as Alexa crossed her arms in front of her chest. “What are you really getting at?”

“I think...” She paused momentarily pursing her lips. “I think you should probably be reassigned somewhere else until this whole thing is over.”

He slapped the file in his hand on his desktop. “You’ve got a lot of nerve saying that to me when you’ve been in here all of eight seconds.”

“I’ve been in here long enough to know when a cop has lost sight of why he wears a badge. I know you don’t want to hear it, but we don’t have any more leads on your partner. We *need* to focus on finding Ryan Daly’s killer.”

“You don’t think we’ve got anything on Olivia?” he repeated. “Then tell me, Detective. What shocking new method of criminology are you preparing to use to find a killer when there’s no witnesses, no DNA and no relation to any of the other crimes we’ve seen?”

Alexa’s expression softened. “I didn’t say I had all the answer-”

“But, you as much as said, we should just give up on Olivia because we’ve got more important things on our plate.”

“You’re twisting my words around! I don’t want to give up searching-”

“So, let’s get this straight... You recognize that Olivia’s still missing and that we shouldn’t stop searching for her, but you want to put all focus on this new murder, the new murder that we’ve got jack shit on. Meanwhile, we still have Landon to toss around a bit to see what else he might be hiding. Munch and Fin are in there talking to Cragen right now, letting *him* know just how little we have on this Daly case, but you aren’t willing to put forth any effort on the case of a *detective* who was snatched out of her own home. Have I got it right?”

“You know, I don’t need this shit from you. You’ve been treating me like crap since the day I got here all ‘cause I’m not your perfect Olivia.”

“Forget it then,” he said striding quickly away from her. “I’ll get Andrea and you can go back to doing whatever else you were doing before you decided to step into a big girl’s shoes.”

He stepped into the video room where Andrea sat, having no one else with whom to commiserate.

“I can’t take much more of her.”

Andrea glanced at him and shook her head. “Well, don’t come bringing all that negative energy in here to me.”

He sat down in the empty seat next to her. The lights from the screen that forwarded through Morse’s videos cast the room in an odd pale glow.

“I shouldn’t have to deal with this bullshit at this point in my career,” he said.

“We were all green at some point, Elliot. Someone had to train you, too.”

“Yeah, but I was never this pushy and arrogant.”

“Yeah, okay,” Andrea said, clear skepticism echoing in her voice.

“I’m serious.”

“I’m sure you are, but don’t forget. Half the reason you’re so pissed with her and I’m assuming you’re talking about Brown, is because you’re realizing that no one *but* Olivia was willing to put up with you.”

“Guess that leaves you out then?”

“Damn straight.”

He gave her a small smile and grabbed the extra legal pad off the desk. He set up the second screen and coured through the remaining videos, his memory piquing anytime he noticed Olivia’s reactions in relation to a date he remembered.

The Olivia on the screen entered the apartment to the right of the video with an irritated expression on her face and he slowed the tape as he picked up her telephone. She had called Maya to vent about a time he vividly remembered because they were working with one of Olivia’s ex-colleagues and he and Olivia had parted ways that day arguing. The smallest of smiles pulled at his lips when Olivia blurted out “God, he can be such an idiot sometimes.”

Elliot forwarded throughout the night and began fidgeting in his seat when on the next day Olivia crossed the apartment wearing only a bra and her suit pants as she poured herself a glass of orange juice. He then shut off the screen and rubbed a hand over his face.

“I know,” Andrea said noticing his response to the video. “It’s hard when it’s someone we know.”

“I still can’t get over the fact that this guy’s been doing this for years.”

“Well, just be glad he was. Otherwise, we’d have every single person she’d ever come in contact with, including you, in our holding cell until we got it all sorted out. At least now we can see who has and hasn’t been snooping around her place.”

Elliot sighed and rested back in his chair. He watched her take some notes on her legal pad and closes his eyes for a moment.

“I’ll give you fifty bucks if you ask Alexa to come help you out in here.”

Andrea shook her head without looking at him. “Not a chance.”

He sped through the videos for an hour longer, before Munch poked his head in the room.

"Cragen's looking for you," he said.

Wonder what this could be about? Elliot thought.

He stood to leave. "I'm looking to bring Landon back in. I want to grill him further about his alibi."

"You find anything special about it?" Munch asked as they left the room.

"The girl he was on the phone with said he was distracted."

"I'm sure that's understandable."

"She said for *minutes* at a time. I want to know what he was doing in those minutes."

"That'll be a pleasant conversation."

The captain had wanted a quick update on his findings with Lucas Roy and Emme Donaugh and after Elliot had delivered the news, Cragen nodded and rested against his desk, arms crossed.

Here it comes, Elliot thought.

"Alexa's telling me you've been giving her a hard time," Cragen said.

"So, she's the tattle type too?"

"She's the concerned type, Elliot. I think she might be right. Maybe working Olivia's case is affecting your judgment."

Elliot leaned against the far wall. "You watch the news this morning, Cap? Everything was about Ryan Daly and Kreider's possible involvement. Just enough to help pollute the jurors in Kreider's case and stir up the public enough to make it that much harder to do our jobs. There was also something about a guy found stabbed just below East 90th and a six-car pile up around Holland Tunnel, but not anywhere...not at any point did they say anything about Olivia. It's like the rest of the world is ready to just move on to the next chapter and I'm the only one standing here screaming that we haven't finished this one yet."

"No one is preparing to give up, Elliot."

"That's not what I'm hearing. You're even telling me that I'm obviously not thinking clearly because I want my partner found."

"We all want Olivia found, but her case is about to be pulled from us any day now. It's been almost two weeks and we're not coming up with anything new."

"That's because everyone who's been assigned to her case specifically keeps getting pulled. I mean, I can't even believe I have to entertain the possibility that she's just going to the wayside, never to be found."

Cragen sat silent for a moment letting his eyes drop to the floor as Elliot quickly tried to brush away an errant tear.

"Pick a case, Elliot. I know you had a stack ten people deep before all this happened and we've got the ones Olivia was leading to deal with too. Just pick a case and focus on it until we can find something else solid on Liv."

"How is that different from telling me I've got to give up and move on?"

Elliot did not wait for an answer and strode out of the office allowing the door to slowly creak shut behind him. It bumped but missed the latch as it hit the door frame and Cragen simply stared at the old doorknob.

The harsh reality of the situation was that no matter how hard he knew he would fight it, the call to move Olivia's case officially to either Missing Persons or Homicide was coming quickly and the frown that had spread across his face on Elliot's departure deepened as he imagined having to tell his most senior detective that his partner's disappearance would soon be at the bottom of another department's pile.

"This will be the last time we do this, Detective."

Mark paced the small interrogation room, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

"I've had enough," he said. "You're harassing me and it's going to stop now."

"No one's harassing you," Elliot said. "Out of everyone we've talked to, you're the only one putting up any real fuss. In my opinion, if you didn't have anything to hide, you wouldn't be this angry when we have more questions about the neighbor you're apparently so cozy with."

Mark turned to his lawyer who sat across from Munch. "I don't really have to say anything else to these people, do I?"

Robert Gruenbaum, five feet, four inches tall with beady eyes, straightened in his uncomfortable chair. "Of course not. You're here because they asked you to come, but you are under no obligation to stay."

"Unless we arrest him," Munch said casually.

"For what! I haven't done anything!"

"Oh come on," Elliot said. "We hear *that* everyday."

"Unless you have anymore specific questions for Mr. Landon," Gruenbaum said, "I think it's best we leave."

He stood and Mark began to follow him out of the room, but paused to glare at Elliot.

"You know, it was what I had to say to your colleagues that practically exonerated you."

"Well, I'm glad you felt the need to do so."

"I'm the reason the press isn't chasing you down the street anymore and this is how you treat me in return?"

Elliot stood to glare at Mark properly. "I didn't need anyone to come forward for me, Landon. I didn't need you to say a goddamn word for me because everyone here knows I wouldn't harm Olivia, but we can't say the same about you."

"This is ridiculous," Mark said.

"Yeah, I find it pretty ridiculous to think that out of every person we talked to, every single person, you're the only one who lawyered up. That tells me you've got something to hide and whatever it is, I'm *going* to find it."

Mark narrowed his eyes again at Elliot and stormed out of the room, Gruenbaum following in his short footsteps. Elliot and Munch then left the room; Munch going to take a nap upstairs, Elliot heading for his desk.

Flinging himself into his chair, Elliot rubbed the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes as he heard the soft pads of feet coming toward him.

"Um..." he heard Alexa say and squeezed his eyes behind his hands. "Did we look into that Philip Fitzgivens again?" She spoke as if they were in the middle of a

conversation. "If I remember those videos correctly, he was hanging around her place a lot."

Elliot sighed letting his hands drop to his lap. "He's there because Liv's neighbor is his mother and I've looked at him every way possible. We've already tracked down everything about him and his alibi was solid. Three people saw him there."

"Oh, okay," Alexa said softly.

She started to turn and walk away, but paused mid-step.

"Look. I'm sorry, okay? I was out of line today saying that you should be reassigned."

"Yes," Elliot said. "You were."

"Let me...make it up to you with a beer or something."

He glanced up at her hopeful eyes and for a moment saw a flash of Dani Beck. Things always began with just a drink which eventually turned into several and before either detective knew what happened, new rumors were floating around the precinct, however they would not be just rumors.

"No," he said. "That's okay. I've got a lot of catch up for tonight, but I'll have everything ready for you to sign off on Donough and Roy tomorrow. 'Kay?"

Alexa nodded. "All right. Well...I'll see you tomorrow."

Elliot gave a slight nod in her direction as she turned and walked toward the elevators. His eyes fell on Olivia's empty chair and wondered how long he would be able to fend off any new partnerships to keep her desk clear of any visitors. In the past twelve months he had had to endure Olivia's clear desk and a new face behind it twice and had no desire to do so again.

The squad room had grown quiet in the late hour and though he tried to focus on the task at hand, his thoughts were littered with memories of Olivia. Late nights, early mornings, bright days, long days.

He tried to dig through the papers on his desk in hopes of finding his notes on a recent case had handed to him about women being raped too realistically on video and his mind unintentionally flashed a part of Morse's videos in front of his eyes. The video, one he had watched that day, had elicited a very clear memory and he was glad that Andrea had stepped out of the room when he rushed through it, wondering all the while if anyone else had seen it.

"I wanna go home."

"We're home, Liv," Elliot had said. "We're almost on your floor."

She leaned half against the elevator and half with her arms draped across him. Her head rested on his shoulder and he had an arm squeezed around her middle holding her upright on wobbly legs.

The elevator doors slid open and he stuck out one foot near the frame to keep the doors from closing on him.

"C'mon, Liv," he said pulling at her arm that uselessly tried to keep her stable in the elevator. "Just a few more feet."

Olivia tried to lean forward, but lost her balance and fell onto him. He rolled his eyes momentarily and gathered her upward in his arms, allowing her to curl into his chest as her eyes began to close.

Elliot rotated her weight slightly to keep his center of gravity square to ensure he would not drop her and slowly made his way down her corridor. His steps were steady, but he could not walk directly in a straight line as the six beers and two tequila shots that splashed in his stomach were beginning to work their magic.

Olivia murmured next to his chest and he wondered if it would be safe to even leave her alone that night. She too, at close to half his weight, had poured six beers down her throat as well as seven shots of tequila and the three Rum and Cokes various hopeful suitors had bought for her at the bar that night.

He and Olivia had stopped for a quick lunch at a hot dog stand that day when Olivia had turned, mid-bite, and was face to face with an ex-boyfriend and the woman for whom he left her, who also happened to now be his pregnant wife. The only reason Elliot remembered him as such was due to the anger that had emanated from Olivia in the weeks after learning that he, Will, had cheated on her. The four of them had exchanged quick greetings and parted ways, but he could still feel that Olivia had not fully recovered from the incident.

She left the precinct proclaiming that her goal that night was to drink away the memory of Will and Elliot, fearing what might happen to his partner in such a state, searched three bars before he found her surrounded by four different men, each listening to her slurred speech with optimistic eyes.

"I hate him," Olivia said, her voice muffled by his jacket.

"Yeah, I hate him too, Liv," he said still making his way down the hall.

"Heesah jerk."

"Yep, Liv. A big jerk."

They approached her door and as he shuffled to keep her in the air and finagle his keys from his pocket, Mark Landon opened his door with narrowed eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"What the hell does it look like I'm doing?" Elliot said. "You could help me out here by just grabbing my keys from my jacket pocket and opening her door."

Mark peered over Elliot's shoulder at the incapacitated Olivia. "What have you done to her?"

"Not me. Blame Jose Cuervo. Now, can you get my keys or not?"

Mark fished the keys out of Elliot's pocket, found Olivia's house key on his own and opened the door for them.

"Do you need any help?"

"I dragged her from the bar and out of the cab," Elliot said. "I think I can take it from here."

He closed Olivia's door with a kick of his leg and half stumbled as he got her onto her couch.

"I wanna go home," Olivia mumbled.

"You're home, Liv," he said. "You're on your couch. Are you gonna be able to make it to your bed all right?"

“Mm-hmm,” Olivia murmured into her sofa cushions, but her hand slid from the couch and banged her knuckles on the floor. She did not react to the crack of her bone hitting the wooden floor.

Elliot rubbed a hand over his face and took off his jacket as he stared at her sprawled on the couch. A brown trickle of her sick gleamed into the light and he sighed as he had hoped he leaned her far enough into the bushes, when they left the bar earlier, to keep any from getting on her pants leg.

He bent down to her resting form. “I can’t let you sleep like this, Liv.”

“I wanna go home,” she repeated. “Heesah bastard...I wanna go home.”

Sighing again, he padded across the apartment and rummaged through her dresser drawers until he found some pajama bottoms. He laid them on her bed and returned to the living room. Gathering her with one arm around her waist and one of her arms around his neck, he led Olivia into her bathroom, where he held her hair as she wretched again and helped her swish some Listerine in her mouth before he carried her into her bedroom.

He hesitated over her mumbling form for a moment before sitting on her bed and pulling her feet into his laps and taking off her shoes and socks. He had removed her jacket and left her in her t-shirt when he stopped and stood with his hands on his hips.

“Liv,” he said. “I can’t let you sleep in those pants, there’s throw up all over them.”

“I wanna go home,” she mumbled and twisted on the bed.

“I know,” he said, “But you can’t sleep like this and I have to take off your pants, okay? I’ll make it quick.”

She groaned and slapped his hands away twice before he could get her side zipper undone. To his word, Elliot slipped her pants off quickly, flashing black panties, and slid on her pajama bottoms, before he unfolded her bed covers and moved her into her bed.

He lied beside her for a minute, his head beginning to grow fuzzy from the alcohol and he rose to leave, he felt a tug at his shirt.

“Don’t leave,” Olivia whispered. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“Liv, I...I can’t stay here with you.”

“Please,” she said, her grasp growing tighter around his shirt. “I don’t want him to know that I’m alone.”

He sighed. “You’re not alone, Olivia. And Will’s not going to know even if you were. He’s gone. He’s a jerk, remember? He’s gone.”

“Please...please don’t leave me.”

“All right,” he said after staring at her for a moment and slipping off his shoes. “I’ll stay with you until you fall asleep okay?”

She nodded and smiled sleepily as he crossed the bed and fell on top of the covers next to her. She curled next to him immediately and he simply sighed as their breathing slowed and fell in time together.

“Why doesn’t he want me?” Olivia mumbled into his neck.

Elliot tried to shrug. “Beats me, Liv. The man’s an idiot as far as I’m concerned.”

She turned her head slightly and he realized that her lips were tracing a curve up his neck toward his jaw line.

“Hey,” he said patting her on the arm. “C’mon Liv. Don’t do this.”

She swung her arm around him and a moment later she had pulled herself on top of him, her blankets still separating them.

“Olivia...stop,” he said trying to sit up in the bed. “You’re drunk. You’ve got to stop.”

“Why?” she whispered her hand caressing his chest. “He doesn’t want me and she doesn’t want you. She left you, El. She left.”

He let his head rest on her headboard feeling like the wind had suddenly been knocked out of him. Her words, dripping with the slurred innocence that only absolute drunkenness could bring, seemed to rip through him as her hands traced patterns in his chest and then began to pull at his shirt.

Elliot pulled her at the waist and sat her back on the other side of the bed as he tried to get out of it. She pulled hard at his shirt, much harder than he thought she would have been capable of considering her state and he fell back on top of her. Her hands wrapped around him instantly as she kissed a line up his neck once again.

“I want you, Elliot,” she hummed.

Bringing his hands around her arms, he clasped them to her middle as he straddled her, sitting upright in the bed.

“You have to stop, Olivia,” he said now breathing hard from the stress of restraint. “We can’t...do this.”

“I want to.”

“No, you don’t. That’s the seven tequila shots talking.”

Olivia stopped squirming beneath him and with her hands still handcuffed by his hands, she stared up at him, her eyes large and sad.

“You don’t want me either?”

He closed his eyes for a moment and let out a breath. “Yes, Olivia. I want you... very much. More than you’ll ever know, but you’re hammered and you’re never going to remember this, so I need you to just lie here and go to sleep.”

“You’re leaving me?” she asked softly as he released her hands.

“No,” he said sighing again as he shifted to the other side of the bed. “I’m just going to lie over *here* until you fall asleep. All right?”

She nodded and curled herself around a pillow instead of around him. Within minutes, she had sprawled onto her back in an inebriated slumber and Elliot quietly slipped out of her bed. He put on his shoes while sitting on her couch and sat with his head in his hands for a moment, his heart still pounding from the feel of Olivia touching him the way she had. It had taken his every ounce of strength to pull away from her when she said that she wanted him and a part of his mind still wanted to return to her bedroom and fulfill her proposition.

He lifted himself from Olivia’s couch, paused for a moment to make sure she was still passed out in her bed and headed for the door, a light sweat just beginning to appear at his brow.

Elliot swore as his hand slipped across a sheet of paper in a manila folder and cut a thin slice in his finger. Finding Olivia’s kit of band aids and antibiotic in her bottom drawer, he painfully patched his finger and returned to his desk, the file of his desire going unfound.

The clock on his desk read several minutes past one o'clock in the morning and he rubbed his temples as he leaned against his desk. Fourteen full days had passed since he had last seen his partner and every lead on her case seemed exhausted. He had dealt with weary cases before where even after fervent searching it did not appear that a child who had been snatched by a molester's hands would ever be found, but this was different.

Through his years with the unit, he had trained himself to make every child and every rape victim whose case came across his desk nearly faceless. It was a necessary evil of the job and if he had not adopted the technique, every abused child would turn into Dickie or Lizzie and every raped young woman into Maureen or Kathleen before his eyes.

Olivia, on the other hand, had stepped beside him as he worked said cases for years. He had grown accustomed to having her near to the point where his eyes unconsciously sought out hers and found them instantly during conversation and he could tell by just the sound of her breathing how many steps behind she was when they were chasing down a perpetrator. There was no way to wipe her from his mind.

Resigning to the fatigue that pulled at his very core, Elliot turned off the light at his desk and pulled on his jacket. He sighed as he reached the squad room elevators, wondering if he could put in another hour before acknowledging the fact that he was only going to stare at his ceiling instead of sleep through the night.

The elevator doors closed around him and as his thoughts floated to his near-interlude with Olivia several years earlier, he silently wished he had not pushed away Diana so zealously.

East 120th Street and FDR Drive
3:28AM

Munch stymied a curse word from his mouth as he lost his footing on the snow-covered hill. A path had been made in the snow leading toward the river, but the night air had quickly turned the slush of snow into ice and he stretched out his arms to balance himself as he slowly footed down the hill.

When he got to the bottom, he glanced backward to see the FDR curving toward Martin Luther King Boulevard and shook his head as a cold wind hit his face. Fin stood several yards away from him next to Melinda with a despondent expression on his face.

The boy over whom they stood lay on a blue tarp and the river lapped against the farther edge of it in odd waves. When Munch had received the call that morning, he had heard the word "river" and hoped that they would have some relief from Kreider's copycat, but once he oversaw the crime scene, he knew they would receive no such luck.

Melinda wrote a measurement in her notepad and looked up as she saw Munch approaching the scene.

"I see you made it up here," she said, her brown skin pink at the cheeks from having been outside for hours.

"Barely. I nearly fell on my ass up there and could've slid down here to you. What've we got?"

“A young male, black and about twelve years old. He hasn’t been in the water very long, so we can be grateful for that. In fact, I don’t think anything more than his feet really touched the river.”

“Is this the same guy as Ryan Daly’s?” Fin asked blowing on his bare, cupped hands.

“I didn’t want to think so at first,” Melinda said. “This is very different from the other murders. All the other boys were found at the very least on dry land, but there’s more to this one too. Look at his face and his chest. He’s been beaten far worse than any of the others I’ve seen, but the marks on his neck are exactly the same as Ryan Daly and the other seven.”

“Can we get prints?” Munch asked. “I want to be able to put a name with the face at least.”

“They already pulled them,” she said sniffing slightly against the cold. “Hopefully we’ll have a name by morning.”

Munch shook his head again. “Why another black kid? This just isn’t making any sense. Even if it was a copycat, he’d follow the same formula, wouldn’t he? Daniel Richardson was Kreider’s fourth victim.”

“Why the river even?” Fin said. “All the other kids were found in parks or alleys. This guy’s going from the exact location where the first couple victims were found all the way up here.”

“He might just be getting sloppy,” Melinda added. “Another difference I’ve seen directly on the boys was that Kreider was meticulous. The abuse most likely went on for several hours before they were murdered. Ryan Daly was abused, but it was over quickly and I’m sure we’ll see the same thing with this boy.”

“Might explain why he decided to try the river,” Munch said. “Maybe there was something on him that the killer thought the river might wash off or hide. He probably just didn’t have the time to get him in all the way. I mean, anyone could have seen something from the FDR.”

Fin nodded toward another officer at the scene. “Any witnesses so far?”

The young officer shook his head. “We’ve got a couple teenagers up the hill who said they saw a guy walking around down here, but that they thought he was just a homeless guy.”

“They get any other description than that?” Fin asked.

“They said he was white,” the officer said shrugging. “But, other than that, they didn’t see anything. Bardell’s got their statement.”

“All right,” Fin said as he started walking toward the hill. “We’ll talk to him.”

“When you do think you’ll know the cause of death for certain?” Munch asked Melinda.

“It’ll definitely be a while. There’s so many bruises on his face alone.”

“Well, the more differences we can dig up the better off we’ll be. I don’t want to give Kreider any more leverage when it comes to this case.”

Melinda sighed and shivered as a large gust blew against her. “I’ll let you all know as soon as I find something.”

"You need to give us more time," Cragen said into the telephone. "I can't believe you want to pull this from us."

"Missing Persons has their own caseload," Deputy Inspector Felton said. "As of tomorrow, her case is getting moved to Homicide."

Cragen's mouth went dry. "There's no evidence that she's been killed. She's just *missing* and if you gave us more time, we can find out what happened to her."

"Two weeks without a trace is more than enough time, Don," Felton said. "It's either Homicide or the Feds. I'd like to keep this within our jurisdiction."

"I don't care about jurisdiction at this point. I want our guys to find her."

"Regardless if you care or not, she's being moved to homicide."

"There's evidence-"

"She's nowhere to be found," Felton interrupted. "And there was some blood in her apartment when CSU ran through there. It's enough to start a Homicide case."

"If we can't find anything and she's our own detective, what's Homicide going to do?"

"This will give Benson more attention if we treat her case like a homicide. It's not that we don't value everything your unit's been doing for the case, but a cop is still missing and fresh eyes need to look at this. We need people to comb through every single detail, without any reservations about colleagues floating around, if you catch my drift. We're bumping the case to Homicide and if we find her alive..." Felton paused when he heard Cragen's voice catch. "I didn't mean that. I meant if...when we find her, we'll pass the case along accordingly."

Cragen hung up the phone several minutes later in disgust. He had known the switch was coming, but he thought he would have a chance to struggle to keep the case a little longer. With two new SVU murders following in Kreider's light however, he knew he did not have much of claim to Olivia's case.

While sitting in his darkened office, plagued by his own thoughts, he allowed a single tear to fall from his eyes before brushing it away quickly and making up his cot in the corner of his office.

Unknown Time and Place

Olivia's eyes opened slowly as her head lied on the bare cement floor. Endless grey expanded before her, shifting and becoming more varied with each blink of her eye. By the time she had pushed herself from the cold floor and elicited a series of coughs akin to a bronchial infection, weak colours had presented themselves.

The room, to which she had become more accustomed than she would have liked, consisted of concrete and cinder block walls and at the far end of it, stood a metal door with several locks that gleamed in the available little light. A group of what she assumed was three women sat crouched together against the wall to her right. Two of them looked very grey while the third was so dark, Olivia could just barely make out her outline in the gloom. She could see the slightest hint of a dull red coming from the head of the woman who sat nearest to her. All three were so thin she could see every bone that protruded from their bodies, their heads looking like nothing more than flesh-covered skulls.

Olivia turned her head toward her left and felt her eyes grow wide at the sight of a younger woman, a girl, staring directly at her. Her eyes were large and colourless in the grey and her face so gaunt Olivia could see cheekbones that would not have shown so clearly had the girl been healthy. She wanted to recoil from the sight of her, but her body felt so weak from just the exertion of pushing herself upright that she did not bother.

She opened her mouth to speak, but sputtered only in a fit of coughing which the girl watched intently as if watching a caged animal.

"Is...this hell?" Olivia finally managed to whisper to the girl.

The girl simply stared at her as if she had not seen a human being properly.

"Don't think so," the girl said finally. Her voice had the hint of a British accent that had been lessened by years of New Yorkers surrounding her. "I feel...alive, and I haven't gathered I'd done anything that wrong, so I can't say that it is."

"Do you know where we are?"

The girl shook her head. "We're higher up in the air. That I know. I can feel it. It has a feeling of being high up instead of being way down below, doesn't it?"

Olivia sighed and closed her eyes for a moment.

"What's your name?"

The girl stared at her for a moment as if trying to remember. "Amy. Amy Kettering."

"What's the last thing you remember before you got here, Amy?"

"I don't know."

"How long've you been here?"

"I don't know."

"Days? Months?"

Amy shrugged and sat down beside Olivia. She was easily half Olivia's weight though she was nearly as long. Her bones stuck out of her skin in odd places as if broken and healed improperly and her eyes were sunken.

"He's been angry lately."

"Who?" Olivia said eyes wide. "Him? Who is he? Why are we here?"

"He uses us," Amy said, a daft air about her voice. "One of the others said she saw a camera at one point and he uses us for that, but he just uses us again and again."

Olivia looked out at the expanse of the room that had grown to a lighter dark grey rather than black.

"We're..." she coughed. "We're going to get out of here, Amy. We're all going to get out of here."

"No one gets out," Amy said. "We're here to stay."

"No," Olivia said. "I won't die like this."

"When he's ready," Amy began, "he moves them to other room. Not the room with the lights, but the other room. He's only changed his mind once and that girl told us about the smell. It's the smell of death. The only time we leave is to go into that other room and we don't come back."

A shiver ran through Olivia's body as she tried to imagine what Amy meant by "the smell of death."

Amy shifted next to her. "I saved you something from the other ones. *They* tried to take yours too because you were still asleep."

She pointed to the huddled three who all now stared curiously at their pair. Amy then held out her dirty hand and dropped something small into Olivia's.

It was some kind of cracker that reminded her of communion wafers and as she tried to remember how to chew, Amy handed her a small Dixie cup from the corner of the room. The liquid inside tasted like watery Kool-Aid, but the sugar coursed through her like new life.

"Thank you," she said resting her head against the wall and feeling hungrier and thirstier than she was before she ate.

The sound of footsteps pounding across cement echoed throughout the room and Amy jumped from Olivia to crouch, shivering in the nearby corner. The three on the right had locked arms and huddled together shaking as a single mass. The red-haired one closest to Olivia cried.

Olivia's breathing grew ragged as she watched the grey locks turn on the door at the room's far end. She stood looking quickly for the pole that had saved her the previous time he had come for her, but found that it no longer existed. Only jagged stumps on the floor and toward the pole's curve and splash of water on the floor remained of it.

She looked toward the door and saw his pale form gleaming at her. His hair was a mess of blond locks and his eyes were cold and penetrating, but she could not make out his face against the grey.

"My name is Olivia Benson," she said defiantly. "And, I'm a cop. You have to let me go."

"You're a difficult one," he said nonchalance biting. "That I'll say for certain. But, even the difficult ones can be...broken."

Olivia heard the clank of something metallic in his hand, and the noise had an uneasy familiarity to it; the sound of a gun being loaded.

He drew the gun level to her face and took a step toward her.

"Now, *Detective*," he said. "Put your hands against the wall."

Olivia stood rebellious, hoping to call his bluff.

He took another step forward. "Must I tell you again? I'd hate to have gone through all this trouble on a wasted project. Put your hands against the wall...please, dear."

She turned, her breath coming out in gasps and placed her hands against the cold wet wall. He stepped just behind her and from the corner of her eye, Olivia could see Amy squeezing herself into a smaller ball in her corner.

He raised his gun and a moment later Olivia could feel its sharp cold barrel against her temple. She tried to shift away from him, but heard the safety click on the gun.

His free hand caressed her shoulder twice before she felt him place his lips at the back of her neck. When he let his mouth drag across the nape of her neck, Olivia's breath caught and she quickly reached out to grab his wrist with her fingernails.

He grunted at the pain and pulled the trigger in Olivia's direction. Heat from the errant shot wafted passed her arm, burning her as the bullet blew past and lodged itself in the wall. The sound of the bullet exiting the gun was deafening and the flash of light that spewed from the gun left her temporarily blinded, but she held onto his arm all the while.

Warm blood trickled onto her hand as she dug her hand into her wrist further and she heard the gun drop to the floor. He slammed her against the wall, cutting her shoulder

in the process, but she kicked out in every direction finally making contact with the weapon in the darkness and heard it skitter across the floor.

She whirled toward the expanse of the room, his arms clamoring all over her as they both rushed toward the sound of the gun. Her arms searched out for the gun as he caught up with her in the dark and pressed her toward the floor. The sounds of the others scattering echoed in the room as they had drawn near. Olivia kicked backward, her foot hitting him squarely in the chest at the same time she her fingertips brushed against the gun's cold handle.

She wrapped her hand around it, but he let go of her in that instant and retreated toward the wall where her eyes, still half-blind from the gunshot, could not make him out from the rest of the dark wall.

She held it out, ready to fire, pressing her eyes to see his pale form in the darkness. She did not want to chance hitting any of the others, but she knew he was still right there.

Her heart pounded and the only sound in the room was her ragged breathing coming in large gulps. She did not know whether or a minute had passed or an hour as she sat, gun still perched, shifting its barrel toward the slightest sign of movement in the room.

Olivia heard the hair shifting, like something swinging through the air. He was right next to her.

She fired twice her arms unsteady from lack of sustenance, but the gun jammed on her third shot.

Time passed silently, as she was unable to take a breath wondering all the while if she had hit her mark. She arched her arms toward the sound of something shuffling.

"Stupid bitch," she heard him said, now from the room's other side. "It's not that bad...I guess. It hurts a little less than this *wound* you've given me on my arm. But...it's not that bad."

Olivia kept her gun on him even though she knew it was jammed and her eyes were finally able to focus on his pale grey form that slinked against the darkness. The door across the room opened, shut and locked with three quick clanks.

The sound of crying erupted from Olivia's left and her head spun as her lungs gasped for air.

Amy appeared by her side quickly and sat down beside her again.

"I...I can't believe what you did," she said in a small voice. "He'll come back. He always comes back and he's angry now. You can't think that's the only one he's got. He'll come back and finish off all of us."

Olivia let her head rest against the wall unable to speak. She was so weak and so very tired. Tears formed in her eyes as she realized she did not know how much longer she would be able to hold out against him.

Amy patted her hand with bony fingers.

"You'll learn to live with it...Then it won't be so bad."

"No," Olivia said snatching her hand away from her. "He's not keeping me here. I won't die like this. Not like a victim. I won't. I'm not a victim. I'm not a victim..."

Tuesday February 13, 2007
Woodside, New York
5:56AM

Elliot lurched forward in his bed as his mind released him from the gripping recesses of his subconscious. He had had another nightmare where this time Olivia was trapped somewhere dark and lied unable to move, but calling out for him.

Pulling back the covers that were laced with his sweat, he set his feet on the floor and put his head in his hands and he quickly prayed for an end to all this. Not for the time, he cursed sleep as much as he cursed the gross fatigue that rattled his body. Exhaustion made his body hurt in the morning, but the nightmares ate at him throughout the day.

He got up, dressed quickly and made his way to the precinct, wincing as he got off the elevators knowing that someone with red hair and brown eyes would be lying in wait for him.

As soon as he set down his morning coffee, Alexa nearly pounced on him, feeding him information about the newest boy found, this time far north of any of the previous crime scenes. By the time she had finished her announcement with far too much energy than he was accustomed in the morning, it was nearly nine o'clock and Elliot's eyebrows shot toward his forehead when he saw Craig Spencer step off the elevator and into the squad room.

"What're you doing up here?" Elliot said shaking his hand with a quick clap on the back.

"Wish it was on better terms," Spencer said. "I take it you haven't got the news yet?"

"What news?"

"Your partner's case. It's been officially handed to Homicide. In fact, I just caught it this morning."

Elliot leaned against his desk and crossed his arms. "No, I didn't get the news. Why is her case being given to the eighth? We've got Homicide cops here at the 1-6."

"As far as the deputy inspector's concerned, whatever went down, happened in her apartment, so the case was passed to us." Spencer paused a moment watching as Elliot ran a hand over his face, clearly upset over the news. "I came here to talk to you personally about it, Elliot. I'm officially on her case, but I promise you'll be in the loop every step of the way. And, the second we find out who's responsible, SVU *will* get the collar."

Elliot paced in front of desk. "As long as we find her...I don't care who gets the glory."

Spencer nodded at him and headed back for the elevators. He passed Melinda on his way out and she approached Elliot, Munch and Fin very somber.

"Andrew Shaw," she said flatly. "Twelve years old. He'd been missing since Sunday night when he disappeared on his way home from a pick-up basketball game."

"Was he killed the same way as the others?" Fin asked.

She nodded. "Yes, but that's probably the only thing that links him to the other boys. He was kicked and beaten with something that was probably a wire hanger before he was strangled. I also found burn marks and defensive wounds on his arms. There were

prints this time, but they weren't in the system." She sighed. "I hope this guy isn't just getting started because he really did a number on this boy."

A pressing silence fell over them and she continued as she fumbled the manila folder in her hand.

"I found something else that sets Andrew Shaw apart from Kreider's victims. There's a chemical substance on the skin near his mouth. I was actually surprised to see it since he'd been by the water, but I also saw trace of it on Ryan Daly."

Munch took the report from her and shook his head.

"I've seen it before that too," she added and all three snapped their necks toward her.

"Where?" Fin said.

She pursed her lips for a moment. "Olivia's apartment. This is the same stuff they pulled off her floor that night."

All three quickly glanced at Elliot, but Fin spoke first.

"Same how?"

"Same as in it's the exact same makeup and concentration as what I found previously."

"You think the guy who took Olivia is the one killing these kids?" Elliot asked

"That'd make sense," Munch mumbled. "If he's got her, maybe he made her say how the other kids were murdered. Maybe that's how this guy knows all the little details behind Kreider's case."

"I don't believe it," Fin said.

"Well, unless I have a...unless we can find Olivia, I'm not willing to say whether or not a single person did both. Just that the same substance was found on his face just like it was on her floor."

"We've got more problems," Cragen said as he walked toward them from his office. "We need to meet with the press. Now. A number of people are gathering at Tompkins Square Park in a protest over all this. They're saying that we got the wrong guy and now no one in the city is safe."

"Aside from the actual murder itself, this latest case isn't anything like the others," Melinda said. "He was much more brutal this time."

"I'll use that to counter what the press is already starting to print."

"That's bull," Fin said. "Kreider killed those other kids."

"And that's what I'm going to say when we get there." He headed for the exit. "Show starts in ten minutes."

The detectives each grabbed various suit jackets and ties to make themselves look more presentable and followed Cragen to the press conference set up on the second floor.

The conference went quickly as Cragen and the deputy inspector re-affirmed that all evidence pointed to a copycat killer and not the same one. Several times Cragen repeated that Owen Kreider killed Jacob Lewendale, Connor Wickfield, Ricky Schrader, Daniel Richardson, Manny Scheibley, Dominic Hedges and Tyler MacFarland and that a new criminal was starting where Kreider had stopped. Cragen ended his speech to the public with a solid determination that they, Manhattan SVU, were closing in on the individual responsible.

Questions shouted by the press dealt with both sets of cases and there was a contented air about the state of the newest case and its pending resolution as the

conference came to an end. However, just before Cragen had a chance to leave the podium, a young reporter shouted from the back of the room.

"Aren't you still down a detective up there?"

Unable to depart with such a question hanging in the air, Cragen informed them that Olivia's case was now being considered a homicide and that they were working diligently to find her killer.

He retreated to his office on that final note, creating an eruption of new questions and thinking that he could retire right there and then.

In the squad room, Munch, Fin and Elliot sat stoic in the wake of their captain's announcement. Though they knew that Olivia's case had been shifted to Homicide, hearing it gave the news a new reality. They each had open cases, but to call Olivia Benson a victim of homicide pressed like the heaviest of burdens.

Fin soon received a call from a potential witness who remembered someone walking through the park Saturday morning near the area where Ryan Daly was found, and he and Munch quickly left to investigate.

"Cragen's looking for you," Andrea said to Elliot an hour later having just left his office.

"We just got a call," Cragen said when Elliot stood in his office. "A teenaged girl was found just above Delancey. She's shook up pretty badly, but they think she'll be all right. Brown's already on her way down there..."

Elliot sighed and shook his head.

"Just give her a chance, Elliot," Cragen said. "She'll get the hang of things."

"I don't have time to show this girl the ropes."

"She's has all the potential to be a good cop."

"She's not SVU material."

"I understand...She's not Olivia."

Elliot glared at him. "So, that's just it. We right her off as a homicide, clear all the stuff off her desk and make way for Detective Wet-Behind-The-Ears?"

"Elliot..."

"No, I'm not doing it."

"You'll do as you're told."

"I'm not letting Brown even fill in for Liv. I'm not giving up."

"Neither is anyone else here, but two detectives working together is going to get a lot more done than just one. You need to give her a chance."

Elliot shook his head. "What about Andrea? She's gotta be close to done with those tapes by now."

"Andrea's been shot at twice before and she's got two boys. She says she likes her desk work and I'm not throwing her out there if she doesn't want to be. Delancey Street. Near the park."

"You've got to have some kind of answer for me," Elliot said pacing the room.

George stared at Elliot, still surprised by his sudden excursion to his office.

"It's not going to be unusual for you to start seeing her in other's faces," George said. "What happened today is to be expected."

Elliot rubbed a hand over his face as he continued pacing. When he had met Alexa at the hospital with their newest rape victim, Cora Rosen, he passed by an open room door and happened to glance at the woman inside lying on the bed.

Her head was wrapped in several bandages as well as one of her arms in a cast, but Elliot froze in her doorway. For just a moment, he thought she was Olivia and nearly caused a scene with the family members who were visiting the woman. It was only when he had taken a second look at the woman, after pushing through the woman's two brothers, that he realized she did not look anything like Olivia. He had simply seen a brunette in a hospital bed and overreacted.

"On Sunday, I met Olivia's cousin and they look so much alike I nearly lost it. Morse... You know I should be where he is right now because I'm practically going through the same thing he is."

"How's that?"

"I'm... affected by all this. It's like I realized on Sunday that I've spent the better part of the last decade with this woman and I thought I was handling the fact that she was gone, but when I see someone who looks like her or who I *think* looks like her... Is this what it's gonna be like if she's dead? Am I going to see Olivia look-a-likes on the street and just break down?"

"I can't answer that for you. We all deal with grief differently."

Elliot stopped pacing and shook his head. "This... this is just bullshit. We had to declare that Liv's case is now being considered a homicide. No one in the squad thinks she's been killed, but her case got snatched from us anyway and I'm gonna have to walk around the rest of my life remembering the words 'Olivia Benson has been a victim of homicide.'"

Without waiting for a response, he left the office and drove back to the precinct hoping that Alexa was still speaking with Cora Rosen's family.

"I think we should sit on Landon for a while," he said to Munch when he had settled back at his desk. "Maybe put some Unis on him or follow him ourselves."

"This is sounding too familiar," Munch said.

"What?"

"Does the name Jeffrey Drover ring a bell?"

Elliot threw down the pencil in his hand. "I was right about Drover."

"No, you got lucky on Drover. He just happened to be molesting those kids, but you wanted to railroad him for everything. Same thing with Landon and there's no reason for you to focus just on him."

"I'm not willing to believe she's dead. I can't."

He and Munch stared at one another, extreme sympathy washing over Munch's face.

"Spencer is a good cop," he said. "He'll let us know the details."

"He's also got six open cases," Elliot said.

"As do you."

"Brown is probably still at the hospital helping the girl retrace everything that happened to her and I've got a foot and half worth of paperwork to sift through. I can focus on Liv at the same time."

He threw himself into his chair with a sigh and Munch put his hands in his pockets.

"There's a problem with Landon," he said.

"There's *always* been a problem with Landon," Elliot said.

"No. In looking at him for this. There's a problem."

"What?"

"What about the door?" Munch said.

"What door?"

"Liv's door. The door to her apartment was locked from the outside. Landon might seem slightly plausible, but the fact that her door was locked throws a monkey wrench in the whole theory."

Elliot shook his head. "Not necessarily. They were neighbors. Maybe she gave him a key."

"Olivia gave a key to a neighbor she barely talks to? C'mon Stabler. We've got to do better than that."

"But, what you're suggesting is that whoever took her had to've had her keys."

"Exactly. It fits everything else. If somebody had her keys, they could've been anywhere just waiting for the right second. And, the stairwell's not that far from her apartment. Someone could've just waited for you to leave and then grabbed her. If they pulled her in the stairwell, no one would've known, there wouldn't be any noise and the whole thing could've gone down in less than a minute."

"But, we would've seen someone coming in and out of there who didn't belong there," Elliot argued. "On Morse's tapes before that night. We would've seen something."

"How would we know thought?" Munch said. "Especially if this is someone Liv gave her keys to. It could've been a friend who could've been going in and out of her building all the time and wouldn't look out of the ordinary on the videos."

Elliot shook his head again as he crossed his arms. "Based on that theory, it could be anyone. Me, Halloway...Hell, even Maya Shah is up based on that."

"Look, Olivia's given her keys out to people, but how often has she had her locks changed?"

"From what I know about Liv, she's given her key out to maybe four or five people tops."

"And have we looked at all four or five of those people?" Munch said. "What about old boyfriends? What about this Matthew guy who smacked her around?"

"She didn't give him a key to her apartment."

"Are you sure? You didn't even know that he was hitting her. The fact that she stayed with him even after he hit her tells me she probably made a couple other mistakes in that relationship too."

Elliot stood and paced in front of his desk. "I don't like this. I don't like talking about Olivia like this. She didn't...wouldn't make some stupid mistake like that."

"She's human just like the rest of us. She makes mistakes and one of those mistakes has to be the reason she's missing."

"You're making it seem like it's her fault she's missing. Like she did something to deserve this!"

"Don't get mad," Munch said. "I'm just trying to get you to put a realistic spin on this. She's vanished without a trace and whether we like or not, Mark Landon does not have her."

“Yeah, not now, but-”

“And we can worry about him having her at some point and then getting rid of her later. Right now, our focus needs to be on finding her. Every day that passes is another day she’s probably going without food or water and it becomes more likely, that we’ll never find her.”

“Landon...he’s involved.”

“We can’t prove that and Spencer won’t be able to either. Not when there are others to still look at. We don’t even know this Matthew’s last name. How can we cross him off the list when we don’t even know who he is?”

“Morse said he hadn’t seen him around the building lately.”

“Well, Morse might’ve been running to Olivia’s aid when Drover was after her, but I’ve seen the unedited videos of the night that guy hit her. Drover’s camera didn’t falter and he didn’t seem to give a damn about what was actually happening across the street. From what I’m thinking, he probably didn’t want us to find those unedited tapes because he didn’t want us to see that he did nothing when his supposed *shining star* was in danger.”

“Fine,” Elliot said. “Let’s say we don’t depend on Morse’s opinion. That leaves us with practically nothing to go on.”

“No, it just means we go back to the basics. Look,” Munch continued when Elliot rolled his eyes. “Whether you like it or not, there are things, lots of things you don’t know about your partner. You didn’t know about this Matthew and you don’t know who she’s been giving her keys out to. If you don’t have that info, neither will Spencer and her case just sits on the shelf.”

“Maya would know,” Elliot said quickly. “Olivia tells Maya damn near everything and *she* hasn’t mentioned anything about this guy.”

“Well, when was the last time we asked her?”

Maya’s hand shook constantly almost like a sufferer of Parkinsons’s as she sat in the chair next to Elliot’s desk. Occasionally, she threw a glance at the empty desk behind her and her large eyes would grow red once more. Her bag sat open at her feet and Elliot could see a half-empty box of Camel Ultra Lights poking out from the its top.

“I can’t remember his name,” she said in a voice raspy from constantly crying. “How the hell can you expect me to remember the name of a guy my friend dated years ago? Do you have any idea what’s happened in my life...both our lives since then?”

She sounded simultaneously as irritated as Mark and as mournful as Veronica Schrader.

“We’re just trying to cover all our bases.”

“Yeah, well while you’re covering your bases, Livia’s still missing. She’s still out there somewhere, probably being hurt by someone, and there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“What do you remember about him?” Elliot said trying to keep her focused.

“Nothing,” she said. “He was just a guy she dated. He was in and then he was out.”

He and Munch glanced at one another. “You don’t know why she left him?”

“She said he was a jerk. I really don’t know. I wasn’t seeing much of her back then. My grandmother was ill and I was flying back and forth to Florida every other week. I can’t remember everything about some random guy.”

“Maya,” Elliot said softly. “He’s not some random guy. We didn’t bring you down here to talk about some random guy. We’re looking at him for a reason.”

She glared at him, her lips pulled tight as her face contorted into the first scowl he had ever seen on Maya’s face. She had looked remarkably like Olivia when she was angry.

“I don’t care what reason you’ve got,” she said through clear, enunciated words. “I’m telling you this Matthew is just a random guy and if he’s the best you’ve got, then I might as well start drawing up the plans for her grave marker.”

“How can you say that when you don’t know anything about it?” Elliot pressed. “We’re asking you for a reason.”

“And, I’ve already told you, he doesn’t matter. He’s a non-entity! He’s not involved! How many times must I tell you! I’ve known Livia for years and this guy doesn’t matter!”

“Then, you don’t know her half as well as you think because this guy was beating her and if you don’t think that’s worth anything, then you’re of no use to us.”

Elliot stood half-expecting Maya to burst into tears again, but she simply rolled her eyes and shook her head.

“You make it sound like some severe domestic violence case or something,” she said softly. “He just hit her three times and then she got rid of him.”

“So, you knew?” Elliot said. “You knew this whole time?”

“How many goddamn times do I have to tell you?” she yelled. “I know Livia. There isn’t anything that’s happened to her that I don’t know about. From the time she learned to ride a bike to the time you came tearing into her apartment over the whole mess with your daughter! She tells me everything, so yes. I knew about him and I was just as angry when I heard about it the first time as I was after the second and third times.”

“You didn’t think this was something we needed to know!” Elliot shouted. “We’ve been trying to track down anyone who’s had any contact with Olivia and you’re sitting on information!”

“I wasn’t sitting on anything!” Maya shouted in return. “Excuse me if I wanted her to have some dignity! There’s no reason for you to pull every single detail of her life to light.”

“There is when we’re still trying to find her.”

“And is this helping at all? Does the fact that she let a guy hit her on more than one occasion give you anymore insight on where she is? Does it!”

“We’re detectives here, Maya,” he said in a less intense voice. “You need to give us the facts and let us do our damn jobs.”

“And, I’ve already told you, there’s no use even bothering to look at Matthew. She hasn’t seen him in years, so it’s a waste of time having us even talk about him. If you think that some *random* guy from years ago is just going to come after her out of the blue, then I’m pulling every contact I’ve got to get this bumped to a federal case, because you people don’t know what you’re doing.”

He turned and stared at her distressed and heavy breathing form for a long time.

“Does Olivia tell you when she hands out keys to people?”

“Yes. She gave you a set about two years after you were partnered.”

“What about this Matthew? Did she ever give him a set of keys?”

Maya rolled her eyes. “What difference does it make?”

“Maya,” he said sitting across from her again. “Olivia’s apartment was locked from the outside after she disappeared, but her keys were all inside her place. That means it had to be someone who had access to her keys.”

“That doesn’t mean anything. Based on that, I could argue that you did something because I know she gave you a key.”

“But, did she give Matthew a key?”

Maya crossed her arms in front of her chest in a huff. “I still don’t see what difference that makes. She still hasn’t seen him in years.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Elliot said softly. “You have no way of knowing for certain.”

Maya stared at the wall to her left.

“Does she tell you every detail about her cases?” he asked and watched as Maya gave a slight shake to her head.

“So,” he continued. “She leaves out basically anything concerning the job that takes up most of her life. If she’s not telling you about the job, how can you say for sure who she does and doesn’t see?”

Maya’s eyes met his and he could see they were beginning to tear. “She would tell me if she saw that asshole again.”

“Did she tell you about a guy named Drover?” Maya shook her head again.

“Maya...he attacked her right outside her building. He was a suspect in one of our other cases. He followed her, lured her outside and then attacked her and would’ve done real damage if she hadn’t talked her way out of it.”

Maya’s foot tapped rapidly next to her chair leg and she swallowed. “She didn’t tell me about that.”

“She didn’t want to tell me either. In fact the only reason I found out about it was because I noticed she was favoring one side of over another and I forced it out of her. He gave her a bruise the size of a basketball and she wasn’t going to tell anyone. Not even you.” He paused as Maya wiped a tear from her eye. “It doesn’t matter how long you know a person. They can still have secrets and there’s always going to be something you don’t know about them. So, I’m going to ask you again. Did she give a key to Matthew?”

“Yes...” Maya said slowly. “She’d said she felt some bullshit love at first sight thing or whatever and she gave him a key right away, but I knew better.”

“How’d you know better?”

Maya scoffed. “Because I had thirty years experience telling me so. I knew he wasn’t going to last just by knowing Livia. Every five years or so, she always manages to meet this magical “one” and it’s always a disaster. I knew he was just one of them, so I wrote him off immediately. But...from what she’s told me at least, and just from reading her, she hasn’t seen him in years.”

She stood and wrapped her large Fendi bag around her shoulder. “Now, if you’re done probing me about every detail of Olivia’s life, I have to go. I need to talk to my mother now so that when she sees the new tonight of your captain telling the world that

Olivia's officially been labeled as dead, she doesn't go into a complete panic over the woman she thinks of as a surrogate daughter."

Maya stormed away from him hitting Fin on the shoulder as he approached the desk pairs.

"There's been another one."

Elliot hung his head for a moment. "Can't be at Tompkins Square. They're holding candlelit vigils for the boys who've been killed."

"He wasn't. He was found in a box near Penn Station. But, he's at Mercy General right now. Cap wants us all there."

"Mercy General?" Elliot said. "He's alive?"

"Beat up pretty badly, but he's alive, and he's talking."

Unknown Time and Place

The metallic piece snapped in two again and Olivia swore as the piece sliced her hand for the second time.

He had not come back in what she counted to be two days, and while he still shoved the stale crackers and juice by the small opening in the door twice a day, she knew it was only a matter of time before he healed and was ready to come after her again.

Her hand shook as she took hold of the piece again in her bleeding hand. Much of her strength had been used to chip away at the lock on the chain around Amy's leg and she was growing weaker on a diet of old wafers and sugar water. Thankfully, he had not had time to replace the chain around her ankle and after some light coaxing, she managed to have Amy sit still long enough for her to work with her new tool.

The gun, a cheap thing that was large and showy, had been rendered useless after her last encounter with him, but she saw opportunity in it and pried and pulled at it until she had cracked it into several pieces. The longest of the pieces she rubbed against the walls and floor until it formed a sharp point and this she kept at her side just inside her underwear. The others she used to finagle at the lock that kept Amy chained to the wall.

She had been trying to stay awake at all times, marking a point on the wall with the gun and counting in her head to keep time. It was not exact, but she had an idea of how much time elapsed between the times he brought them "food" and the noises from outside the room.

Olivia had paced the room several times listening for any variations that might give her clue as to where she was. The muted sounds of the city would echo most by the sole square that appeared to be a boarded window and when she was near the door, but she never lingered there long in case he made a quick entrance. She could, however, hear buses and on occasion, people shouting. The sounds were not as far "up" as in her own apartment, but as Amy had suggested, they were clearly above ground.

"How much longer?" Amy whispered for the third time in what she thought to be an hour.

...fifty-eight...fifty-nine...ten twenty-three...one...

"I don't know, Amy," she said. *...four...five...six...* "When it's off, you'll know."

"He's going to be mad. He'll see what you've done and then he'll kill us."

“He’s not going to kill us.” ...*seventeen...eighteen...* “We’re getting out of here as soon as I get you all undone.”

She continued to pick at the lock, the crude tools clicking at intervals as she turned them in her now hurting hand. She had hoped to do something with the gunpowder in the remaining bullets, but the room was constantly damp and even if she could manage to create some sort of fire, she knew she could never maintain it.

The minutes ticked by as she continuously padded her toe to the floor in one second time and her ears piqued at the sounds of the lock’s inner mechanisms. An hour passed and then finally...

Click.

“You’ve got it off?” Amy said a bewildered expression displaying on her emaciated face.

The lock fell the floor with a clank that echoed in the room several times.

“Yep. Told you I would.”

Olivia stood and faced the other three who sat crouched together in the corner. She took a wobbling step toward the three, but they withdrew in unison making a small blotch of grey in the dark corner.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” Olivia said. “Just let me see your chains and I can unlock them too.”

The woman nearest her pulled her legs toward her body, taking her lock with her.

“Just go away,” one of them whispered.

Olivia sighed and stared at Amy again. She was marveling at the chain that now lay flat against the floor and her hand rubbed the place where it had worn a dark stain on her pale skin.

Olivia crossed the room and pulled at the chain to see where it fastened to the wall. She pulled herself along it until she found set of hooks and washers that were bound to the wall.

As she tried to imagine how long it would take to pull the chain off the wall, the sound large footsteps pounded from beyond the door.

She jumped from it, taking the end of the chain with her and Amy tore across the floor to huddle with the others.

Olivia’s breathing took up pace as she saw the door locks shift and the door open slowly.

“I see you’re waiting for me,” he said with a smile that seemed to glow in the dark room.

Olivia took a step backward as he took one toward her.

“C’mon, you bastard,” she whispered as she pulled the shank from her side.

“What’s that you’ve got? Don’t tell me you been-”

Olivia leapt forward brandishing the chain and within a second had the chain wrapped around his throat. She pulled at the chain that twisted around him as he clutched at his throat and pushed the shank into his middle as hard as her arm would move.

The sickening squish of metal tearing through skin seemed to ring in her ears as his blood trickled onto her hand.

He screamed and with his free hand, managed to snatch the chain from her and threw her against the far wall.

She regained her balance and ran to the corner where Amy squatted.

“Come on!” she screamed as he stood doubled over in room’s middle, but Amy just stared at her with wide eyes, the others trembling beside.

Behind her, he groaned and stood upright.

Olivia snatched Amy’s arm. “Come on!”

She had dragged her to her feet when he came at them both, slamming them into the wall.

Amy screamed as they hit the wall, the others scattering to the other corner and Olivia slashed her shank at him.

Amy’s hand slipped from hers, covered in his wet blood, and Olivia heard her run across the room as he came around to slam her into the wall again. His hand slid to her throat and squeezed tighter and tighter.

Her throat constricted and lungs seized as everything in her neck pained at once.

She swung the shank haphazardly at anything her hand could reach and stabbed into his arm. Blood seeped from the new wound and onto her hand as she made repeated slashes at him and slipped to the floor when he released her.

Unable to get to her feet so quickly, she crawled for the door and into a black corridor. She scrambled across the floor just going as straight as she could and heard him coming after her.

Every muscle in her body burned as she pushed herself to her feet and broke into a run. Her eyes searched the black for some sense of light, but found nothing.

His shuffling feet behind her quickened pace and he grunted as his feet fell into a full sprint for her.

She willed her legs to continue running and –

SLAM!

White stars appeared before her eyes as she came in contact with something hard.

His feet raced into her paused form and she darted her hands in every direction trying to find something. A doorknob, a handle; anything.

He slammed her body backward as her hand touched a long, cool latch. She felt his hands squeezing at her arms and he threw her into the wall again. Blinding pain seared through her side from an old bruise and with it came a course of anger. Her legs kicked in a fury at him as his mouth came toward her shoulder.

White teeth bit into her neck and she screamed kicking him again and again. His hand grabbed hold of her hair and pulled her toward the wall as he sunk his teeth further into her, breaking the skin.

With every will left in her body, she surged her hand forward and slashed the shank across his face.

He doubled backward for just a moment, but it was all the time she needed. The handle was found and she threw herself against the door and into a new room.

He pounded after her as she pushed the door closed and used every muscle against the door to keep him back. She struggled for only moment before he stopped and she turned quickly to find a lock on the handle. It would not keep him out if he chose to come through the door, but she knew it would buy her time.

Her breathing came in gasps and as she tried to catch her breath, leaning against the door, the smell hit her. She clapped a hand to her mouth, but soon it was suffocating.

The smell of years of rot and decay floated through her body and tears fell instantly from her eyes as she leaned further against the door in hopes of getting away from it.

Not all the crime scenes she had beheld could account for such an odor and as she considered whether to find another hiding place, Olivia heard him throw his body against the door.

In the dark grey light that cascaded over the room, she could see the door shake in its frame and she tried to steady herself, shank in hand.

She backed away from the door with his second heave and bumped into something heavy. She moved around it as it stood in the middle of the room and kept it between her and the door as he threw himself at the door a third time.

The odor grew stronger as she came farther into the room, but in the dim light, the object before her looked like nothing more than a large armoire. It stood taller than her with two doors in the front and a set of three drawers beneath them.

The door blasted a wooden spray as he broke through its hinges and her breathing waved in quick pants as she stood ready to strike, but wondering from which side of the armoire he might come.

She raised her shank with an unsteady hand as his breathing stopped and for a moment she thought he might have padded behind her like on their last clash.

His yelled resonated around the room, softened by the piece in front of her and as she stood prepared, the armoire shook and fell forward.

She screamed as she tried to back away from it, but could not move from its expanse in time and it crashed down upon her as she fell to the floor.

Her breath came in short wheezes as the armoire squeezed the air from her and she watched him step from behind it and pick up her dropped weapon.

"I'm beginning to think," he said breathing hard himself, "you're a bit more trouble than you're worth."

He turned on the spot and left the room, stepping on the pieces of door as he walked.

Olivia shifted her arms and stymied her breath for a moment trying to pull herself out from under the armoire, but her weight fell back on her elbows as she pulled. Her left leg was caught under one of the drawers that had shifted on the piece's fall and without the strength to lift the piece of furniture, she allowed herself to fall flat on her back and face the ceiling.

The tears that escaped from her eyes caused the parts of her body not trapped by the armoire to convulse and as she gasped for air, the smell wafted back into her mouth and lungs.

It came at her from all directions and nothing could be done to suppress it. She turned her head to her left and then her right, but each time she turned, its intensity grew heavier.

Finally, the weight of the odor had reached an event horizon and she leaned over as far she could to keep from having to lie in a pool of her own vomit.

Gasping for clean air, she turned as best she could onto her side and lied against her bruised and scratched arm. As her heartbeat gradually slowed, her eyes peered around the room in search of the putrid odor's source.

She froze when she came in contact with what looked like another set of eyes staring back at her. She blinked twice, but saw no movement. Shifting again, she focused on the eyes and realized she was looking at another gaunt face. It had a waxy appearance and was even greyer than those of Amy and the others, almost like it was...

Her breath caught, filling her lungs with the sour air and her eyes caught sight of another face and then another beside that.

Stacked along the wall farthest from her lay the bodies of tens of women whose faces, all decomposing at different phases seemed to stare a hollow gaze at Olivia.

She squeezed her eyes shut, the horror of his actions still floating in her mind and pulled herself into a ball, wrapping her arms around her head. Tears poured from her eyes and not knowing what else was possible, she screamed out the only name her mind could form.

“ELLIOT!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Wednesday February 14, 2007
365 West 32nd Avenue

Zachary Calbrach lied against his pillows fidgeting slightly with the oxygen wire that rested against his nose and over his ears.

From looking at his medical chart and a quick summary of the crime scene, Elliot knew that the twelve-year-old would most likely spend the next few days in the hospital. The lacerations across his face were just beginning to heal, but the damage his assailant had done with a belt to Zachary's neck were still very clear and dark against his skin.

His mother sat in a chair next to him, holding a hand to her forehead and looking like the slightest shift in movement might throw her into a crying heap on the floor. As Munch and Fin were at the crime scene trying to find witnesses, Elliot had called her earlier to arrange for him to speak to Zachary and her voice wavered so much on the phone she was barely discernible.

“Don't mess with it,” Mrs. Calbrach said through her hands.

“It feels weird,” Zachary said.

His blond hair was pressed against his head, but stuck out in several directions due to his position on the pillows.

Elliot knocked on the open door twice and Mrs. Calbrach rose to meet him.

“How are you, Zach?” he said standing beside the bed, another officer standing just to his right.

“Zachary,” he corrected. “I don't like Zach. It rhymes too much with my last name.”

Elliot smiled. “Okay. Zachary it is. I'm Detective Stabler. You can call me Elliot.”

“My mom says I'm not supposed to call adults by their names, so can I call you Detective Stabler?”

“That's perfectly fine. Now Zachary, this here is Officer Morriston. He's an artist.”

"You're an artist?" Zachary asked eyes bright.

"Yes, I am," Morrison said. "I'm a sketch artist and I'm also a cop."

"That's cool."

"If you're up to it," Elliot said. "I'd like for you to talk to Officer Morrison and tell him anything you remember about last night. Is that okay?"

Zachary nodded. "I'll try my best, but I don't really remember."

"It's okay," Elliot said. "Anything you can remember will be fine."

An hour later, Elliot held an obscure sketch of someone described as having a flat face, a wide mouth and "weird" eyes. Zachary had called his attacker "shorter" with lighter hair, but with nothing in place to make a comparison, they were left with only the deranged sketch. His only consolation was that Zachary was still heavily medicated and there was a possibility that once he was on lighter drugs, his memory might give them a more suitable suspect.

"How'd the boy do?" Cragen asked as Elliot walked toward his desk in the squad room.

"The sketch looks like something out of a cartoon," he said. "I'm hoping we can ask him again in a few days. He's got so many drugs running through him, I'm surprised he can even sit up straight."

"How is he?"

"He seems upbeat, but he's probably just repressing at this point."

Cragen's eyes stared past Elliot.

"You're day's about to get a lot more interesting."

"Why's that?" Elliot asked turning to see at what Cragen was staring.

Each wearing black three-piece suits and stern expressions, Jonathan Holloway and Jillian Harfort strode toward Elliot and Cragen in tandem.

"Good morning," Cragen said with a false delight.

"Let's cut the bull," Jonathan said curtly. "You both know why we're here, so let's get on with it."

"You're ready to take another swing at me while I've got my back turned," Elliot seethed. "'Cause this time, I'm be sure you'll spend a night or two at Rikers."

"You know this is absolute garbage," Jillian snapped before Jonathan could respond. "We keep asking to be informed of any changes...any goddamn changes about Olivia's case and we kept having to hear things on the back end. Why?"

"Mrs. Harfort," Cragen said. "We have a lot of cases to tend to--"

"So, that's it?" Jillian interrupted. "You have a lot of cases and when it looks like you've got a tough one on your hands, you just up and slide it to the next precinct. Is that how you operate, Captain Cragen?"

"Olivia's case was moved to the precinct where--"

"We don't care about who's doing the goddamn investigation!" Jonathan yelled. "We care about getting Olivia found! Why the hell are you people calling this a homicide?"

"We are still doing everything we can to find her, but *that* is out of our hands."

"Bullshit!" Jonathan yelled.

Cragen glared at him. "You better watch yourself Holloway or you really will spend the night in prison."

“Olivia isn’t dead! How could you even stand there and say it! She’s not dead! You people need to have every single person who’s got legs to be working on her case!”

Jonathan swung his hand at the desk closest to him and brushed the wire paper tray that sat on its edge to the floor sending a spray of paper across the squad room and jarring the officer out of his seat.

Cragen took a step toward him and spoke in a low voice. “If you think you’ve got any goddamn clues as to where she went, please, feel free to offer them up. We could have eighty cops on her case and we’d still be in this position.”

“That’s right,” Jonathan said. “With your thumb up your ass!”

“Don’t bother, Jonathan,” Jillian said. “He’s as much as said they don’t have a clue where she is and so they’re writing it off as an unsolved homicide and that’s the end of that. Tell me, Captain, have you cleaned off her desk yet for the next one or do you give us some time to come collect her things?”

“No one is writing Olivia off,” Elliot said.

“Then why hasn’t she been found yet!” Jonathan yelled.

“You want to give us a good place to start looking, Holloway, then be my guest. You just give us a place and we can have a hundred cops tearing through the city looking for her.”

As he glared at Elliot, Jonathan’s blue eyes seemed to change colour into something nearing hazel-brown for just a moment and Elliot felt his heart jump at the concentrated rage blazing behind Jonathan’s eyes.

“Why don’t *you* give us a place to start?” Jonathan whispered.

“Don’t get your shorts in a knot about that again,” Elliot said. “We’ve already been over this.”

“And, I still don’t care! There’s a video on the Internet of you damn near strangling her and yet you’re here in front of me *acting* concerned.”

Elliot took a step forward, but Cragen took two and pushed him away from Jonathan.

“See that?” Jonathan said his voice cracking. “That’s what you did to her, isn’t it! I know what goes on in here. I know! People have told me what’s up! They told me how you were ready to take her down even in front of all your cop buddies the day she disappeared. God only knows what you did when you didn’t have anyone watching. Without anything to protect her but her own wits and that could’ve only taken her so far when she’s dealing with a Neanderthal!”

Elliot lunged for Jonathan, but both Cragen and another detective, who stood just beside him, kept the men apart from one another.

“Look, damn it!” Jillian said. “I don’t care what is or isn’t on that video! I don’t even care who’s at fault. I just want to be kept in the loop and I just want her found!”

“You know exactly what we know!” Elliot said. “Someone took her from her apartment two weeks ago. That’s it!”

“What’s this I’m hearing about you *harassing* Maya over piddling shit about ex-boyfriends?” Jonathan said.

“The woman’s fragile enough as it is,” Jillian continued, “and she doesn’t need you dragging her down here, without telling her a *damn* thing, but demanding answers all the same!”

“You said two weeks ago that she was an absolute idiot,” Elliot said. “You should learn to make up your mind.”

“I was frustrated! Just like I am now even listening to this!”

“We’re looking at everyone possible,” Cragen said. “That includes people that maybe she doesn’t want to bring up.”

“We want Olivia found, Captain!” Jillian yelled. “If you think that uproar over those boys was rough, just let us get started. We will have everyone in the Tri-State area in here screaming for her to be found. I will not see my friend’s case thrown to the wayside because you people think you’ve got better things to do! You don’t! All that matters is finding Olivia Benson!”

“You tell that to the parents of the kids that are being murdered in the streets,” Cragen said.

“She’s *your* detective! That has to take priority over something!”

Her face had turned completely red and she was out of breath.

“She takes priority,” Elliot said after Jillian had calmed. “Every spare second we have is spent on Olivia.”

“And that’s great to hear,” Jonathan said sardonically. “But no one here really gives a fuck how much *spare time* you spend on her case. I want her found! I will have all your jobs by the end of this week if I have to! I want her found!”

“What good do you think that’ll do, you dumb prick?” Elliot said. “You want to bring in fresh batch of people who don’t know or care about Olivia? The cop who’s officially handling her case right now and I go back a long time and the second he gets word, *any* word on her case, he’s coming straight to me. Don’t wave your daddy’s money around in here. We are doing every single thing possible to find her and you coming in here like this isn’t helping.”

Elliot’s words echoed through the room as Jillian wiped at her eyes and stood a little straighter.

“I’m not going to apologize for anything I’ve said. We want her found and I don’t expect to hear about any other changes in her case from the news.”

“You won’t,” Cragen said.

“I know I won’t,” Jillian said. “I’m calling here every day. Every hour, on the hour until she’s found.”

“And, don’t think she won’t do it,” Jonathan added.

“You two do whatever you think you need to, but nothing here is going to change,” Elliot said. “We...care about Olivia just as much as you do and we’re not going to stop looking for her.”

They stared at one another for a moment before Jillian gave the slightest frustrated stomp of her heel.

“Fine,” she said. “Jonathan, we’re going to leave the captain and his *detective* so that they can have some time to figure out what the hell happened to our Liv.”

She turned with a flash of her hair and headed back toward the elevators. Jonathan glared at Elliot with a hatred Elliot had never seen earlier burning in his eyes so intensely, it took every bit of his resolve to stand firm.

Woodside, New York
9:41PM

The alcoholic liquid within the grey aluminum can gave an effervescent hiss and fizzed as Elliot returned it to its spot on his coffee table. The bitter liquid still played across his palette when he closed his eyes and leaned back against the couch, his body aching from incessant stress.

He had bought "Beast" from the liquor store several blocks over because it was the cheapest thing he could stand to have gushing down his throat and he did not want to suffer the tortuous hemicrania that would follow with a copious amount of scotch or vodka. He still had several Pabsts in his refrigerator, but he could not drink them.

It was hard looking at them each time he opened his refrigerator, but he knew it would be worse to have them lying empty in his trash. There was something about removing anything from his life that so reminded him of Olivia that was unsettling.

The day had ended on a more-or-less positive note despite the way it began. He and Alexa were able to find Cora Rosen's rapists and even elicit a confession, though he knew it would have gone quicker had Olivia been interrogating the perp with him. Alexa had wanted to get a celebratory drink for a quick close to the case, but no one was in the mood, least of all Elliot.

He had also paid a visit to a local flower shop that night and bought Valentine's Day flowers for his daughters and a single long-stemmed, peach-coloured rose for Kathy. She had simply stared at it awkwardly for a moment before accepting it and that was when Elliot went back out to the nearest liquor store.

Elliot took another swig from the can when he heard a knock at his door. He crossed the living room to open it, and the door had just barely opened when Jonathan barged into the apartment nonchalantly.

"How the hell did you get in here?" Elliot asked.

"Daddy's money," Jonathan said. "Remember? Everything I do apparently has to have the hand of the Halloway forefathers for it to have any meaning. I mean, it's not like *I've* spent my life doing what I could to make my *own* way in the city or anything."

Jonathan swayed slightly as he stood and Elliot could smell the light scent of scotch coming from Jonathan as he paced across the living room.

"Took me some time though," he continued. "If that's any consolation. Had to tip a couple people here and there, but finally *I* found someone who knew someone who worked in my building and who just happened to live in yours. Isn't this city great? It's like some oblong cog and I've got all the grease."

"Why are you here?" Elliot asked growing impatient, but his words were clearly missed as Jonathan had taken to turning in a circle as he gazed around Elliot's apartment.

"Is this really where you live?" he said. "God, I'm feeling claustrophobic in here. I can't even believe people live in places like this anymore."

"You know," Elliot said. "I'm humoring you right now because I know you're having a real rough time with Liv being gone, but I think you need to leave."

Jonathan laughed, flashing a perfect smile and stumbling slightly. "God, I hate you. I really do. I mean...all this time, I've tried to just be a good guy about it for Liv's sake, but now that I look at you...I really fucking hate you."

"Likewise, now get out."

Jonathan shook his head and waved his finger in front of him. "No, c'mon now buddy. Let's talk for a second. See, Olivia's not here right now, so there's no reason for either one of us to even bother being cordial. 'Kay? So, let's just talk. You and me for a sec. We've started off good so far. I hate you and you hate me. This is good. Good! Ha-ha! And the evening and the morning were the fifteenth day and *Jonathan* saw that it was good."

He doubled over at the waist into a fit of chuckles.

"Halloway," Elliot said taking a step toward him. "Get the hell out."

The smile faded from Jonathan's face like it had been quickly wiped clear. He fished around in his inside coat pocket, pulled out a pair of long tickets and slammed them on Elliot's coffee table.

"See those? Tickets to a show. For Valentine's Day. Today! I bought those tickets the Tuesday before she threw me out...the first time. They were my back up plan seeing as how she had to cancel on me that Monday."

Elliot swallowed as he stared at the tickets, but felt his face fall into a scowl. "You going anywhere with this little story?"

"I had it all planned out on Monday. Everything was so fucking perfect it would've gone down as the greatest one in history. But then...I got the call and I had to go onto Plan B." He stumbled further into the apartment and bumped into Elliot's television nearly knocking it off the stand, but did not notice. "But, tonight though... Tonight, was going to be special. Not trite. Liv and I talked about me being a trite bastard before, so I wasn't going to be trite. Tonight we were supposed to go to this show and then we would laugh at how good or bad it was. After that, we'd go back to her place and watch old movies just like we normally did. Like she always wanted to do. Then, I'd rub her feet until she fell asleep and after that I'd put her to bed and just be so...happy to just wake up next to her in the morning. That's how it was supposed to go."

"Halloway, you've got ten seconds to get the hell out of here before I throw you out."

Jonathan reached into his left side pocket and pulled something small from it. "When she woke up...feeling good for once after a night of just being happy and comfortable, I was gonna be kneeling beside her with this ring. This perfect ring."

He opened his hand to reveal a flash of diamond and continued. "Tomorrow was it. February fifteenth was supposed to be the day, but you...you've screwed me over... again."

"What the hell do you mean *I* did?"

"I wanted to do it *weeks* ago, but she had to work...with you. And, now here I am again. Wanting my Olivia and now because of you, she's nowhere to be found!"

The sorrow in Jonathan's voice pulled at every one of Elliot's emotions, but instead of accepting sympathy for the man before him, he could only draw anger.

"I didn't do anything to her. If anything, *you're* the one who had her crying on the job."

"You're a goddamn liar! I treated her like a queen! The only time things ever got bad was when your name got brought up."

"You told her she was incapable of allowing herself to be happy. You called her a whore! I don't care how good you say things were. You don't deserve her!"

Jonathan took a step forward. "I was angry, you bastard!"

“So is that what you say to a woman when you’re angry? How ‘bout after you put a ring on her finger? Were you gonna try to tear her down any time you got angry? Maybe try smacking her around if that didn’t work!”

“Fuck you!” Jonathan said as he faltered on his feet.

“Get. Out.”

“You’re a goddamn fucking bastard, you know that!”

“I don’t care. When this is all over, I can’t wait to tell Liv what an asshole you’ve been to every single person in her life. Maybe then she’d throw you out for good. She’s put up with your bullshit for far too long anyway!”

“After everything I had tried to do for her, she wouldn’t give me any room to make a mistake. One single goddamn mistake! But you...you could fuck up eight days a week and she’d still forgive you! You could scream at her, blame her for screw ups on the job, push her away when she tried to help you, but she always forgave you. I make one mistake and I’m out the door! I fucking hate you! I oughta shoot you where you stand!”

Jonathan pulled a gun from his inside pocket and Elliot stood tense. Tears were streaming down his face and the same intense rage Elliot had seen earlier had returned in full force.

“Halloway,” Elliot said. “You need to put down that gun.”

“I hate you...so much. You...you...You’re just this cop whose father was probably a cop and his father before him! You’re kid’s probably going to grow up and be one too. You’re just this...blue collar...nobody and she cares more about you than she does me.”

“Jonathan,” Elliot said, his eyes never leaving the gun trained at his chest. “That’s not true. She loves you. She told me herself. She said *you* were the one. Now you have to put down the gun.”

“I hate you!” Jonathan said through his teeth. “She’s the only thing in this world that’s ever mattered to me and I can’t have her because you got to her first! Even when she’s found, it’ll be you that finds her. You’re gonna be the one she sees when she wakes up safe and sound. I know because you’re her goddamn case of emergency person!”

“It’s just ‘cause I’ve known her longer. Trust me. If you gave it a few more years, you’d be number one.”

Jonathan took a step forward and clicked off the safety off the gun. Elliot’s heart froze as he wondered if he could get to his own gun before Jonathan could take a shot at him.

“Number one?” Jonathan said. “Don’t talk to me about number one. She’s all I ever I think about. From the first night I met her, I knew she was it. The search was over. She was everything I wanted in a woman. Honest...caring... Never mind all the other perks like great sex. She was just fun to be around and she didn’t want anything from me, but me. Wasn’t looking for a rich husband to take care of her. Wasn’t asking me to buy her shoes or jewelry or some other shit. Olivia just wanted me. Do you know how hard that is to find? Do you?”

Elliot shook his head. “It’s difficult.”

“You’re fucking right it’s difficult. On my eighteenth birthday, I got access to my trust and had more money guaranteed to me than most people see in a lifetime. Do you know what happens when people hear that? They change and you see them how they

really are. The beautiful people start grabbing at anything they can and all of a sudden they're...hideous. The people you call your friends turn around and sell you out as soon as they think they can get a piece of your pie or worse. They try to use you until you tell them no, and then they can't stand the sight of you. Money fucks with people, Detective. I thought it fucked with everyone until I met Olivia. She liked me before I told her who I was related to and afterward she said surprised. She said she thought all rich boys were arrogant and just looking for a good roll in the hay before marrying blonde money to pump out more rich boys. She...she said she was surprised someone like *me* would want *her*."

"Who wouldn't," Elliot said his eyes fixed on Jonathan's quavering gun.

"Right. That's what I said. She found a man who admired her for what she did for a living and I found a woman that I could trust and love. And everything was perfect. Then...then, I met you and then I realized that I had to play catch up against some *guy* who for all intents purposes is really no different from me. Sure, you're a little buffer, but I've got more hair. We both have blue eyes and we're both strong, sensible people when the time warrants it. From where I stand, you take away money, and we're the exact goddamn person and yet...I was always a step behind you."

"Just put down the gun," Elliot said. "We can talk all this over like men over some drinks, but you have to put down the gun."

"Did something change that night, Detective? Did she say something to you that made you realize you might have to keep your hands off her? Is that why you snapped and killed her?"

"I didn't kill her."

"Bullshit."

"Olivia's not dead."

"How do you know that?" Jonathan said as a tear dropped from his eye. "Do you have her locked up somewhere? Is that how you know?"

Elliot took a step toward his gun that lied in a holster across the living room and spoke very slowly. "I know...In my heart, I know she's not dead. You...care about Olivia too. Do you *really* think she is? How can you even imagine it?"

Jonathan's hand shook as he stared at Elliot down its barrel. "If I could just see her...maybe then I'd be all right."

"You and me both," Elliot said. "I saw a woman the other day who I thought was her and I nearly lost it. I get it. Trust me, I get it. But...you need to put down that gun. Think about what would happen if you pulled that trigger. What would Liv do if she came back and you were in prison for life for shooting me?"

"She'd probably hate me," Jonathan said his voice cracking. "And spend the rest of her life crying over *you*."

"No. She said you were the one, remember? So, you can't do anything *stupid* while we're still trying to find her." He watched as Jonathan's trigger finger twitched and he searched for a lie. "She told me herself the only reason she keeps me high on her phone or anywhere else is 'cause I'm on the job with her. That's it. That's the only reason."

"You're a liar. You just said I didn't deserve her and now you're putting me on."

"I swear on my life," Elliot said, nearly pleading. "The night before she disappeared and you hadn't called her... She sat right next to me and said, 'He was the

one, wasn't he?' When it comes to Olivia, you have absolutely nothing to worry about and when we find her, she'll tell you that."

His words seemed to have the desired effect and Jonathan's eyes fluttered. They stared at one another for a full minute before Jonathan tilted his gun and allowed the clip to fall to the floor as he shook his head.

"It's not fair," he said, tears steadily falling from his eyes. "What makes you so fucking special?"

He turned and threw the solitaire engagement ring at Elliot and it skidded across his coffee table leaving a long scratch as it came to a stop. Elliot did not move.

Jonathan turned and left the apartment. "Not fair at all..."

Elliot let out his breath, unaware that he had been holding since Jonathan dropped the clip. He crossed the room to pick up the clip, set it on his coffee table and turned his attention to the ring as he sat on his sofa. From its weight and cut and from the little he knew about diamonds in general, he gathered it cost several months' salary, but it was probably something Olivia would have cherished.

The round Brilliant cut diamond was easily two carats and was the most flawless stone he had ever seen. Though it was night and he had only his kitchen light several meters away, the diamond refracted the light into a dazzling array. He could not tell if the setting was white gold or platinum, though he was willing to bet, if Jonathan loved Olivia as much as he said he did, the ring would be platinum, wholly matching her personality.

He's right, Elliot thought.

The ring alone would have made for a surprise engagement that could have gone down in history.

He lied back against the couch pillows, turning the ring over and over in his hand, his thoughts on Jonathan.

Every cop instinct he had told him that he should report Jonathan as soon as possible, but he knew he would not. Jonathan had stood before him, not the smug and pampered brat Elliot had built him up as in his mind, but as a man mourning for the only thing that had kept him stable. In his eyes had burned every intent of avenging Olivia and Elliot knew that if in that same position, he would have spat the same words as Jonathan had earlier that morning. He felt his stomach burn at the idea.

We really are alike.

The telephone on the end table next to him gave its shrill cry, ending his silent muse.

"Stabler," he said once he picked up the phone.

"Detective Stabler?" Evelyn Rivers breathed into the receiver. "I...it's Evelyn. Evelyn Rivers."

"I know," Elliot said rubbing his forehead and subduing a sigh. "How are you feeling?"

"N-not good," she said. Her voice sounded tearful once again. "There was a newspaper. One of the nurses brought one to me. I hadn't read it days, but...You're saying she's dead?"

"That's not what that article meant."

"But it said her case was now a homicide. That means she must be dead."

He sat silent not knowing what else could be said. Evelyn had called on almost all of the fifteen days Olivia had been gone and each time she sounded progressively worse,

yet Elliot had run out of encouraging words. At this point, there was simply nothing left to say.

“Micah did it,” she said.

“Evelyn, I’ve told you before. Micah was in jail before Olivia went missing.”

“You keep saying that, but the news said you never even talked to him. How could you know?”

“We know, Evelyn. We know where he was.”

She sobbed into the phone. “You don’t understand. Olivia...Olivia told me that he was going to jail and that he’d never bother me again, but then he was here the next day. I heard the orderlies talking about it. He was trying to get me...*here*.”

Elliot closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “You only have a few more days there and-”

“And then what? Olivia said she’d help me. She said she’d be here for when I got set. When I got back on my feet.”

“And she will be.”

“But you just said it...I’ve only got a few more days left. Is she just going to magically appear by Friday?”

“Evelyn, you can’t keep letting yourself get upset like this. Olivia is going to be found I promise you, and when we find her, she’ll be able to tell you Micah Diorel had nothing to do with all this.”

“He got out once and he’ll get out again.”

“He didn’t get out. He was just able to post bail and that got revoked when he came after you. He’s in jail now and he’s not going to get out.”

“Maybe not today, but what about in a few years? What about when I’ve started my life over and you and Olivia’ve forgotten all about me? What’s going to happen then?”

Elliot opened his mouth to speak, but could find no words of comfort. Evelyn sniffed in the phone.

“I just...I just don’t think I can go on living like this.”

“Evelyn,” he said. “I don’t want you to worry about Micah hurting you again. He’s not. When he gets out, we will know every single place he visits and everything he’s doing. Besides, you’ll be so happy with your life, you won’t even be thinking about him.”

“So...what you’re saying is I’ll be well into living a new life...when he comes after me the last time and finally kills me.”

“No. That’s what I’m saying at all. I just-”

“You know what I wish?” she interrupted. “I just wish Olivia was here. If she would’ve told me life was going to be like this, I would’ve just stayed and that apartment and let him kill me in the comfort of my own home...”

Elliot heard the telephone fall to the ground on the other end. Evelyn’s cries sounded far from the phone, but they echoed in his mind nonetheless.

Unknown Time and Place

Almost...

Almost...

Damn it!

Olivia slapped her hands against the cold floor as the armoire's first drawer slid out of place once more abating all her actions of the past four hours and rolling a set of terrycloth towels out from its hiding place. Her breath caught at the sudden pain and she drew in another gulp of the rancid air causing tears to form in her eyes. Across the room, the faces of the dead seemed to be laughing at her.

I won't die like this.

She had been contemplating her trapped left leg for the past day that she had counted out once she had resolved to stop screaming for help that would never come. He had not returned and though she could not hear him stomping about the corridor, she was certain he lingered. The issue of her leg, however, remained the problem at hand.

The whole of her body had, at one point, been squeezed beneath the wardrobe's mass, yet everything except her left leg was pressed against the piece's flat front doors. It took the better part of six hours to slowly shimmy her shoulders, hips and eventually her right leg out from under the weight, but her frustrations rested on her caught leg. He would return eventually, and seeing her half escaped would most likely elicit a grosser response than seeing her where he had originally left her.

Olivia swatted at a gnat that landed on her arm and lied on her back staring at the decaying ceiling. At first she had intended to simply lie under the armoire and let him put her out of her misery by killing her, but when the gnats began to descend upon her, she knew she lacked the resolve to even wait silently for death.

Sunlight had just appeared from the side of the room when she began her trek from beneath the piece. The sun's weak rays had protruded through a window that had not been boarded properly like the one she had found in the other room and in the grey light it cast, she caught her first true glimpse of the room. The bodies, regardless of decay were each mutilated though she had a difficult time discerning whether it was something he had done to them or if it was from the hundreds of fly larvae that squirmed in and out of their dead tissue. The sight only hastened her resolve to flee.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and pushed herself onto her elbows. Her leg was trapped at odd angle between the first and second drawers and she knew that if she could bend just so, she would have a chance to pull out her appendage. But the human body allowed for no such bends just below the kneecap and Olivia coughed as the air she gasped threatened to pull her remaining stomach contents from her gut. Only one option remained.

With a shaking hand, she grabbed one of the dirty hand towels that had jumped from the first drawer and drew it toward her mouth. She had only heard of this feat being performed once successfully and without something on which to bite down, she knew failure was imminent.

She shifted her entire body to where she could nearly squat and her right leg was almost completely beneath her. Exerting pressure into her right, she pressed the left leg upward against the armoire drawer and bit down hard into the towel as pain shot through both legs. Again and again she attempted the trick, pushing her leg harder against the armoire as tears formed. With a final upward shift of her weight against the pain, her right leg straightened and the bone that resided in the left, snapped.

A blinding white light penetrated her eyes as her body lapsed into a paroxysm of agony. The umbrageous flesh that rested around the limb screamed with her as her own voice pierced the silence in violent echoes. Pain surged through her body like blood in her veins, touching the most distant recesses of nerves.

Ultimate malaise. Paramount anguish. Rue's epitome. Nothing surmounted the dolor pounding in her soul.

Her body convulsed as she fell to the floor, towel from her mouth wet and bloody, shaking the appendage that was now only attached by skin, splintered bone and tearing muscle mass and erupting a new torrent of misery. Every heartbeat extorted further suffering and Olivia screamed as capillaries in her face broke from distress.

Her skin was hot against the cold floor and tears came from her eyes like rivers for an infinite amount of time. There was no time; only pain.

Waves of absolute suffering began to wash over her as her cries continued, yet with each swallow of fetid air, the shock of pain lessened in cycles. Subsiding like a slowly setting sun, the hurt rocked her body with less brilliance to the point that she could rest her quivering body onto her elbows once more.

Slowly, Olivia pulled her body from beneath the armoire, tugging at her leg with an ardent jerk and allowing the piece to fall on the floor with a wooden plop as she fell onto her back, squeezing her eyes shut from the ripping pain.

Her head swam from the tortuous exercise and as she waited for the strength to move, she willed her mind to focus on something to stave off the throb in her leg.

...G...D...high B...high A...high B, low B, high B, low B...

The fingers on both weak hands moved in time with Bach's first cello suite as she played the invisible and distorted instrument in her head and by the time she reached the final B, she was able to shift her body upright.

A slow process began as she pushed herself across the cement toward the shards of the door through which he had broken, Johann's two and half centuries old tune still floating in her head.

Olivia pulled at the doorframe as she reached it and managed to draw herself into a standing position on her bruised and wobbling right leg. Panting, she willed the nerves that still connected her broken leg to the rest of her body to push the limb toward the floor.

Fire and ice splintered up her body and she clenched her teeth to keep another convulsion at bay.

Taking a deep breath, she allowed the agony to well in her stomach as she pressed weight on the broken extremity and through a cycle of pulling at the walls, half-crawling along the floor and crying, she dragged herself down the dark grey corridor.

After the equivalent of three normal steps, she sank to the floor and stared at her progress. She rested her head against the wall and found a pole, similar to the one she had clung to for life, attached to the floor and ceiling. Shaking her head at the sight of it, her eyes searched out further into the dark.

A square outline of light stretched out toward her as she sat in the darkness and she narrowed her eyes to make sense of the odd ring. The longer she sat, the more the grey dissipated and Olivia could see that the ring of light surrounded a large wooden board, not unlike those she had seen in the rooms.

Having heard nothing but the sounds of her own breathing and cries in hours, her ears piqued at the sounds of the city that brewed just beyond the board. Engines roared, horns honked and voices yelled on the other side of the wood.

I'm getting out of here.

Struggling to her feet once more by way of the pole, she wormed her way further down the hall until she saw a set of three locks protruding from a door. Keys stuck out in odd angles from each of the locks and she was certain of what lied behind the door.

She grabbed hold of its handle, turned the three keys and retched open the door. The sound of scurrying feet caused her to cry out as she had tried to take an alarmed step backward and rested on her leg.

"Hello?" she whispered into the dark.

"H-hello?" a voice answered. "You're...not dead?"

Tears streamed from her eyes and her lips pulled into the first smile she had made in what felt like years at the sound of Amy's quavering voice.

"No," Olivia said, allowing herself to slide down a wall next to the door and fall towards the ground.

Amy's gaunt figure appeared before her eyes. "We heard you...I thought you were dead."

Olivia shook her head slightly.

"I used your thing," Amy said. There was an excitement to her voice like a young girl stretching her limits for the first time. "The chains are off. Off them too."

"Help me up," Olivia said reaching for her.

Once she had balanced on her working leg, Olivia leaned against the wall and peered into the grey to see the others still huddled against the far wall only chainless. She opened her mouth to tell Amy that they could get out if they went at him at the same time, but the sound of feet shuffling in the corridor silenced her.

Amy dragged her to the corner with the others and her body shook as his cold eyes found her quickly in the room.

He took a step toward them, but as all five shriveled together as one, he paused, repulsed by the sight.

"That's enough," he whispered. "I've had enough of this and I'm tired of you."

He lurched forward evincing a scream from the lot and grabbed Olivia solely by the hair as he pulled her away from the tangled arms of the others.

Amy jumped to her feet and slapped at him with the chain in her hand, but his brawny arm swiped at her small body and threw her against the far wall, knocking her out at once.

He took hold of Olivia's arm and dragged her screaming into the corridor, throwing her in a painful heap on the floor towards the room where his past victims lay.

She rolled for a full second hitting her head against the pole, but grabbing onto it instantly. He simply stood before her staring through narrowed eyes as she pulled herself upright on the pole she had passed minutes earlier.

"I've had enough," he repeated as she grasped the pole with her arms.

The familiar click of a gun's safety being drawn echoed through the air and Olivia swallowed stale breath when her eyes discerned the object in his hand.

The Smith and Wesson semi-automatic pistol glimmered in the grey light as he raised it toward her. The weapon she had pulled apart not two days ago looked like a toy model in comparison to the machine that could rip holes with its bullets.

His eyebrows furrowed as a finger, snow white against the silver gun, pulled the trigger that was encircled by a stainless steel loop.

Pain seared through both legs as she tried to bolt back to the room where death laid in wait. She stretched forth one leg in front of the other as the gun cracked behind her.

The first shot rushed passed her with a blur of heat, yet the second cracked just as soon as the first had hit the boards in front of her. Doubled agony tore through her side as she hurtled herself forward.

She hit the boards at the precise second a third bullet crashed into it and Olivia fell into a spray of glass and white light.

Nicks of wood and glass tore at her face and the sudden blur before her eyes shrouded her body in a sea of cold.

A swirl of colour rushed toward her face and as her body succumbed to gravity's pull, black letters from afar registered on her retinas drawing a familiar image lost too soon.

Bulk that was both hard and soft seemed to rush from under her and squelched the rivers of air passing by her body.

Cold, far deeper than that of any of the rooms, descended upon her flesh, yet something warm and wet dripped onto her fingers as she lay upon the massive bulk.

The light before her eyes grew dim though the cold did not. With all other senses ceasing to function properly, Olivia drew air into her lungs, pressed the same air out, and praying to a God on whom she had not called since childhood, called out for help.

Thursday February 15, 2007
5:19AM

The call had not ripped him from sleep like Elliot had supposed it would. He had actually been lying awake in his bed, wishing for sleep, but knowing, after the encounter he had had with Jonathan, that it would never come. He had, however, expected the call to wake him from some dream or nightmare about her.

The bar and clubs of the Meat-Packing District that beat their steady music into the night each day of the week had already closed to make way for impending daylight and Elliot sifted through the street that should have been dark, but was illuminated in a familiar flashing purple light.

"A body's been found," Cragen had said when Elliot answered his telephone thirty minutes earlier.

"Oh..." he had said not quite knowing what answer was expected of him until Cragen continued.

"It's a white female with...shoulder-length brown hair and dark brown eyes."

Elliot's heart had frozen for a moment before he relaxed again in the bed. "Who else am I working with on this one? Brown?"

A mass of police squad cars created a semi circle around an alley that had been roped off by a series of yellow police tape and blue and white crowd-control barricades and a gathering of officers mulled around the area, speaking in low voices and creating a murmur that echoed over the streets.

Cragen sighed into the phone. "They need...Elliot, they need an identification."

"Why do you need one from me?" Elliot asked knowing the answer.

"I think you already know why...She's been beat up pretty bad. It's too hard to for them to make a positive ID and Maya Shah isn't answering her telephone."

Elliot's breath caught as the tear that had formed upon hearing the words "beat up" fell over the brim of his eye and rolled down his face. "I'll be there in thirty."

His footsteps slowed as he approached the barrier. The uniform-clad officers at the scene seemed part a path for him as he drew nearer, each staring him with mixed expressions of sympathy and grief. He passed through the officers to find Fin standing in the alley next to a long figure beneath a white sheet. Pale feet stuck out from under it and Fin glanced up when he saw Elliot coming towards him.

"Elliot..." he said stepping directly in front of him. "Maybe...you should take a second."

Elliot stared at him with eyes that were dry, but had turned red in a matter of minutes.

"How bad is she?"

Fin was silent for a moment. "Bad. Her face...we can't tell, but she's about Liv's height and weight."

Elliot took a step forward, but Fin took a step with him.

"Maybe you should take a minute before you look."

Elliot glared at him and brushed by toward the body, an intense burn radiating from his stomach suddenly feeling like his insides had caught fire. Spencer stood next to it and took a step away as Elliot approached. Up close he could see locks of brown hair with vague highlights poking out from under the sheet and he forced his feet to move forward so that he could squat next to the body.

He looked back at Fin to see him standing, arms crossed and looking pale. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, Elliot took hold of the sheet and pulled it toward him.

Dozens of lacerations marred a face so full of bumps and bruises that Elliot had to bite his lip to keep back the tears. The woman's face was so mutilated there was only one way to know that minute if it was Olivia.

He pulled back the sheet further and revealed a t-shirt and pajama bottoms. As he pulled the pajamas away from her skin, he closed his eyes to create a clear picture of the image he expected to see.

"Did this one hurt?" Olivia had asked as her finger traced a line on his shoulder.

They had been alone in the crib and had just awakened from quick naps while waiting for test results on the case. He had decided to change his shirt while she was still asleep, but woke her in the process and she immediately inquired about the several

tattoos that covered part of his chest and arms. Her eyes were taking in every part of his bare chest and he was more than happy to let her.

“Not as much as some...*other* ones.”

“Other ones?” she asked with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “You’ve got ‘Welcome Aboard’ tattooed on your dick, don’t you?”

He laughed. “Not there, but I had something fun done on the back, if you get my drift.”

“The back, eh?”

“Yeah, why you want see?”

“Heck yeah, I wanna see. I want to see this tattoo that only Kathy and your doctor have seen.”

“There’s a reason only Kathy and my doctor have seen it,” he said still smiling. “As it is very much on my ass.”

“Well, there’s no point in being shy, Elliot. I should know this stuff. What if you’re in some horrible accident and I have to ID you? Wouldn’t you want to give me the piece of mind of knowing that you’re the one with tattoo of whatever on his ass?”

Elliot rolled his eyes and checked outside the door of the crib to make sure they were alone.

“All right,” he said undoing his zipper.

Olivia laughed and started singing and clapping her hands.

“Bow-chicka-bow-bow. Bow-chicka-bow-wow! Gimme a little shake and I’ll give ya dollah!”

He laughed again as he lowered his pants lightly to reveal a tattoo of a heart with blue lettering that read “Katherine.”

“Aw...” Olivia said smiling, but immediately subdued.

“Yeah,” he said fastening his zipper. “So, what do *you* have?”

She only raised her eyebrows and shrugged silently.

“C’mon now, Liv,” Elliot said. “You can’t just leave me like that. I showed you, now I want to see what *you*’ve got. The same thing could happen with the terrible accident or whatever. Show me, ‘cause I *know* you’ve got at least one somewhere.”

“Okay,” she said slyly and began to pull at her shirt.

“Oh wait, hang on a sec,” he said sitting on the bunk in front of her. “I think I might want to be seated for this.”

She gave him a playful slap across the chest, unclasped her belt and unzipped her pants to reveal pink underwear.

“Ooh! Hot pink!” he said laughing. “Who you are those for?”

“Oh, shut up,” she said, but bit her lip and blushed slightly as she slowly began to pull down one side of her panties.

“Whoa! What kind of tattoo is this? Where did you get the idea for that ‘Welcome Aboard?’”

She flashed him a wide smile and revealed a very small pink heart appearing beside the curve of her pelvic bone. Elliot put his hands on her hips and pulled her close as he squinted at it.

“That’s it? Liv, I’m disappointed.”

She slapped him on the arm as she pulled her underwear back in place.

“Disappointed? It’s a tattoo, isn’t it?”

“With all that build up, I was expecting a skull and crossbones or something. At the very least that ‘Welcome Aboard’ you mentioned.”

Olivia rolled her eyes. “It hurt like hell and I only did it because everyone else was getting them too.”

“Oh, *there’s* a good reason.”

“You’re one to talk. Tell me, did you get those ones from the Marines all by yourself? Besides it was a drunken night when we were eighteen and free to do whatever we wanted. It was me, Maya, our friend Jill, and three other girls we all swore we’d be friends forever with, but now I can’t even remember their names.” She laughed. “And that was the reason too. The heart was supposed to say ‘Friends Forever’ across it, but I couldn’t handle the letters too.”

“So, Maya’s got one to match?”

“Yep, and she even kept off the letters so I didn’t feel bad.”

Elliot shook his head and simply smiled at her.

The pink outline that appeared on tanned skin elicited a gasp from Elliot, yet on a second look he realized that it curved again in the form of a butterfly; not a heart.

He coughed several times as air was simultaneously swept in and out of his lungs and a single tear escaped his eye.

“It’s not her,” he said in a breathless gasp.

He stood quickly and made it out of the alley just in time to vomit into a gutter a ways away from the other officers.

I should’ve known it, he thought. *She had on that camisole. The purple one.*

But, his heart still beat so wildly he was certain he was going into arrest as his hands shook and pains shot up both arms and throughout his chest.

Elliot eased himself onto the curb and put his face in his hands. Fin stepped toward him cautiously, his own heart beating furiously

“Homicide will be here in a little,” he said not knowing what else to say. “I can stay...let ‘em know what found out so far.”

Elliot removed his hands as he stood. “Yeah, that’s fine. I’ve, um...I’ve got to check in on the Calbrach boy again. We...we need to see if he’s feeling up to another go with the sketch artist.”

“Maybe you should think about taking some time,” Fin said shaking his head.

“No, I’ve got it,” Elliot said quickly. “I’ll let you and Munch know what I find with the boy.”

He started to walk back to his car and saw another parking beside his. By the time he reached the vehicles, Melinda had stepped out of her car and was staring at him with wide eyes searching for answers.

“I’m surprised you got called out over here,” he said.

“I’m on call...again,” she said so soft it was nearly a whisper.

They stared at one another for a moment before Elliot gave a slight shake of his head, causing Melinda to erupt into a series of gasps and sighs as she wiped at her eyes. She reached up and gave him a light hug before grabbing her things out of the trunk of her car.

Elliot sat staring at his steering wheel after she left, an array of emotions overwhelming him. Shame, relief, loss, grief. They ate at him as the unknown woman's battered face reappeared in front of his eyes continually forming into Olivia's and dissolving just as quick.

Shaking his head, he turned the key in the ignition and headed for the precinct.

SVU Squad Room

7:10PM

Maya was running by the time she made it into the precinct. She had been to the 1-6 enough times for the officers at the front to simply wave her on by, though they only saw a flash of brown and black as she passed. Once inside an elevator, she hit the button for SVU six times in a single second and danced on her toes as she waited for the doors to open again. The detectives in the elevator with her eyed her suspiciously, but said nothing.

Her tear-stricken form leapt out of the elevator doors as soon as they had opened wide enough for her to step on the floor.

"Elliot!" she shouted half-spring to his desk. "Oh my God. My phone. I was at the law library because I figured the best thing to do was to bury myself in work and I'd had it just on silent and-and-then I looked and I saw all these messages, but I thought at first it was just my mother calling or it was somebody from a newspaper or Jill because she's been calling all the goddamn time just to make sure I'm doing all right, but I'm fine, I'm fine, but I just saw a call and I didn't recognize it and then I realized that it had to be the police and if the police were calling me it could only mean one thing, but please. *Please* no! I mean, I-I-I don't know why'd someone would call me that early in the morning unless you found her did you? Did you find her because Elliot, I need to know. I need to know and I...and I..."

Maya gasped and Elliot took her by the elbow and lowered her into his chair. She had spoke in a constant stream very fast and without taking more than a few gasps for air. Her sand-coloured face had become pale and slightly pink under the strain.

"Maya," he said. "I got the call this morning too. It wasn't her."

"Oh God," Maya whispered before dissolving into a fit of tears. "That's good, right?"

"Yeah, it's good."

"I mean as good as it can get, I guess...I mean..." She went silent for a moment. "You're never going to find her are you?"

"We'll find her."

"When? It's been two weeks and she's just gone and no one has any idea what happened to her."

Elliot, having no response, just let his eyes fall to the floor. An hour later, not knowing what else to do to calm her, Elliot sat in his booth at Debb's bar across from Maya, whom he had bought a drink, but she only stirred it.

"What was it like?" she asked him after not saying a word in minutes. "Having to view the...body?"

“Well, you wouldn’t’ve had to do it like I did...”

“But still. I mean, you went there not knowing. What was it like right before you knew for certain it wasn’t her?”

He searched for the most accurate word he could muster. “Painful.”

“Painful,” she repeated. “Yes...I suppose I could see that.”

She stirred her drink with her straw for another minute before speaking again.

“Do you know how I met her? I don’t suppose she ever told you.” She waited for Elliot to shake his head and continued. “Kindergarten. That’s how far back we go. It was the very first day of school and our teacher had us make this stupid paper nameplate thing. We were supposed to trace all the letters of our name and then draw something fun on the nametag, but I couldn’t spell out my entire name. Mayanjula. It was the N that I couldn’t get and I just kept messing it up. On the fourth or fifth time I had to start over, I started crying and this little blonde girl next to me very calmly and coolly suggests that I just take off the last few letters. She was like ‘Cause Maya’s a name too.’ That’s how I got my nickname and Livia’s been bailing me out of my own trouble ever since.”

She took a long drink and wiped away a tear.

“Maya,” Elliot said staring at her intently. “We are *going* to find her. I promise you.”

She nodded. “But, I guess you can’t promise me that when you find her she’ll be alive, right?”

Elliot said nothing, but felt the familiar burn in his stomach flare once again at the idea.

“I didn’t think so... Thanks for the drink.”

She stood and slowly left the bar, leaving Elliot alone with his thoughts.

Friday February 16, 2007

SVU Squad Room

10:26PM

Elliot sat at his darkened desk, staring at the empty space across from him. He had finished the report on his most recent case with Alexa and it was late, yet he had not moved in twenty minutes.

He had spent a good part of the day with Spencer, giving him every single detail they had collected in regards to Olivia’s case, but when gathered all together, he saw that they had surprisingly little. Outside of notes from Morse’s videos, both edited and unedited, and specifics about possible suspects, there was nothing tangible to give Spencer and Elliot felt a sense of hopelessness overwhelm him as Spencer walked away with the details of Olivia’s case.

Lizzie had called him some time in the afternoon to inform him that she had too much homework for her to go see *Sleeping Beauty* that night. He had wanted to protest, but somehow, telling his daughter to shirk schoolwork that he was certain was not dire, appeared to be the worst kind of parenting conceivable.

He glanced to his right to see some of Alexa's files left on his desk. She had been using the side of his desk occasionally for some of her things just to avoid touching Olivia's and he was glad that she understood his earlier message.

A light layer of fine white dust had settled over Olivia's desk, covering her coffee cup, her keyboard, mouse and monitor. The picture of Jordan and Jeremy Harfort that he had knocked over weeks earlier, still lay on its back, it too now covered with the white dust. The image of her empty chair was what shook him most. Instead of her sitting across from him asking for him to sign some paperwork, telling him to hand her one of the two sandwiches he had bought for them on another late night or even yelling at him over one case or another, there was nothing.

"Go home, Elliot," Cragen said.

Elliot slowly turned his head toward Cragen who he had not realized had even stepped up to the desk pair, but turned right back to her desk before he spoke.

"It's been seventeen days, Cap. Seventeen days, since anyone has seen or heard from her."

"You've done enough for today. Go home and try to get some sleep."

Elliot stood from his desk. "Seventeen days...you know how many rapists and child molesters we could've tracked down together in seventeen days?"

"Elliot..."

"Seventeen days...even if she was just stuck somewhere and needed help, seventeen days later, there's no chance she's still alive. Right now...right now I wish she *was* dead."

"You don't mean that."

He shrugged. "That way, at least I could have some closure. At least I could just move onto the next stage. Isn't that the next part of grief? Acceptance? I mean I've denied the fact that anything could've happened for days, then I was just angry with myself for not doing more...I might've missed the bargaining stage, but there's always time for that. I'm well into depression, so the next stage has got to be acceptance."

"You can't give up hope that we're going to find her."

"We tell parents all the time that it might be time to move on. That they may never see their children again, and yet...when it hits home, nobody wants to think about the possibility that she's never walking through those doors again."

"Elliot, no one just disappears in the middle of the night."

"You're right. They don't. But, she did. There's no note, no ransom, no leads, nothing. We've got nothing to go on and she's still gone. If she weren't a cop, this would've been at the bottom of the pile a week ago."

"But she *is* a cop and that's why no one wants to give up hope."

Elliot shook his head. "Hope...I'm beginning to think that hope is just a metaphor for bullshit. It's the bullshit we feed ourselves to make us get up in the morning and think that today is somehow going to be better than yesterday."

"You need to get some sleep."

"Yeah, sleep...Sleep. You know I can actually remember the last time I slept well. It was eighteen days ago, right before Tyler MacFarland was found. She was upset because Halloway had said something completely uncalled for to her and we both went back to her place to watch old movies...Eating something sweet while watching movies from the fifties and earlier, and to tell you the truth, it worked. I felt better than I had in a

long time and that night, she fell asleep on her couch right next to me. I thought about leaving, but I didn't. I just pulled a blanket around the two of us and slept right there beside her. And that was it. I haven't slept well since and I probably won't ever again."

Cragen sighed. "Elliot..."

"No, I got it, Cap. Sleep. I need to get some, so I'm out. I'm gonna drive home and lie in the bed and stare at the ceiling for about six hours and then get up in the morning and start the day. And, eventually I'll just learn to adjust to that being my own brand of sleep."

"You can't let this get you. We're going to find her."

"Yeah... So, I guess it's just a matter of when, eh? A month from now? A year from now? And also where. In which river? In the trunk of whose car?"

Cragen began to reply, but Elliot had started to walk away and was in no mood to hear someone else tell him he needed to keep the faith that Olivia was still alive.

He hit the chilly February air and immediately remembered what it was like standing next to Olivia near her building with the snow just beginning to fall and the cold making her face slightly pink.

He began to drive home, but instead of taking the normal route, drove north because his car happened to be facing that way.

Maybe I'll just keep driving, he thought, and leave New York's hell hole behind me.

He came to a light at East 90th and saw a black man and a little boy pawing through a dumpster not too far from the street. He wondered what their lives were like and thought that even though, they were the ones going through garbage on a Friday night, their lives were probably much better off than his.

The light turned green and Elliot's tires squealed for a moment as he decided to head home for his nightly stare at the ceiling, and the man outside jumped at the sound of the tires against the pavement.

"Uncle, what's wrong?" the little boy asked.

The man shook his head. "Just people. Anyway, you gotta dig deep in here. I was tellin' your mother people throw away all kinds of stuff. You just need to dig for it."

"Can we go home now? It's cold and I don't think we can use any of this crap anyway." He motioned to the pile of assorted broken electronics sitting in a rusty red wagon.

"Naw, boy. Let's just do one more. C'mon we gonna do that dumpster over there."

The little boy pulled at the wagon and hurried to keep up with his uncle in the dark alley. He refused to voice it, but in truth, he was more terrified than he was cold. The alley ran between a series of abandoned buildings and the homeless that lied around the perimeter looked angrier and surlier than any of the others he had seen in the city. Above him, the windows of the building on his left were all blackened save for one sole window that was boarded up, but looked like it had been recently shattered.

He wondered if someone might have throw a rock at it, as his older brothers were prone to do, but his keen young mind gathered that even if someone could throw a rock four stories in the air, there was no way, they could make that big a hole in a window that large.

“Okay,” his uncle said approaching a new dumpster. He opened the top and the foul stench of garbage emitted out of it. “This is a deep one, so you should get in and dig from the bottom up.”

The boy peeked into it, but quickly shook his head. “Uh-uh! I ain’t getting in there.”

“C’mon boy. Let’s go. The sooner you’re in, the sooner you’re out and then we can go home.”

The boy sighed and allowed his uncle to hoist him into the dumpster.

“There’s nothing in this one,” he protested immediately.

“You ain’t even looked yet. I told you. You gotta dig.”

As he sifted through the trash in his meagerly gloved hands, he wished he was anywhere else in the world and vowed as he opened a bag filled with diapers, that he would not spend his life dumpster diving.

He had excellent grades in school, but did not have a lot of friends because he did not like sports and preferred to read than play video games. His favorite place in the city was the library and his uncle had taken him for the afternoon promising that they were going to the library, but instead took him trash hunting because his eight-year-old frame fit into the dumpster easier than an adult’s.

“C’mon boy,” his uncle called. “Just toss me whatever you can find.”

“Uncle, I’d told you already. There’s nothing in here.”

“Don’t get smart with me, boy. Just find something. It’s a big dumpster. There’s gotta be something worth something to somebody in there. Look!”

The boy rolled his eyes and shifted several more trash bags and saw something white nearing the bottom layer of the dumpster. Hoping it was an old iPod that would appease his uncle for the night, he reached for it, but it would not budge.

He moved more of the bags and saw that the object was far too long to be an iPod. Heaving another bag out of the way, the boy froze in place as he blinked what looked like painted toes belonging to a bare foot. He swallowed, his hand beginning to shake as he moved another bag and found black pants surrounding the foot.

“Uncle!” he yelled. “There’s something in here!”

“Well, throw it out here so we can go home.”

The boy shook his head, though he knew his uncle could not see him. “I...I can’t.”

“Why the hell not!”

“I-I think it’s a... Uncle, I think there’s a person in here.”

Part Three: Flight from Fate
Chapter Twenty-Four

Friday February 16, 2007
Upper East Side, New York

A navy sedan sped through the city's streets defying all traffic sanctions imposed upon general civilians. A flashing red light turned in a spastic array within a domed container magnetically attached to the car's roof and an echoing tone flowed in waves from it as the sedan crossed five lanes of traffic to avoid a car that was making a slow turn onto East 81st Street. Adjacent cars swerved in several directions to avoid hitting it and each other as the sedan careened through another light. It moved so quickly it was only a flash of blue and red to pedestrians making their way down the artificially lit streets.

As the sedan crossed East 87th, a flashing ambulance turned onto 3rd Avenue just before it, and inside the car, Elliot Stabler swore, pounding his hand against the steering wheel as he hit his breaks.

They took too long to get here, he thought.

He had flown across Queens, crossed the river and steamed up 3rd Avenue by the time they had arrived at their scene and backtracked to his present location.

His phone had chirped into the late night hours bringing news from a cop Elliot had known at the academy who never expressed a desire to become a detective. Gary Johnston had called with an urgent air in his voice having been called to a scene that had developed at East 90th. A woman had been found in a dumpster that sat in a scarcely-used alley and after a quick once over with his flashlight, Johnston had whipped out his cell phone to call an old friend.

For seventeen days, Olivia Benson's face and name floated around the city in some capacity and every cop had been informed of the necessity in calling the deputy inspector of Precinct 16 the moment she was found. Johnston ignored the order and called the single person he knew would care most about his discovery.

The ambulance lurched as it turned right onto East 88th into the semi-circle driveway that led to the hospital's emergency room entrance. Elliot's car had just barely rolled to a stop when he parked haphazardly across two spaces, leapt from the vehicle and tore across the small patch of grass that lead to the hospital door as EMTs jumped from the paused ambulance.

They worked with quick movements as they carefully slid a gurney from the transport on which was attached the thin frame of a woman covered to the neck in a white blanket. A large oxygen mask covered her face and her skin had taken a purplish colour from a mix of blue from the cold and blood smeared across her face, but Elliot recognized her immediately and called out for her as he ran for the cart.

"Olivia! Olivia!"

"Hang on there," a cop near the racing EMTs said standing in front of him as Elliot pushed toward the gurney.

Elliot flashed the badge on his coat lapel and the officer let him pass to run with EMTs.

"Howisshe?" he said in a rush.

“She’s been non-responsive,” the EMT closest to him said as the headed into the ER corridors.

Olivia’s head lolled to either side as the cart rolled.

“What’s wrong with her? What happened?”

“She’s been shot and she’s got a host of broken bones.”

“How long’s she been out?”

“Can’t say.”

“If you need anything,” Elliot said, his voice cracking. “Anything at all...”

“We’ll take care of her, Detective,” a nurse in pink scrubs said appearing next to him.

“Anything...,” he repeated. “I’m her blood type. Anything you need from me...”

The nurse stared at him. “Exact type? You’re sure?”

“Yes. Exactly.”

She nodded at the blonde nurse who was scurrying alongside of Olivia’s gurney.

“Get him hooked up,” the first nurse said. “Detective, please. We’ve got to get her in.”

Elliot stopped dead in the corridor, releasing the cart as the EMTs barked Olivia’s stats to the approaching scrubbed nurses and doctors.

“Detective,” the nurse said pulling at his arm. “Please. This way.”

He glanced into the emergency room as the nurses and EMTs lifted Olivia from the gurney on a third count and began working on her body. The ER doors flopped closed and with another tug on his arm, he followed the nurse down the opposite hall.

5:38AM

Elliot sat with his head in his hands on the wooden bench that ran along the hospital corridor. All around him, nurses and doctors moved about the floor, nearly oblivious to his dysphoria.

East 90th, he thought. I passed it on my way home and I never knew.

Questions blazed through his mind as he sat pondering. What if he had stopped and said something to the trash pickers to send them on their way? What if they had not found her when they did?

He had been waiting in the hall for hours, refusing to move even though he was told by one of her doctors that she would not be out of surgery for some time. He simply could not chance it. He could not risk that she needed him, if even for a moment, and he not be there. It was simply imperative that he stay.

Voices bounced across the polished floors and taupe walls as Elliot stared at the seconds ticking by on his watch. His right arm throbbed momentarily, still sore from the earlier blood letting and he pulled at the cotton that was pinned under a large bandage at his elbow. It was still rather dark with blood and stuck to his skin so he let it alone choosing to remove it when...if he had a chance to go home.

“Detective Stabler?” a female voice said from a meter down the corridor.

Elliot jumped to his feet immediately as a blue-eyed woman approached him, holding a wearied expression on a face curved with lines that seemed deeper than the rest of her demeanor would suggest.

"I'm Dr. Linda Haddley," she said.

"Yes," he said expectantly. "How is she?"

Dr. Haddley sighed. "Olivia is in a coma and still very critical. She'd lost a lot of blood and was well into shock by the time they had brought her in... Her heart stopped momentarily, but-

"Momentarily? How long is that?"

"Eighty-four seconds, but it doesn't look like her brain was cut off from oxygen long enough to cause any real damage."

Elliot ran a hand over his face and leaned against the wall, his legs feeling weak beneath him.

"She is still very weak," Dr. Haddley continued. "Aside from the gunshot, she had several broken bones, including a broken femur, a shattered left fibula and splintering in her right one. Her right arm was broken as well as her collar bone, several ribs and fingers, not to mention a host of cuts and bruises all over her."

"How bad was the shot?"

"It just got her on her side. It wasn't too bad, but it didn't help. She's also recovering from hypothermia and some frostbite."

"How long would she have been outside if she's showing symptoms of that?"

"She was only wearing a camisole and thin pajama bottoms when she was brought in. Even if she was outdoors for a few hours, it would have affected her, but I'm guessing she's probably been someplace indoors, but very cold for a while now. We've only now got her temperature back up to the mid-nineties."

Elliot nodded to himself, taking note of every statement. "Was she raped?"

"It doesn't look like it, but from what I can see, she was involved in a grievous fight with someone. There are several bruises over her body in what looks like hand prints and there's a bite mark on her left shoulder close to her neck. We tried to take some images because I know they'll help you find out what happened to her."

Elliot let out a breath. "Why's she in a coma?"

Dr. Haddley was quiet for a moment searching his face as if trying to determine how much information he could take in one blow.

"It looks like she might have fallen."

"What do you mean fallen?"

"Fallen," she repeated. "From a considerable height. More than twenty feet and her MRI shows some swelling in her brain, especially around the spine."

"Is... Is she going to be p-paralyzed?"

"There's no way to tell just yet. We're remaining hopeful, but we just don't know and we really won't know until she's conscious."

Elliot wanted to sit down at the news, but he was not sure if he would be able to get back up again.

"There's something else," she continued. "She was exposed to some kind of inhalant. We're running some tests to figure out what it was, but it looks a harsh anesthetic and it's creating some other adverse reactions."

"How bad?"

“She’s been having seizures. We’ve been able to stop them for the time being, but depending on how long she’s been exposed to it...she may suffer further side effects... *once* she wakes.”

He could not help but notice the doctor’s emphasis on Olivia waking eventually for his benefit. He sensed there was probably something in his eyes that showed he was not taking the news well.

“How long do you expect she’ll be out?”

Dr. Haddley shook her head. “Could be a day, could be a week. We’re still uncertain. There’s a lot that weighs into it.”

“Like what?” he said quickly. “Is there something I can do to help her?”

“You’ve done enough,” she said sighing. “We used all the blood you gave because she was nearing thirty-seven percent loss once she got to the emergency room. Outside of that, she’s incredibly malnourished and her body’s fighting a severe bronchial infection. Combined with the cold and the severity of her other injuries...I’ll be honest. It might be a while.”

Elliot closed his eyes and rubbed his temples. “Can I see her?”

“She’s in the ICU, but I can have someone take you to her room. You won’t be able to go in, but you’ll be able to see her.”

He nodded once and followed the doctor down the corridor.

Elliot’s ears piqued at the sound of feet hurrying down the corridor, but he did not shift his gaze. He stood outside of a large room in Mercy East’s Intensive Care Unit with his forearm pressed against a glass window and his chin resting on his forearm as his glazed eyes stared at the figure beyond the glass.

From the corner of his eye, Cragen appeared nearly out of breath next to him and he did not move knowing that his superior would have his own reaction was his eyes focused on the room.

Cragen hung his head low and let out a long breath unable to truly grasp what lay before him.

The walls of the ICU were a pale, sea foam green and gave the room a ghostly glow in combination with the low lights that hung overhead. A series of machines, large and small, beeped and hissed as they worked in tandem, each pointing in the direction of cream-coloured blankets that covered most of the pale form that lay on the long bed that lied to the far left of the room.

A thick, long white tube protruded from Olivia’s mouth, dwarfing the smaller, vein-like channels that ran in and out of her arms and the intravenous bag that hung beside the bed. Covered in a sea of red scratches, her face puffed in odd places from purple bruises, but through the abrasions, her face was severely emaciated. Even from under several blankets, through the sets of casts and braces that covered her right arm and both legs, the white plastic neck brace wrapped about her neck and the large bandage that distended from her side, Olivia had the appearance of someone who had lost a ghastly amount of weight in a very short time.

Silence descended on the two men outside of the room as Cragen caught his breath and Elliot broke it after several minutes, with a flat, deadpan voice.

“She’s in a coma.”

“For how long?” Cragen asked.

“They’re not sure. Her doctor doesn’t think she’s been like this the entire time, though...”

“I heard she was shot.”

“Yeah,” Elliot said matter-of-factly. “Apparently, that’s not what did the most damage though... She fell.”

“From where?”

Elliot shrugged, his eyes never leaving Olivia’s room. “Still don’t know. They think maybe a couple stories.”

“Where’d they find her?”

“A dumpster on 90th. A guy and his nephew were dumpster-diving and found her there. She’d been there for half a day...lying there, bleeding out. I heard from one of the other ER doctors what really happened down there. Her doctor only told me that her heart stopped, but she didn’t mention that they thought they’d outright lost her for a minute and half.”

“Jesus,” Cragen said. “Was she...?”

“No,” Elliot answered quickly, knowing the question Cragen could not say. “But it looks like somebody probably tried. Wherever she was, they kept her without food or water and half-beat her. She’s looking at close to forty percent breakage in all her bones and there’s swelling in her brain. And...and, they’re saying there’s a possibility she won’t walk again, granted, they can’t be sure until she wakes up...if she wakes up.”

Cragen leaned against the window, shaking his head.

“She was brought in wearing her pajamas,” Elliot continued. “The same ones I saw her in that Tuesday. Means that for seventeen days now, someone has had her and had been hurting her this entire time. She disappeared in less than five minutes and she turns up weeks later in a dumpster, with the trash. We had every cop in the city looking for her and we still couldn’t find her.”

“Don’t do that,” Cragen said. “You can’t start blaming yourself for this, Elliot.”

“Who should I blame?”

“The guy who did this to her.”

Elliot finally stepped away from the window, his breath suddenly coming in angry gasps. “We’d been on her case for two weeks and we didn’t even find her. Some idiots going through garbage had to find her for us! That’s where they found her! In the trash! This guy took her, shot her and threw her away like she was nothing and what’s better is he’s going to get away with it because we’ll never find him either!”

“Elliot, she’s found. We know where she is now and she’s getting help. It’s over.”

“Is it? Who’s it over for, Captain? Is it over for you, ‘cause it’s nowhere near over for me.” Tears were beginning to form in Elliot’s eyes and he did nothing to quell them. “The guy...the people who did this to her are still out there. She just now turned up on 90th and that was after the media coverage began to focus on these other kids. It wasn’t even as if he got spooked because she was getting so much air time and attention from the press. She was found because he was done with her.”

Elliot rested his head against the cool window again and closed his eyes. Cragen stood silently watching the mechanical ventilators assisting his detective to breathe.

“Elliot,” Cragen said. “Her doctors are saying that someone tried to hurt her, right...?”

Elliot turned his head and stared at him. “From where it looks right now, Cap, I’d say they succeeded.”

“They *tried*,” Cragen continued as Elliot sighed. “I think she’s here, alive right now because she’s tough and she got out. She’ll beat this, and we’re going to find the people responsible. It’s just a matter of time.”

Elliot said nothing and returned his gaze to Olivia’s broken form beyond the glass.

“I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but you need to get some rest.”

Elliot chuckled manically. “Yeah...sleep.”

“Come on, Elliot. I know you’ve been here all night and I know you haven’t slept in days. I’ll stay; you go get some sleep. You don’t have to go home. Just find a comfortable chair or something and just relax for a bit.”

“Naw, Cap,” Elliot said. “I think I’ll start sleeping when *she* wakes up and tells me to go to sleep herself.”

Cragen only nodded, feeling a pit in his stomach over seeing two of his best detectives at their most vulnerable. He stood for a few minutes more before saying that he had to give a status update to the deputy inspector.

“Take all the time you need, Elliot,” he said before walking back down the corridor.

At some point later, during Elliot’s hours of relentless watching, a sympathetic orderly had found a chair for him and he sat staring at his partner’s broken face as he heard a different set of feet rushing towards him.

He turned his head and stepped away from the glass to allow Maya’s body to come sliding to a stop in front of the window. She placed a shaking hand flat to the glass, turned and collapsed next to the wall in a fit of tears. Elliot knelt beside her, hugging her and allowing her to weep openly into his arms. Her body convulsed as her cries reverberated down the hall, vibrating into his chest, but Elliot held onto her knowing that if he had not grown numb from constant grief, he too would be sobbing on the gleaming hospital floor.

When she finally let go, Maya’s chest was heaving in haggard gasps, retching for air.

“I...I...I already saw her doctor,” Maya murmured after her breathing had regained a normal rhythm. “She...she said...if she wakes up, Livia...might not walk again.”

Elliot nodded and sat beside her against the wall with Olivia’s window shedding light from above them.

“I was so happy at first when your boss called me. He said...I was Olivia’s other case of emergency contact, but he knew he had to tell me first anyway...I was just so happy when he said you’d all found her. I started crying and I was saying to myself...it was finally over, but then he said hospital...I guess...I guess I just never thought that when you all had found her, we’d have to deal with the repercussions after...”

“There’s nothing saying she won’t be okay after all this,” Elliot said in a low voice, raspy from not being used in several hours.

Maya shook her head, tears splashing from her eyes and onto her shirt. "It's just that any time I thought about the worst thing that could happen...I always thought she'd be dead, but now...Seeing her like this, I don't know if this is any better."

"It is better. It's far better than the alternative. She's alive and she's here and we know she's not being hurt by somebody anymore."

"But," Maya began, but paused to stare at him with large, wet eyes. "Even if she wakes up, she'll never be the same. This...horrible thing will have happened and it's going to be this scar on all of us for the rest of our lives."

He sighed and they sat in silence, the magnitude of Maya's words invading his thoughts. Having only time to consider her present whereabouts, he had never once considered the aftermath of Olivia's disappearance. With both legs and an arm broken, she would have to relearn how to do everything including walk, assuming she still had the capacity to do so.

His talk with some of the practitioners who had performed her MRI had given a response slightly different from Dr. Haddley's. While she had been completely honest in telling him that paralysis was a possibility, for his sake, he assumed, she had neglected to mention that paralysis was not just possible, but likely, especially from below the waist. The news had shaken him severely, but even as he sat next to Maya, like Dr. Haddley, he had not the heart to tell everything to someone so emotionally fragile.

"Are you gonna be here?" Maya said trying to stand several minutes later.

He stood with her. "I'm not leaving until someone forces me and even then, I'll put up a fight."

"Good," Maya said giving him a weak smile. "I...I have to tell...everyone and I don't want her alone. Even though I know we can't go in, somebody should be here. 'Kay?"

He nodded and she fumbled through her bag with dazed eyes eventually pulling out her phone.

"...think I'll maybe start with...God, I don't even know." Tears began to fall from her eyes again.

"I understand," Elliot said reaching out to hold her steady as she had taken a wobbling step backward.

"I mean...Jonathan will be...and Jill...I don't know who'll be worse at this point. And...I should probably tell her aunt, shouldn't I?"

"Maybe you should just get some rest," Elliot said repeating the advice he did not take. "My captain and the guys at my precinct can take care of everything."

Maya nodded and steadied herself. "Yeah...I think I'll just go home for a bit and wait from them to just come to me."

"I think that's a good idea."

Maya nodded again and slowly stepped down the hall, reaching out a hand to steady herself along the corridor's wall every few feet.

Saturday February 17, 2007
12:09PM

Elliot's long legs brought him briskly toward Morse's padded cell. He knew the rest of the day would be spent at his post in front of Olivia's window, but he had one last errand to run before returning.

Time had come to a halt as he stared into Olivia's room wanting to see some improvement in her condition materialize in front of him as nurses continually streamed in to check on her.

Some time in the morning, Munch and Fin had arrived at the room, displaying the same shock as Cragen. After getting a report on how Olivia was fairing, they nearly dragged him out of the hospital and threw him into a cab, knowing he probably lacked the capability to drive at that point. He swore, insisted that he was not leaving her for anything and even took a half-swing at Fin as they streeled him down the corridor. The only reason he allowed it instead of kicking his way out of their grasp was due to simple exhaustion and the guarantees from both detectives that they would not leave the hospital and would notify him of the slightest change in her condition.

"If she blinks," he had threatened, "or even shifts her head, I want you to tell me."

He had actually fallen asleep for a few hours in his apartment and, as usual, he had awakened from a terrible nightmare in which Dr. Haddley told him repeatedly that Olivia had not survived.

When he had risen from his bed, he checked the nineteen messages on his phone. Most were from his family, who he had gone to visit that morning to relay the more positive aspects of Olivia's condition. He left out any mention of possible paralysis, noting the expression in Kathleen's already watery eyes.

The orderly in front of him paused by Morse's door and heaved the lock out of place to allow Elliot to quickly enter. Morse lay in the corner of the room asleep on the bare floor.

He looked considerably worse than the last time Elliot had seen him. His hair had fallen out in patches and made him look like he was suffering from an eczematic condition.

"Wake up, Morse," the orderly said in a gruff voice, dripping with the irritability of having dealt with the youngest of the Morse clan for an extended period of time. "You've got a visitor."

"Go away, Detective Stabler," Morse muttered still facing the wall.

"I've got something to tell you."

"You *always* have something to tell me, and then you come with the questions. Like, you're just so certain that I know where she is, but I'm just not telling."

"I know that you don't know where she is," Elliot said.

Morse turned slowly on the floor and then stood.

"Finally, we're getting somewhere." He took a step toward Elliot. "What's with the sudden change of heart? You finally grow some iota of intelligence?"

Elliot glared at Morse for a moment. He was painfully thinner and paler than when he had first entered the squad room weeks earlier and Elliot tried not to be overwhelmed by pity.

"I probably shouldn't even tell you this," Elliot said. "It's not like you deserve it. I should probably just let you wither away and die here without knowing anything."

Morse's eye twitched as he took another step forward, his face frozen in anger. "What are you playing at, Detective?"

"We found her. She's alive."

Morse's eyes rolled back into his head for a moment and then his face broke into a wide grin as tears immediately formed in his eyes.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"A hospital. Don't bother asking because I won't tell you where."

Morse nodded. "*How* is she?"

"She's been better, Morse."

"Is...is she talking? Did she say what happened yet?"

"No," Elliot said solemnly and the smile faded from Morse's face.

He stared at Elliot for a long time before speaking again. "She's dead, isn't she?"

"I just told you she wasn't."

"But, I can ready you like a book. She may be alive, but if she's not talking then...she's probably near death."

"She's in a coma."

"Ah, yes," Morse said sarcastically. "A coma. How wonderful. So, how long are the doctors going to keep her around before they bring up the subject of *the plug*? Are you going to come tell me when you're the one who pulls it?"

"Olivia's not on life support. She's breathing on her own, but she's just sick."

"Sick. Oh, that's original."

Elliot shook his head. "You know, I don't even know why I bothered coming here. You're a prick and you're gonna be one 'til the end of your days."

"Why did you come here? Felt you could get me to admit to something by sharing a little bit of news?"

"I want information," Elliot said.

"Just like always."

He stared down at Morse with intense eyes. "I need you to cut the bullshit for once. Just once. I'm not asking for much, but I just need you to search in that little head of yours and give me a name."

"Why?"

"Olivia is..."

"She's going to die, isn't she?" Morse asked.

"Look, Morse. Every second, I'm standing here is a second I'm not with her. I just need a name."

"For what? She's been found." Elliot's eyes fell to the floor, but Morse read the body language. "You...want me to give you something in case you really do need to start investigating a homicide..."

"I just need a name, Morse," Elliot repeated. "Someone we haven't looked at yet...I just need you to give me a name."

Morse paced in front of him, his eyes never leaving Elliot's before he stopped and sighed. "I was thinking about you and her this week. The things you've done. The things you've said. If you're looking for a name, the first one that comes to mind is really Stabler, but I suppose since you're here in front of me, looking so sincere, I can think of another."

"Any name..."

"I thought about that night, those years ago...It took me a while, but I remember now. Williard?"

“Who?”

“Willard,” Morse repeated. “Matthew Williard. I was thinking about it for a long time when it finally hit me. No pun intended.”

“You’re sure it’s Williard?”

“Positive.”

“Well, given the way Olivia looks right now, I’d like to have someone other than an old boyfriend to go after.”

“You asked for a name...How about Jeremy Cross?”

“Okay, who’s that? I’ve never even heard about him.”

“Yeah, you have, you dolt. The fuck buddy, remember?”

Elliot froze as he remembered the night Morse had come to the precinct with his details on Olivia.

“Right...”

“And don’t forget that Landon across the way.”

“He’s at the top.”

“Just make sure you look.”

“From what you’ve seen,” Elliot said nodding. “From what you remember, is there anything that makes you think Halloway did something to her? Anything that would make you think that he’d let us find her if things got too crazy?”

“No,” Morse said. “Never. He might raise his voice every once in a while, but he wouldn’t lay a hand on her. Even if she deserved it. He wouldn’t know how.”

Elliot stood silent for a moment. “Three weeks ago, someone could’ve said the same about me and Liv.”

Morse’s eyes narrowed at Elliot. “Like I said, *Halloway* would never hurt her. He cries in his car every time they have a fight and she throws him out. And, like I said, Halloway wouldn’t even know how to do anything to her. It’s not in his character. You however...I saw it in you the first time I saw you drive her home.”

Elliot rolled his eyes and turned to leave.

“Detective?” Morse said getting his attention once again. “I don’t care what the rest of the world may think. Or even what Olivia may think of you. I saw what had been building over weeks and weeks and there’s no doubt in my mind that if she hadn’t been strong enough to get away from you, you would have killed her.” He paused to cross his arms. “Take it from someone forced to stay in the psychiatric ward...you should really think about getting some help before you do something your cop buddies won’t be able to fix for you.”

“We found Olivia,” Elliot said dryly.

“But, that still doesn’t change my opinion of you. Remember Detective. I’ve been watching for years and I know you almost as well as I know Olivia.”

Elliot simply shook his head as he head passed the orderly and out the door.

An hour after he had regained his post by Olivia’s room, Elliot spotted the form of someone new coming down the corridor. He had been either sitting or standing the hall for so long that he could recognize all the doctors, nurses and hospital staff that worked on the floor and he knew from just the outline approaching him, that this was someone he had not seen in a long while.

Sylvia Whitmore’s graceful stride brought her down the corridor quickly and Elliot soon stared into a face that had an odd familiarity to it. Large green eyes had given

way to a series of fine lines and wrinkles in an otherwise attractive face and her silver-blond hair caught the light as she turned toward the window and gasped softly.

"It's worse than that other detective made it out to be," Sylvia said. "Much worse."

"I'm so sorry," Elliot said to her.

"What for? You didn't do this."

He wanted to reply, but knew she was correct and simply continued his stare at Olivia's unconscious form.

Sylvia began a silent pace behind Elliot for several minutes, her eyes constantly on the window, before she paused and removed a small black flask from her large handbag. She unscrewed the cap, paused briefly to look at Olivia and tilted the flask into her mouth.

Elliot stared at her with a frown on his face and she pointed her index finger at him.

"Don't..." she began. "Don't you dare judge me. The only piece of my sister I've got left is nearly gone. I think...if there was ever a moment I needed one, I think this warrants it."

He nodded slightly as she took a second drink and slipped away the flask.

"You'll let me know if her condition changes?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you, Detective," she said quickly, then turned and left.

After Sylvia had gone, Elliot retched himself from the room for long enough to grab an overly-priced cup of coffee from upstairs and a few minutes afterward, Maya appeared at the window, with Jillian at her side.

Jillian gasped and burst into tears when she saw Olivia lying unconscious beyond the window. She glared at Elliot when she regained her composure and he had the feeling that if she was not so very conservative, she might have decked him on the spot. Instead, she quickly left without saying another word.

"She's sorry," Maya said, looking as if she had been crying non-stop since he had last seen her, "about all the things she and Jonathan had been saying to you. I know she is. It's just...she's Jill. She doesn't really apologize, even when she should, but I know she's sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Elliot said.

"Has there been any change?"

"No. I've just talked to her doctor. She says she looks a little better, but there's not been any real difference. She's still unstable."

Maya nodded and dabbed at her eyes. "Have you talked to Jonathan?"

"I haven't and no one's been able to reach him. According to the house sitter, he's spending time at someplace upstate, but there's no phone to reach him at."

"Yeah," Maya said. "I figured he might do that. He'd been saying he needed some time away from the city to clear his head, but he's got horrible timing. Always has."

"We'll let him know if we hear from him."

Maya swayed as she stood, her eye drooping.

"You want me to take you home?" Elliot asked.

"No, somebody should stay."

"If anything happens they'll let us know. C'mon. I'll drive you."

Maya sighed and allowed Elliot to usher her down the corridor and into his car. "How are you doing otherwise?" Elliot said, trying to make some kind of small talk as they drove through the park.

"Otherwise..." she said leaning against the passenger door. "Otherwise, everything's turning to shit as I touch it. The last time we met with the DA, my client erupted into a huge uproar about how he was being discriminated against and whatever. Completely tanked any plans I had to get him off with time served."

She closed her eyes and Elliot glanced at her noticing that she too looked like she had lost weight in the recent weeks, most likely from stress.

"How 'bout you, yourself?" he asked. "I mean, are you sleeping or-"

"God, you sound just like Jillian."

"I do?"

"Yeah, constantly checking on me. Jonathan too. In fact...now that I think of it, I'm really not surprised that she gets along with you so well. Livia, I mean. There's so much of Jill and Jonathan in you. Or maybe all that's the other way around. She likes Jonathan because she likes you...or whatever."

"Okay," Elliot said figuring she was delirious from lack of sleep and grief.

"I'm serious," she continued. "From the way I look at it, if you put Jonathan and Jillian together, you get Elliot Stabler. Maybe that's why you all argue so much. You can drop me right here."

He paused the car on West 75th Street. "You need help?"

"I've got it. You'll let me know anything about Olivia?"

"Of course, but I imagine I'll probably see you at the hospital tomorrow regardless."

Maya flashed a sleepy smile and nodded as she turned to walk up the stairs to her building.

He sat in the car for several minutes reflecting on the past twenty-four hours and weighed whether he would try to go back to the precinct or risk another nightmare in his apartment. Choosing neither, he turned the car around and drove down 9th Avenue until it turned into Hudson Street.

The air in Olivia's apartment was stale from lack of its occupant and he glanced around it half-expecting her to call from the bedroom that she would be "ready in a second."

He walked a circle around the apartment stopping at her desk in hopes of seeing some sign of Matthew Williard, yet there was none.

Looking over the items that Maya had neatened on her desk, he spotted a familiar picture tucked away in the corner. He reached for it with a smile tugging at his lips. It was the same brilliant picture he had given Cragen when their search for Olivia had just begun.

Framed photo in hand, he took a step away from the desk and towards her sofa, seeing from the corner of his eye her case files that had been left untended. He made a note to grab them on his way out of the apartment and slowly lowered himself onto her couch.

The afghan that rested along the backside of the couch smelled like Olivia and he pulled it around himself as he rested against the couch pillows and closed his eyes. He had hoped for some kind of divine inspiration by coming to Olivia's apartment, but his

eyelids suddenly felt very heavy and he wondered if he even had the strength to lift himself from her couch.

The picture shined in the moonlight that poured into her apartment from the nearby window as it lay on the hope chest Olivia used as a coffee table. Elliot sighed as he took one last look at it and allowed his eyes to close as he lied wrapped tight in Olivia's blanket.

Sunday February 18, 2007
Greenwich Village, New York
7:50AM

Elliot's eyelashes fluttered open as sunlight streamed through Olivia's windows. He stared at her ceiling for a few moments trying to get his bearings before he rose to leave the apartment. As he locked the door, Mark Landon opened his own apartment door carrying a large trash bag.

"Good morning," Elliot said flatly.

Mark scowled at him and slammed his door shut, leaving Elliot to shake his head as he strode down the hall.

"She's doing much better," Dr. Haddley said as they stood outside of Olivia's hospital room. "Her temperature is good and her heart rate's just about returned to normal. The frostbite on her feet is clearing up, so I don't think we'll have to remove anything."

"What about the gunshot?" he asked quickly. "And, she's still got that tube...?"

"Yes... We're still keeping an eye on the bronchitis. It's quite severe and we're trying to keep it from turning into pneumonia. But, the wound is healing fast."

"And the seizures?"

"I think she might have gotten it all out of her system. I'm still thinking it might have just been the stress her body was under all this time."

"Do you have any idea when she might wake up yet?"

Dr. Haddley shook her head. "Unfortunately, we don't. Her brain waves are very active, but she just hasn't regained consciousness yet. But, on a more positive note, as long as her condition does continue to improve, we might be able to move her out of ICU by tomorrow."

Elliot nodded and Dr. Haddley left down the hall issuing instructions to the lanky nurse who walked with her. He stared at Olivia's comatose form and sighed. Her face looked much better as some of the bruises had begun to subside, but she still looked very pale and the oxygen tube distending from her mouth was unnerving.

A ring from his jacket pocket, jarred from his constant staring, willing Olivia to suddenly wake.

"Stabler."

Twenty minutes later, he arrived at Melinda's lab having been directed there by several surprised CSU officers. They had been expecting to see Detective Spencer at the CSU lab, but Elliot breezed through the lab combing for information as Spencer had

already told him that CSU had results on Olivia's case. Melinda normally only worked Homicides, but pulled strings of her own to have the case handed to her.

"You have something for me?" he asked.

"Lots. We'd done analysis on all her clothes and it looks like she's been in them the entire time. We found some seminal fluids on them as well as wood chips, glass, and just general dirt."

Elliot nodded though his mind had stopped when he heard "seminal fluids."

"There was also lots of blood and hair," Melinda continued. "And it's not all hers. I found seven different types of hair and at least two blood types."

"Seven?" Elliot's eyes were narrowed at the idea of it. "How many people could've possibly had her?"

Melinda shrugged. "Just telling you what I've found. I've more analysis to do tomorrow. I'll let you know what, if any, matches I find, but I just wanted to you to know, she's at the top of my list."

"Thanks Melinda," he said. He opened his mouth to give her an update on Olivia when his cell rang from his pocket.

"Stabler," he said without reading the display.

The small smile that had been lurking behind his guise of thankfulness for the medical examiner's efforts faded quickly and Elliot closed his eyes and hung his head.

He listened to the rest of the other party's words and replied with a sigh.

"Goddamn it."

All Saints House

10:58AM

Elliot squinted slightly at the flash of a camera at the very end of the long corridor. A mass of detectives and uniformed officers had already gathered at the bathroom that sat at the end and were floating in out of the area speaking in low voices.

Normally, he would not have been called in such a case, but, as the officer at the other end of his earlier phone call noted, these were extenuating circumstances.

Elliot swallowed as he entered the bathroom preparing himself for what he was about to see. A tall detective nearest to the tub stood holding a small piece of paper with handwritten ink and the CSU officer next to him slowly bent to pull the blood-stained razor off the checker-patterned tiles and into an evidence bag.

The bathtub itself seemed to glow against the deep red that surrounded its insides and Elliot repressed a shiver as he first took sight of Evelyn Rivers lying up to her neck in a mixture of cold water and her own blood. Her eyes were closed, but her face had frozen in a combination of fear and grief and he could make out the salt stains her previous tears had left on her face hours earlier.

"She left a note," the tall officer said handing Elliot the piece of paper. His voice was flat and uncaring. "It just says she couldn't live like this anymore. Whatever the hell 'this' is supposed to be."

Elliot read Evelyn's tear-stained handwriting with shaking hands: *He's tried to kill her and I know he'll kill me next. I can't keep living like this anymore, so I'm just going to beat him to it.*

"Should be pretty open and shut though, eh?" the officer said, breaking Elliot's moment of silence for Evelyn. "Don't know why they even keep razors around a place like this when all the woman all look like they're ready to start slitting stuff when they bring them in here."

"Why don't you have a little respect, you jackass?" Elliot said nearly shouting.

"What respect?" the officer said. "If she had any respect for *herself*, she probably wouldn't've ended up in a place like this in the first place."

Elliot glared at him, wanting to hit the officer in his red face, but simply handed him back the note and stormed out of the bathroom, not wanting to do anymore to sadden the scene of Evelyn's death.

He drove back to the precinct feeling cold and hot at the same time. A part of him wanted to pull his car into an alley and cry for his inability to keep Evelyn from hurting herself, while another part wanted to scream out at the frustration of the same calamity.

When he finally stepped off the elevator and into the squad room, Alexa popped out of nowhere to berate him.

"How come I'm just now finding out what's going on?" she said with wide, angry eyes. "I know her too. I wanted to know. No one even bothered to tell me about Olivia."

Elliot brushed past her and headed toward Cragen's office, but Alexa continued.

"You know, you can't keep treating me like I did something wrong. You can't just ditch me anytime you feel like it. I know this whole thing's been rough on you, but you can't-"

He did not hear the rest of her as he closed Cragen's office door behind him, leaving her with her arms crossed and pacing in front of the door.

"Evelyn Rivers is dead," he said flatly. "She killed herself this morning. Said she thought Diorel had tried to kill Olivia and would eventually kill her. She said she was beating Diorel to it even though...even though I told her repeatedly that Diorel wasn't involved."

"I'm sorry," Cragen said.

"Me too."

"Elliot, you did everything you could. That girl was fragile to begin with. You can't beat yourself up about this."

"I could've done more."

"How? She was a wreck for weeks."

"I could've read the signs a little better. If I'd just been a better cop, I could've saved her life."

"Evelyn Rivers refused to leave Diorel even though he was about two steps from killing her. We already knew she was in a state before we even got her case. You knew that and so did Olivia. That's why she had to practically drag her away from Diorel."

Elliot shook his head. "What makes this all even worse...is that I know, that if Liv had been here, she could've kept Evelyn from doing it."

"It's like I said. Given the state she was in, I don't think anything anyone could've said would've kept her from doing it."

“Liv...Olivia saw something in Evelyn that I could never get in touch with. If it had been up to me, we would’ve put Evelyn on the back burner and forgotten all about her until Diorel finally murdered her, but Liv always wanted to check in on her and see how she was doing. Now, that I think about it, I never once called the girl just to make sure she was doing all right. Just to keep something like this from happening.”

“We were too busy finding answers about this newest string of murders and looking for Olivia.”

Elliot ran a hand over his face. “Speaking of...I spoke to Morse again. I want to re-interview Mark Landon.”

“Naturally,” Cragen said with a sardonic tone. “Did he give you anyone else?”

“Yeah, two. The guy who slapped Olivia on his videos. Matthew Williard and also a Jeremy Cross he said we may want to look into.”

Cragen shook his head. “It’s Spencer’s case.”

“C’mon, Cap. Even Craig knew this was never his case. Olivia’s not dead and for all intents and purposes this has SVU all over it.”

“Fine,” he said after a moment of silent staring. “Do what you need to, but... I want you to make a better effort with Brown. She’s a good cop, Elliot.”

Elliot glanced out Cragen’s office window to see Alexa in a heated discussion with Andrea who looked thoroughly annoyed.

“I’m not ready to concede to a new partner just yet.”

“No one’s asking you to, but if you’re taking on Olivia’s case, we need to have results. When Liv wakes up... and I know she will, she’s going to want answers. You’ll have more to tell her if you work with someone rather than just working alone.”

Elliot rolled his eyes and sighed, but marched out of the office and nodded at Alexa.

“I need you to help me find some information on a Matthew Williard. I want to find him today. He’s already hurt Liv once and I wouldn’t put it past him to try hurting her again.”

Alexa nodded quickly and nearly broke into a run towards her own desk area where she pulled up a search on her computer. Elliot watched her with another sigh as Andrea, who had finished noting Morse’s videos, closed the video room and approached him.

“You have a minute, Elliot?” Andrea said softly. “I need to talk to you.”

“I don’t have a minute, Andrea,” he snapped, some of his irritation with Alexa smearing onto Andrea. “I need to go check on something. You need to wait.”

Andrea narrowed her eyes at the terse comment and as Elliot strode away from her, she headed toward her own desk, reports in hand.

Matthew Williard’s real estate office was large and comfortable with all the markings of a successful and growing business. He stood as Elliot and Alexa entered his office and gave them a dashing smile etched on a handsome, tan face. Tall and blue-eyed, Williard had a likeable air about him and an endearing charm enfolded throughout the rivets of baritone and bass in his voice that many people loved instantly. Elliot hated him on sight.

"Please," Williard said shaking Alexa's hand. "Have a seat. People think I'm crazy, but I've always had a soft spot for the NYPD."

He reached out a hand toward Elliot, who, feeling an old anger stir inside of him and playing in his head the several mental quips he had been rehearsing on the drive to Williard's office, stared at his hand for a moment and simply nodded with his hands held tight behind his back.

The moment Williard came into view, a flash of Olivia falling backwards after he had slapped her across the face floated across Elliot's eyes like a hologram and it took every bit of his resolve to let the awkward moment where Williard pulled his hand away and glanced at Alexa with high eyebrows, pass without further incident.

"Now," Williard said seated behind his large oak desk. "What can I do for you? I haven't broken any laws, have I?"

Alexa returned his wide smile weakly. "Do you know a Detective Olivia Benson?"

"Course I do," he said settling back in his thick leather chair. "I've been hearing her name on the news for weeks now. Yeah, we dated for some time a while back. She broke up with me, but I've always thought I should've chased her a little harder. I can't help thinking she was the one who got away."

"I see," Alexa said flatly.

"She always had so much patience with me and such a great attitude. I really hope she's doing okay. I have been worried sick since I heard that she'd been found."

"Have you?" Elliot said softly his eyes burning into Williard.

Williard glanced at Alexa for moment with raised eyebrows. "Yeah... Is there something wrong?"

"You tell me," Elliot said. "We did a little background checking into you and no one can account for your whereabouts on Tuesday January 30th."

"January 30th? I can barely remember what I had for breakfast this morning and if I didn't have my Blackberry I'd probably forget my own last name. But, what do you mean you did a little checking into me? You're talking to me like I'm some kind of suspect."

"Funny thing is," Alexa said. "You are."

Williard laughed. "I'm a suspect? In what?"

"What the hell do you think?" Elliot seethed. "Olivia Benson's lying comatose in the hospital and *someone* did something to put her there."

"Wait... Someone? You can't possibly think I did something to Olivia?"

"Well," Alexa said. "Now that you mention it..."

"This is ridiculous," Williard said flattening his tie.

"You know what I think's ridiculous," Elliot said. "That you're willing to sit there looking smug after all you've done. After the way you hurt her. You're nothing, but a dog and if I wasn't wearing a badge, I'd kick your ass river to river."

Deep down, everything instinct within Elliot told him that Williard was not involved. His demeanor was simply too calm. Even the greatest sociopaths showed some signs of distress when the police began questioning them about a possible quarry. However, something had to be done. The image of Williard's hand sliding through the dark to strike Olivia was far too vivid in his memory and though Elliot knew there was little he could do to ensure that Williard spent time in prison, he still needed to suffer.

“Hurt her? Olivia?” Williard scoffed. “I think it’s a bit rich that you’re calling me names and threatening me for hurting Olivia. Especially since it wasn’t too long ago that I saw something off the Internet that showed you and her in a very *compromising* position.”

“Get up,” Elliot said coming around the desk.

“What? Why?”

“You’re coming down to our precinct.”

“For what? No, forget it. I’m not going.”

“You can either come under your own steam or you can be dragged up there under whatever trumped up charge I can think of. It’s your choice, but you’re coming.”

The drive to the precinct had been tense and silent and Elliot allowed Williard to sit alone in an interrogation room for several hours while Alexa, Munch and Fin dug through Williard’s records. They quickly found that was a divorcee who had had two previous domestic violence accusations filed on him in earlier years, but for some reason, both his, and girlfriend thereafter, recanted.

From the records they could also see that Olivia discovered this very information the night she had confronted Williard and he struck her for the third and final time.

“How’ve you been?” Elliot said to Williard another hour later.

“You can’t keep me here like this,” he said immediately. “If you insist on keeping me, then I’m asking for my lawyer.”

Munch opened the door and wheeled a small television into the room.

“What’s that?” Williard said with wide eyes.

“Don’t worry about it just yet,” Elliot said smugly, but Williard shook his head.

“These cop tactics aren’t going to work with me. I used to date one of your own, remember? She told me lots while we were between the sheets.”

“Couldn’t’ve told you that much,” Elliot said. “She doesn’t take kindly to abusers.”

“Abusers? This is nonsense. I never touched her like that. Not once.”

“Who said anything about touching Olivia?” Munch said taking the seat next to Elliot.

Williard glared at him. “You’re insinuating it, but I never did.”

“We’d like to believe you,” Elliot said with a smirk. “But, we’ve got evidence that says otherwise.”

“That’s bull. I never laid a hand on her.”

Munch turned on the television and pressed a button on the small DVD player that rested on the cart behind it. The screen went blue for a moment before showing Williard and Olivia arguing from a night years earlier. All three men watched in silence as the arguing continued and Williard let out a gasp as he watched his own hand strike Olivia so hard she fell to the floor.

“Wh-where’d you get that?” he said with watery eyes.

“Does it make a difference at this point?” Munch said. “We just trapped you in the worst lie I’ve heard all week.”

“I...I...”

"Yes, please," Elliot said seething. "Tell us. *Explain* to us what was going on that night."

"That was a long time ago."

"Yeah, it was," Munch said. "But lucky for you, that tape's dated. It was made less than three years ago."

"When's the statute of limitations run out on filing assault, battery or personal injury in New York County, John?" Elliot asked brightly.

"Why, Elliot, I think it's three years."

"Three years?" Elliot said and turned back toward Williard. "Well, isn't that interesting."

"I...I understand where you're going with this, gentlemen," Williard said softly. "But you have to understand-"

"Yes, we do want to understand, don't we, John?"

"We do, Elliot."

Elliot smiled. "We want to understand everything so that we can pull every single niche out of the penal law to make sure you serve as much time as possible."

"I was under a lot of stress back then," Williard said his foot tapping nervously. "Some of my places were being eaten up by the competition and it was looking kind of bad there for a while and then all of sudden she comes at me with this old crap and I just...lost it."

"Oh, you lost it," Elliot repeated.

"I did! But I swear on my life, I've been getting help since then. After Olivia pulled that gun on me...I finally realized what I was doing and I got help. I'm seeing a therapist three times a week."

"Does that help?" Elliot asked with feigned care.

"Absolutely! She has taught me things about myself I never even knew."

"And if it doesn't," Munch said, "you can always smack *her* around until it does."

"I swear to God I don't do that anymore and I haven't had any contact with Olivia since the night she threw me out."

"You're sure?" Elliot asked now serious. "That's the story you wanna stick with?"

"I swear. I mean would you try to talk to a woman who just aimed a gun at your head?"

"Guess we can say you're a smart man, eh?" Munch said.

"Look," Williard said, "if I had any information, anything at all, I'd tell you. I'd tell you because I'd want you to tell her how much I've changed. Maybe she'd give me a second chance."

Elliot shook his head as he stood. "As far as I'm concerned, she gave you more chances than you ever deserved and if I'd known what you did to her at the time, I'd've gladly served the time for breaking your neck."

"Are we filing charges? Cragen asked Casey when Elliot and Munch entered the small room that sat outside of the interrogation room.

She shook her head. "I can't see how. The statute's about to run out anyway and with Olivia in a coma... And he seems like the kind of weasel who'd have a lawyer or two just greasy enough to get him out of serving any time even if we could make the charges stick."

“So, what do we do?” Elliot asked.

“Let him sweat in there for a few more hours,” Cragen said. “Then I’d let some of his past records slip to some of clientele and competition. How are you doing on this Cross guy?”

“Alexa’s working on him.”

“Well find him. This’ll be the first we’ve really looked at him, so find him and grill him hard.”

“Got him!” Alexa said excitedly as Elliot left the interrogation room.

“Who?”

“Jeremy Cross. He works lugging boxes down by the docks.”

Elliot nodded as he reached for his coat. “You drive. I’ve got a couple phone calls to make for our friend Williard in there.”

Gansevoort and Washington Streets
5:38PM

"Cross?" a stout manager with a clipboard said to Elliot and Alexa when the approached him. "He's over there, but I don't know how much you expect to get out of him. He's kind a dull...you know? Slow."

Something large moved behind the truck at which the manager pointed and Elliot felt slightly caught off guard by the sight of the man who had just heaved three large crates from on truck onto another.

Jeremy Cross’s mess of brown hair and round face gave him an initial appearance of young boy, but the body on which rested his large head proved he was anything but. Six foot six and easily two-hundred and fifty pounds, Elliot felt dwarfed by the large man and Elliot wondered why Jeremy was spending his days moving boxes instead of blocking others his size on a football field somewhere.

“Jeremy Cross?” Elliot said holding out his badge.

Jeremy set down his crate and stepped from behind the truck.

“Yeah?”

“I’m Detective Stabler. This is Detective Brown. We need to talk to you for a couple minutes.”

“Yeah...sure,” Jeremy said taking a few steps toward them. He spoke with deep voice and a strong accent and Alexa, barely standing at his elbow, eyed him suspiciously. “What’s going on?”

“I’m sure you’ve seen reports on the news about a cop’s disappearance. A Detective Olivia Benson?”

Jeremy nodded and blinked large brown eyes. “I heard she was found. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” Alexa said quickly jumping into the conversation. “We’re still trying to figure out what happened to her.”

“I was really happy when the news said you found her. Do you know what hospital she’s at? Can I go see her or talk to her?”

"No, sorry," Elliot said crossing his arms as he stared up at the man. "She's still in the ICU and she can't have any visitors."

"ICU?" Jeremy said, a quizzical expression on his face.

"Intensive Care Unit. Look, Jeremy, when was the last time you spoke to Olivia?"

Jeremy looked up as he thought for a moment. "Think it was maybe a year or so ago. She's usually the one who calls me, but she hadn't in like a real long time, so I called her."

"And you haven't spoken to her since?" Alexa said.

"Naw...don't think so. Hey, am I in some kind of trouble here?"

Elliot and Alexa glanced at one another.

"No," Elliot said. "We're just talking to anybody who had any contact with Olivia and might know what happened to her."

"Oh," Jeremy said, looking down at his shoes. "Sure wish I could help. If I knew anything, I'd tell you."

"I'm sure you would Jeremy," Alexa said.

Elliot gave Jeremy his card and he and Alexa walked back to the car.

"What do you think?" he asked.

She paused, surprised that he had asked her opinion. "I don't know. I think he seems genuine though. And, I hadn't seen him on any of the tapes past the time when Jonathan Halloway began showing up."

"Morse must've had it wrong," Elliot said as they drove back to the precinct.

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Alexa, I know Olivia and she wouldn't go out with a guy like that. She likes smart people. Guys who can make her laugh. He's not even close to her type."

Alexa sighed. "You didn't watch the unedited version of those tapes, Detective, but you're right. They never went *out* anywhere. She'd dress up, he'd meet her at the door and they wouldn't make it out of her front door. It doesn't take a 160 IQ to be good at what he does."

Elliot rolled his eyes as they headed back up 8th Avenue.

"Hey! Zachary, right?"

Zachary Calbrach nodded with a smile at Munch as he and Fin stepped into his hospital room.

"I'm Detective Munch and this is Detective Tutuola."

"Are you here to talk to me about what happened too?" Zachary asked.

"We are," Munch said.

"Sorry, I didn't do so well last time."

"You did just fine," Fin said, "but we just wanted to know if you could remember anything else that might help us catch him."

Zachary sighed. "I'm starting to remember now. I'd seen him before. Like a couple weeks ago, but I still can't make him out. Like, I see him...but I don't. It's weird."

"It's okay," Munch said. "Do you remember where you might've seen him?"

“Like at school and stuff. I just remember thinking...like ‘It’s that guy.’ You know what I mean?”

They spent another twenty minutes trying to pull memories from Zachary, but he quickly grew frustrated and when his mother insisted that he had had enough for one day, they shifted their efforts back to interviewing witnesses in the case.

Taking a short hiatus to check on Olivia and see Elliot back at his post by Olivia’s window, Munch and Fin spoke to all three possible witnesses as well dropped visits on those who had discovered the crime scenes in Ryan Daly’s and Andrew Shaw’s murders. The day had been long and the tasks at hand arduous and unfulfilling as not one person interviewed had any relevant information to add.

Cold and bedraggled, Munch suggested they check in on the neighbors who lived several doors down from the Calbrach house.

“Just terrible,” Mabel Hickins said as she lowered her eighty-year old body into an arm chair in her living room. “To think that someone could do something to such a lovable little boy. He used to come here and let me read to him when he was little. Now, he’s a little too grown to spend all his time here, but he still waves on his way home from school.”

“When you saw him around the area,” Munch began, “did you ever notice anyone ever following him or paying him any attention?”

“Not so much,” she said. “The school’s just a stone’s throw away from here and I see most of the kids every day. It used to be safe for them to just walk home, but nowadays...”

“You seem to know the area pretty good,” Fin said.

Mabel nodded. “I’ve been here forever and even if the neighborhood does go down the tubes even more, I don’t see myself moving.”

“So, have you noticed anybody around the area or around the schools that seemed out of the ordinary?”

“Well...There was someone staring at the kids a few days back.”

“What did they look like?” Munch said taking out a notepad.

“It was a young man. He was kind of far away so I couldn’t tell how old he was. Maybe in his twenties. Maybe younger. Maybe older. But he was standing nearby the fence watching the kids leave the school, maybe a day or two before this happened to Zachary.”

“Can you remember what he looked like?” Fin asked, but Mabel shook his head.

“Reddish hair is about it. I wish I could tell you more. But, um, tell me something. You’re all cops...what do you know about that young woman I’ve been seeing all over the news. The one they just found on 90th?”

“What about her?” Fin said.

“Just wanting to know how she was doing,” Mabel said. “I try to follow the news as best I can and didn’t know if you knew anything else about her. I mean to tell you honestly, with all this fuss over those other two boys and now poor little Zachary, I’d all but forgotten about her. But, I guess that’s just the way the mind goes when you get to be my age...”

Elliot sighed as he watched the lanky nurse with the mousy brown hair change the bandage on Olivia's side.

With Williard and Cross no longer viable witnesses and with Mark staunchly hiding behind his attorney, he had found no other evidence to use to pursue the case and he found it painfully ironic that the one person off of whom he could bounce ideas until one sounded plausible, was the only person he could not ask.

He pressed his hand against the window and willed her to wake for another twenty minutes before he turned to leave. The moment he turned, he caught sight of Maya and another woman walking down the corridor. The other woman's brown hair was lit with highlights and she was tall, like Maya and Olivia, but had the body of a mother.

"Elliot," Maya said with a small smile. "How is she?"

"Better. Her doctor says she's mostly stable and they might be able to move her out of the ICU tomorrow."

"Good...good," Maya said.

An awkward silence fell over them before the woman's hazel eyes glinted behind her black Emporio Armani glasses and she opened her mouth.

"Sarah Hyman," she said offering her hand toward him in a business-like manner. "Wish we could have met under more light-hearted pretenses."

"Me too."

They stared at one another for a second awkward moment, before Elliot cleared his throat.

"I've, uh...got some things I still need to get done. Maya, you've got my cell just in case anything changes. Sarah...good to meet you."

"Likewise," Sarah said, though her tone suggested different.

As Elliot strode down the hall, he could hear snippets of their voices coming like echoing hisses off the polished walls.

"I can't believe he has the nerve to be here," Sarah said. "After what Jillian told me...the other cops in her unit think he's involved."

"He's not, Sarah," Maya said. "I know him and he wouldn't be here if he was."

"But what if it's a cover? What if he's just trying to see exactly how much he did to her?"

"Sare, he didn't"

"You need to come back here tonight and make sure he doesn't come back to finish her off..."

Elliot simply shook his head as he climbed the stairs back to the street, but his mind was plagued with thoughts of Olivia by the time he got back to his car.

What am I going to do if she never wakes up? What was going to happen if something's really wrong with her? What if the seizures were a sign of brain damage? What if she really couldn't walk again?

He pushed a hand to his side as the burn in stomach hurt worse than ever at the same time his phone rang from his pocket.

"Yes," he said quickly noticing for the first time that he never bothered to change the number's display from "Home" to simply "Kathy" or "The Kids."

"It's me," Kathy said brightly. "I was just wondering if you were free to have dinner with us tonight."

He nodded into the phone, the burning subsiding momentarily. "Sounds like a plan."

Elliot's original plans for the evening included another round of "Beast," hopefully sans-Jonathan, and a night of staring at his ceiling praying for a peaceful slumber, so the idea of having dinner as if his family was whole again seemed the perfect distraction.

"Dickie," he said into the living room as Dickie and Lizzie were deep into a racing game on the television instead of helping make dinner. "How 'bout you help Maureen set the table?"

"Rick."

"Sorry?" he said through furrowed eyebrows.

"Rick," Dickie repeated never taking his eyes from the game. "I'm trying it out for a while. Rick."

Elliot closed his eyes and shook his head with a grin. Kathleen laughed as she stirred spaghetti sauce into which Kathy sprinkled basil every few strokes.

"All right, fine. *Rick*, help your sister set the table. *Elizabeth*, come tear lettuce with me."

Dinner felt just like old times and after Maureen had left and the others had gone upstairs to bed, he and Kathy sat on the sofa and talked like they had before life had grown so complicated. Elliot felt his heart ache for his old life as Kathy told him how grumpy Dickie had been recently over losing Jessica Barrow to the basketball player, how Lizzie's music was coming along so well and how Kathleen's spirits seemed to brighten after Elliot had told her that Olivia had been found.

Talk eventually turned to Olivia's state and he felt oddly surprised to see Kathy so interested in his partner, regardless of what had happened.

"Kathleen says she wants to see her," Kathy said sipping her ginger ale.

"No," Elliot said. "I don't want any of the kids to see her like that."

"Well, how bad is it, El?" She paused, but when she received no response, continued. "I mean, I haven't heard much from the news except that she's still critical. You've all been keeping a tight lid on just about everything."

"Just as it should be. This is bad enough without the press crawling all over her room."

"How bad is she?" When he remained silent, she pressed him further. "Look, I need to know. I need to know if I need to brace myself for how Kathleen will be if her Olivia's condition worsens... How all the kids will be, for that matter."

Elliot sighed. "It's bad, Kath. Her doctor says *if* she wakes up from the coma... she'll probably never walk again."

"Oh Jesus," Kathy whispered. "Do you have any idea what happened yet?"

"We don't know. I mean... Cragen's making me work the case with this girl who... I mean, for Chrissake, Dickie could make a better cop at thirteen than she is."

"I guess we all have to crawl before we can walk."

"Yeah, well. I wish she'd just crawl back to wherever she came from so I don't have to deal with her."

He grunted slightly and shifted on the couch as the burning sensation in stomach grew worse.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“Nothing,” he said rubbing his side. “Just my stomach.”

“You should probably see your doctor about it,” she said concern written all over her face.

He scoffed and shook his head.

“I mean it, Elliot,” she continued. “With all that’s been happening this past month, you’re probably working on an ulcer.”

“Probably,” he said sleepily.

She pursed her lips. “You look tired. How ‘bout I make up the couch for you again and you can take the kids to school again in the morning?”

Elliot attempted to nod, but had already leaned his head back against the arm of the sofa and by the time she rose to grab a blanket for him, he began to snore softly.

Kathy broke into a wide smile and she pulled a blanket over his sleeping form. She watched him sleep for a long time before retching herself from his side and stepping softly up the stairs to her empty bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Monday February 19, 2007

First Avenue and East 30th Street

“What’s up Doc?” Elliot said brightly as he strode into Melinda’s lab. He had fallen into dreamless sleep the previous night and while his neck hurt slightly from sleeping on his old couch, he felt rested and mildly happy.

“We got the analysis back on Olivia’s clothes,” Melinda said, “and I’ve got lots for you.”

“The hair?”

“I ended up finding eight different types altogether. Some were actually from you and I also found a match with that handsome Halloway she’s been seeing. Four of the samples were in the system too.”

“Whose are they?” he asked expectantly.

“All Missing Persons cases. Two from women who had gone missing about three months ago and one who went missing a month before them and another who’s been missing for close to a year. Their DNA had been catalogued from hair brushes and things just in off chance that they’d be found and were unidentifiable. The other two are clearly men, but they aren’t coming up with any names in the system.”

“Figures,” Elliot said shaking his head.

“But, there’s a plus,” she continued. “The DNA from one of them was first taken from an older rape case in Brooklyn. The woman claimed that she was raped on camera by a man in his early twenties, but that he let her go. They were never able to catch the guy, but from everything I’ve seen, he’s been involved with a homicide and several other Missing Persons cases.”

“And his hair was found on Olivia.”

“His blood too and...” She rifled through a large envelope on her desk. “I’m willing to bet that these probably belong to him too.”

"Bite marks," Elliot said just above a whisper as he stared at a black and white image of what was clearly Olivia's left shoulder.

"I had the hospital send those over this morning."

"So, this guy... whoever he is... He's had Liv this entire time and he did all this to her."

Melinda sighed. "I still don't know for sure, but since his blood was on her clothes, I'm willing to bet he didn't get away without a few problems."

"Yeah," Elliot said laughing flatly, but never taking his eyes off the grey image.

"I ran the dirt on her clothes and found some weird stuff."

"Like what?"

"Well, some of it looks like dust, really. Accumulation of dead skin, little hairs and other things that would just collect from the air. Basically stuff you'd find in the corner of a bathroom or under a bed or something."

"How is that weird?"

"By itself it's not, but I also found wood chips, cement dust and... what looks like decaying tissue."

Elliot's eyebrows flew toward his hairline. "What do you mean decaying tissue?"

"Like... the kind of stuff you'd expect if you stuck your hand inside a casket that had been buried for about four or five years. There's skin, other than hers, rubbed all over her clothes. They're old too. Also found rat droppings and some unhatched fly larvae."

"Jesus," Elliot said rubbing his head and staring at the bite mark on Olivia's shoulder once more.

"I'm not sure how much any of it will help. It's not making a lot of sense to me right now, personally, but it might later."

Elliot nodded and waved the photograph. "What about these? Do you see anything else from her injuries?"

"I did," Melinda said. "They took pictures of most of her bruises and they also sent me X-rays. Now, some of the bruising looks older than some of the others, especially this one on her back."

"That one is older. There was an... incident with a suspect."

"There's these two rather large ones though. I'd say this other one's a little newer than the one you pointed to, but still older than the rest."

She paused and stared at Elliot with large, questioning eyes.

Elliot replayed the events of that night in his head. He had literally thrown Olivia into her side wall. He saw her double over and that was what brought him to his senses. That was also what caused an eruption in her and sent her flying back at him.

"When I last saw her..." Elliot began. "That night, we, um... I thought at one point I might've broken one of her ribs, but she seemed okay. "

She nodded, having already known the answer and continued.

"Well, her X-rays tell me a lot. She definitely fell. I'd say from about thirty feet or so in the air. Maybe even forty."

"Why forty?"

"Just from the depth of the splintering and the breakage. Do you know how much it takes to break a femur?" Elliot shook his head. "It takes a lot. The thigh bone is one of the hardest and thickest in the body and it takes a good seventeen hundred pounds of pressure to do it, so a fall from thirty feet at just the right angle might do it, but..."

“But...”

“Physics tells me that if she fell straight from thirty feet and landed on the ground, she’d be suffering worse problems than she is right now. She’d have bad injuries from a fall from just ten feet. I’d say something broke her fall and gave just enough cushion to keep her alive.”

“What though?”

“Well, they found her inside that dumpster on 90th. I’m thinking she wasn’t put there, she fell into it.”

“You mean out of a window and into the dumpster?”

“That would explain all the glass and many of the lacerations she has look like those of someone going out of a window.”

“Was she pushed or did she jump?”

“Still can’t say yet. I’d have to get a better look at the scene.”

“How soon can we get started on it?”

“Give me a few hours and I can go up there with you.”

Elliot nodded and gave her a weak smile.

“How’s she doing?” Melinda asked. “I haven’t gone to see her yet.”

“Still in the ICU and in a coma, but her doctor says they may be able to move her some time tomorrow. She originally told me today, but this morning she decided to give it another day. Just in case.”

Silence fell between them before Melinda spoke again.

“She’s going to be okay, Elliot,” she said.

“I know,” Elliot lied. “It’s just...she’s been having these seizures and they don’t know if it’s this chemical she’s been exposed to that causing them.”

“What kind of chemical?”

Elliot shrugged. “Her doctor didn’t specify. Just some kind of chemical that’s causing all these problems.”

Melinda’s eyebrows flew up into her hair. She walked across the room and flipped through a few reports.

“The same substance found on the floor of her apartment... and on the boys. It’s on her clothes too. I’ll have to check it again, but I’m pretty sure it’s the same concentration as the others and... if it was inhaled for an extended amount of time, it could cause some seizures or brain damage-” She froze, immediately regretting her words.

Elliot was silent a moment. “...someone came at her with this stuff the second I left her place.”

Melinda nodded.

“Where can you buy this stuff?”

“You can get the components from a lot of sources. Any chemical supply place, but a lot of these are all regulated. If these were made from legal transactions, there’d be a record.”

Two hours later, Elliot parked the navy sedan on East 91st and headed west down the street with Melinda. He had gone to see Casey while Melinda was completing several other projects in her office and even after pleading with the best sad eyes he could muster, Casey insisted that there was no way to get a warrant to search the entire block.

The police tape that surrounded the dumpster in which Ray Meekham and his nephew, Deondre, had found Olivia had been removed as CSU had finished their scope

of the area. The dumpster rested in an alley between two large unoccupied buildings and showed signs that it had been moved recently.

“Yeah, we move ‘em,” a grizzly man told Elliot when questioned. “Depends on whose trying to piss out his territory, you know?”

Elliot nodded. Melinda stood a foot away from them, slightly apprehensive about the man’s appearance.

“Were you around here on maybe Friday night or Saturday morning?” Elliot asked.

“Already told the other cops who was out here,” the man said. “Just saw the man and his boy the other night and that was it. Didn’t even see nobody putting that lady in there.”

He thanked the man and he and Melinda stepped across the area staring at each of the buildings. The row was falling apart and even the black and white letters of the “Absolut” billboard in the distance did little to suppress the gloom.

“What do you think?” Elliot said as he stared up at row upon row of boarded and broken windows.

“There’s no way to say for certain,” Melinda said, “Most of the windows around here are broken and boarded up, but just from judging the area and the crime scene photos, it’s got to be one of these on the left. I’d say the fourth floor for certain since the dumpsters are tall. If she fell from up there, it would definitely account for her injuries and whatever was in the dumpster could have broken her fall just right.”

“C’m on Casey,” Elliot said pleading once more in her office another hour later. “We’ve gotta be able to get something.”

“It’s out of my hands,” she said. “Especially if the homeless up there are moving the dumpsters around just for the hell of it. That dumpster could have come all the way from the park and we’d have no way of knowing. Only one of those buildings up there even has an owner and he’s been MIA for years.” Elliot looked noticeably dejected and she sighed and continued. “I want to get the bastard too, but I don’t want us throwing our weight all over the city, only to have him get off on a technicality once we find him.”

He turned to leave, but paused. “What about a list of names?”

“What do you need?”

“Melinda told me there’s this chemical that was found on Liv’s clothes. It’s been found on her floor too and in the most recent case with these boys. I need to know who makes some of the components and a list of who’s bought them recently.”

Casey turned to her monitor. “Give me an hour and I’ll have a warrant to get you what you need.”

Elliot rubbed his eyes and pushed away from his desk to stare at the ceiling in the squad room. He had obtained the lists of consumers in the city who had purchased large quantities of anesthetizing agents from the warrant Casey had had signed within thirty minutes, and he and Alexa had been combing through the pages and pages of records for hours without finding anything relevant.

He had been fervently searching for something relating to suspects he had been able to cross off his list: Harry Morse, Owen Kreider, Philip Fitzgivens, Adam Jackson,

Matthew Williard, Jeremy Cross, Jonathan Halloway and especially Mark Landon. Hours into his search, he was still unable to come up with anything.

"You should go," Alexa said softly from behind the list she was reading. "You look extremely tired."

"I am," Elliot whispered.

The constant stress of the previous weeks combined with days upon days of extreme fatigue and poor eating habits had finally caught up with him and he felt sicker with each passing minute. His clothes fit loose from the weight he had lost and the circles under his eyes did not seem like they were disappearing any time soon.

He rose from his desk with a sigh.

"You gonna be okay?" he said to Alexa. "I mean we need to at least go through these tonight. I can catch a quick nap in the crib and help you later if you want."

"I'll be fine," Alexa said. "Just get some rest. You look like you're about to collapse right before me."

Elliot nodded and quickly left the squad room, and the moment the elevator doors had closed, Alexa leapt from her seat beside Elliot's desk. She padded quickly toward Cragen's office and stared at her superior for a moment as he sat behind his desk.

"Yes?" he asked eyebrows high.

"I just thought you should know what I've found...or really didn't find when I was going through all these records."

Cragen leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Okay...what *didn't* you find?"

"Stabler's name, of course."

"I didn't know you were looking for it."

"Well, I was keeping an open mind about the case."

"Elliot's involvement has been nullified by his actions," Cragen said trying to keep a scowl from spreading across his face at the young detective.

"Captain," Alexa said taking a step forward. "I understand that Elliot is everybody's favorite around here, but the fact is a detective still went missing and he was the very last person to see her from January 31st until last Friday. Combined with what we saw in Morse's videos, I made a judgment call."

"And it was the wrong choice, Alexa."

"I see it as good news. This way we can say for certain that Elliot's not involved."

"Only the rat squad does something like that."

"But, as far as I'm concerned we're still trying to find out what happened to Detective Benson. I know no one wants to think it, but if he was any other guy off the street, we would've checked him thoroughly too. I mean, we still checked Halloway and he's *dating* her."

"And the difference between Elliot and Halloway is Elliot is a seasoned cop who I'd trust with my own life. The fact you didn't find anything just proves what kind of person he is and what kind of person *you* are. It's not something anyone does here in SVU and you should be ashamed of yourself for even checking."

Alexa stared at him for a long while before straightening her posture and blinking rapidly to hold her resolve.

"My father used to be a cop," she began. "And he's spent the last ten years in a wheelchair after his old partner lost it after his divorce and shot my father in the spine."

His partner did it in the middle of the night and claimed he didn't know what the hell had happened for days. He stood by my father's bedside, came to church with our family, held my mother's hand as she cried...everything. I know that we all want to believe the best of people, but I think it's a little naïve to do so blindly just because someone wears a badge."

"That kind of stuff doesn't happen all the time, Alexa," Cragen said in a much softer tone.

"But, the fact is, it *does* happen and as much as people revere Elliot Stabler in this department, he was still the last person to see Olivia before she disappeared. Cops do wrong too, but at least now we're that much closer to being certain that he's not involved."

"He's a good cop."

"And so was the one who shot my father." She sighed and took a step toward his door. "I just thought you should know so that maybe the higher ups might get off your back about it a bit."

She left and Cragen ran a hand over his face feeling both relieved and heavily burdened at the same time.

Tuesday February 20, 2007
Mercy General Hospital East
1:09PM

Elliot's heart raced as the orderlies and nurses slowly pushed Olivia's bed and the various IVs out of her room and along the corridor. Maya stood next to him with her hand at her chin and shivering from her tattered nerves.

When Dr. Haddley removed the large tube from Olivia's throat, he and Maya were able to see Olivia up close and it was only then that they could see the damage that had been done. The swelling around her eyes had gone down significantly and many of the cuts had healed into brown scabs in spots on her face, but it was the lack of colour and the gauntness of her face that caught Elliot's breath. She had lost a considerable amount of weight and even though Dr. Haddley insisted that Olivia was getting "better," her waxy, grey skin told Elliot otherwise.

"She'll be monitored around the clock," Dr. Haddley said once Olivia had been set up in a new room. "I'm still slightly worried about the bronchitis, but I think the change might do her some good."

"And, if it doesn't?" Maya said, face stricken.

"Then we'll try another course of antibiotics and she may have to go back into intensive care."

"So, what do we do now?" Elliot asked. "Is this just a waiting game?"

"Well...yes. We need to wait for her bones to set. A broken femur is no small matter. Besides the bronchitis, she's also in danger from infection from there and also the gunshot wound. But...I've seen people bounce back from worse."

"Can we...can she hear us?" Maya said. "I mean can we talk to her to just let her know that we're here for her?"

Dr. Haddley nodded. "You can talk to her. Her brain waves are very active so I know she can probably hear us."

The doctor left Elliot and Maya alone in Olivia's room as the sound of heart rate monitors and IV drips echoed in waves.

Maya pulled a chair close to Olivia's bed and patted her left hand that was the only extremity to not break throughout the ordeal.

"I guess," Maya said with a sigh. "I guess all we have to do now is wait."

"Yeah..."

They sat in silence for nearly an hour, each willing her to wake, but neither wanting to make a sound for fear of disturbing her barely stable condition.

Maya cleared her throat and glanced at Elliot as she continued to pat Olivia's hand. "This is so nerve-racking."

"Yeah..."

"I mean..." Maya said. "Does she just wake up or...I mean, I'm not sure what's supposed to happen. How long can she stay like this?"

Elliot shrugged. "People stay in comas for years, but...this is Olivia. She'll probably wake up tomorrow and demand to know why neither of us is at work."

Maya smirked at him and turned toward Olivia as she leaned closer to her.

"Livia...It's M-J."

As Elliot expected, there was no change in Olivia's stoic and unconscious face, but Maya continued.

"Livia...We're here for you...You should just wake up 'cause... you look like hell."

Elliot let out a soft laugh and Maya turned around, facing him with shining eyes.

"Figured I'd put her on the defensive...might her snap her out of it."

Elliot nodded, but Maya continued staring at him.

"Say something to her."

Elliot shook his head. "No, I...no..."

"Please," Maya said tears reforming in her eyes. "It's Livia. She'd want to know that you're here too."

Elliot sighed and walked across the room. His body cast a grey shadow over Olivia's small form.

"Liv," he said softly. "It's me..."

Her body immediately jerked and Maya stood quickly dropping her hand. The heart rate monitor emitted a piercing sound as the vibrating lines on its screen splattered erratically.

"Nurse!" Elliot shouted, but a team of nurses and doctors on the floor had already run into the room dragging a crash cart from behind them.

He and Maya backed into the corner, watching in horror as the doctors worked on Olivia's frail body. Tears streamed down Maya's face as the crash cart seared and Elliot felt his own heart stop as the solid flat sound that signified that Olivia's heart had stopped beating resounded about the room.

Three shots of epinephrine and three jolts later, the heart monitor popped back to life and the tension in the room eased over the course of several minutes.

Elliot pulled Maya into a hug and allowed her to cry into his shoulder while he held back tears of his own.

“...we’re still unsure if it was the seizure or something else that elicited it, but it’s definitely pneumonia at this point.”

Elliot and Maya stood outside of a large window that displayed a new room in the ICU. Olivia, paler than ever, lay with several new IVs and the intubation tube reconnected. Maya had her hand over her mouth, still in shock, and shook as she stared through the window.

“We’ll keep her under close observation overnight,” Dr. Haddley continued.

“What made her heart stop like that?” Elliot asked.

“We’re still unsure...which is why she’ll stay down here for another night. She’s stable now, but I don’t want any other surprises.”

She left a short while later, noting that no other responses were imminent from either Elliot or Maya, and a cold silence descended on the corridor until both present heard the sounds of someone running towards them.

“What happened?” Jillian yelled. “I want to know what happened! She was fine and now she’s down here again! What happened!”

“Jill...” Maya said, approaching her cautiously. “They tried to take her out, but she just wasn’t ready. She’ll be okay, though.”

Jillian’s eyes were fixed on Elliot and she pointed at him as her cheeks turned red.

“You see!” she screamed. “You see what happens! You leave her alone with him for just one minute and now she’s back in intensive care!”

“Jillian, please,” Maya hissed grabbing her arm. “Stop yelling. You’re not making any sense.”

“The hell I’m not! You were here earlier and she was getting better! You leave him alone with her and now she’s sick again!”

“Jill, I was standing right here the whole time. She just got sick.”

“*He* did something else to her!”

“She’s got pneumonia!” Maya said. “Her doctor said it was a possibility. She’d been out in the cold for hours. Let’s just be thankful she’s not any worse off!”

Jillian dissolved into tears, shaking her head. “No! He’s not going to stop until she’s dead! He doesn’t want her to wake up and tell the world what he did! I told her she should’ve gotten out of that unit because of him and now look! Look! He’s going to kill her and it’ll be all my fault because I didn’t force the issue. I didn’t tell enough people about the type of person he was!”

Maya pulled Jillian into a hug. “Livia’s a smart woman, Jillian. And she’s strong. She wouldn’t go down without a fight. That’s why she’s here now and not...somewhere else. Elliot didn’t have anything to do with this and you know it.”

Jillian just cried in Maya’s arms and together they sank to the floor as Maya looked on at Elliot helplessly.

“I’m sorry,” Maya said an hour after she had ushered a sedated Jillian Harfort into a cab.

“For what?” Elliot said, never taking his eyes from Olivia’s window.

“About Jillian.”

Elliot shook his head. "You've already apologized about her and I told you not to worry about it."

"I know, but...I still feel bad about it. I should've waited until I was little more collected before I called her."

"Has anyone been able to contact Halloway yet?" he asked, changing the subject.

"No, and seeing as how this is almost Wednesday and he still doesn't know that she's even been found, I'm sure we'll all be facing a shit storm once he rolls back into the city. Maybe it was better that he wasn't here for this today. With Jillian flying down the hall like that, I'm sure Jonathan would've pulled a gun on you at this point."

Too late for that, Elliot thought with a sigh.

"You want a ride home?" he asked.

"That's okay. I think I just want to stay for a little while longer. I know it's not going to do anything, but I just want to be here for her...just in case."

Elliot wanted to ask "in case of what" as he left the hospital, but decided against it. His dreams were already haunted by visions of Olivia's death and he knew that he would have enough trouble staving off the demons without Maya's tribulations to torment further.

Wednesday February 21, 2007

SVU Squad Room

9:07AM

"It's her. I know it."

"Are you sure?"

"I just said I was."

Alexa rolled her eyes at Elliot as he sat with a case file open on his desk.

After spending the morning wanting Olivia to wake and lighting a candle for her in the hospital chapel, Elliot had settled back at his desk to comb through Missing Persons cases of Amanda Hill, Kimberley Nelson, Taynesha Grant and Amy Kettering. Hair from all four women had been found on Olivia's clothes and he knew that somewhere in their files lay the key to discovering what had happened to Olivia.

The sight of Kimberley Nelson, missing since late October, in a photo with a smiling beau had elicited a sharp memory from a video that had been buried under a stack of manila files for nearly two weeks.

"It's the same girl from the DVD," Elliot said. "Munch handed this to me weeks ago. It's her."

"That doesn't make any sense," Alexa said. "That was made in December and she hasn't been seen or heard from since before that and everything in her Missing Persons file makes it look like she was probably killed at the same time she disappeared."

"Did you look at the video? It's her."

"There's no way."

"She was about fifty pounds heavier, but it's her."

Alexa shook her head. "I don't see it."

"It's her," he repeated. "And the blond guy who's in all of them...he doesn't kill her on here, but I'd say the last of the movies on that DVD definitely looks like he murdered that girl."

"I can't see how this is going to help us find out what happened to Olivia."

"Alexa," he said trying to remain composed. "Olivia was brought into the hospital wearing the same clothes I'd seen her in three weeks ago. We found hair from half a dozen people on those clothes and this girl, Kimberley Nelson, was one of those people. Think about. Kimberley's been missing for months, but Liv came in contact with her during the past three weeks. To find out what happened to Olivia, we need to find out what happened to that girl."

"But, how do we start? We only have that video and some hair."

"We need to know what's in those original case files. You up for a drive?"

She eyed him suspiciously for a moment, but nodded her head and thirty minutes later, they were heading towards the Brooklyn precinct where Detectives Partelli and Charaden held the Missing Persons case file of Kimberley Nelson and the others.

"I love Brooklyn," Alexa said from the passenger side of the car provoking a sideways glance from Elliot. "It just feels so historic to me. There's something in the air."

"How long have you lived out here?"

"Long enough to know that Manhattan's gotten too damn expensive for any normal person live in anything other than a hole in the wall."

"Tell me about it..."

Partelli and Charaden had little information to give them and both seemed irked that Manhattan SVU saw fit to leech into what was their case.

"What do you know about the guy who's in all the movies?" Elliot asked the detectives who stood, stony-faced with arms crossed.

"We've been getting these trickle in for a couple years," Charaden said shaking his head. "But, the people who bring them in are always anonymous and by the time we see what's on them, no one can find them."

"We gave the ones where it looks like a murder goes down to Homicide," Partelli said. "And, they don't have anything on him either. It's either a private dealer or just an amateur because there's no production info and there's never anybody else on them. Just him and some girl. Sometimes it's different girls; sometimes the same, but it's always just him."

"How'd the women turn up missing?" Alexa asked.

Charaden let out an annoyed sigh. "Usually just disappearing in the middle of the night. Never a note or a call. They just vanished."

"Friends and relatives?" Elliot said glancing at Alexa.

"All been quizzed and shown a picture of this guy's face. Nobody knows anything. You might want to bother Bronx Missing Persons too. I know they've got a case that sounds kind of similar."

Missing Persons in both the Bronx and Manhattan gave as much information as possible, but it seemed all the boroughs were stuck from lack of evidence. A number of women had gone missing in the city, only to be seen later in an all-too-realistic-death pornography months or years later. The closest thing to a trail Bronx Missing Persons had been able to find ended when the lead which came from the guy who had brought in the original tape who got it from a friend of a friend of a friend who got that tape from a

seedy store in Chinatown, brought the detectives to an empty building. What struck Elliot most about all the open cases was that each of the women who had later appeared in a video in one form or another, had simply vanished into the night, not unlike Olivia.

Brooklyn SVU detectives were able to give them the name of the woman who claimed to have been let go by the same man seen in the videos, but they quickly learned that she had committed suicide not long afterward, still thinking that “he” was going to come after her again.

Tired from a day of discovery nothing more to lead them closer to what had happened to Olivia, Elliot and Alexa returned to the precinct to report on what they had not found about the case.

As daylight slowly turned into evening, Elliot started ask Alexa if she wanted to buy half a pizza, figuring they were both in for a long night, when he received a call from Maya. The call was quick and to the point. The hospital was about to move Olivia from the ICU again and she thought he would want to be there when they did.

Alexa asked if she could tag along with him when he started to leave the precinct for the hospital, but Elliot made certain not to even bat an eyelash in hopes that she would simply assume he had not heard her.

When he got to hospital, Maya had already begun arranging a series of cards and taut plastic balloons on the small window sill to the far left of the room.

“Who are those all from?” he asked softly as he in the chair beside Olivia’s bed. He had wanted to keep conversation to a minimum as the last time he had spoken in Olivia’s presence, she had gone into shock and though he was in no mood to repeat the experience, his curiosity got the better of him.

“Mostly well-wishers. She probably doesn’t know most of them, but I still figured it might brighten the place a little. Especially, considering she might be in here for a while.”

“You think so?”

“I know so,” Maya said. “I spent most of last night reading up on bone breakage and expected healing times. She’d be in the hospital for a while even if she wasn’t...”

Maya’s voice trailed and she sighed as she turned another “Get Well Soon” card so that it caught the shrinking outside light.

"Do you have any idea what happened to her yet?"

He shook his head, not wanting to voice the words “we haven’t got anything” so close to Olivia.

"Well, I have faith in you just like I have faith that Liv will wake up any day now and tell me...tell me...how my haircut doesn't fit my face or how I need to stop jumping from man to man or how I should just get over my parents and work on growing my practice. After all this is over...she'll be okay."

Elliot turned his gaze to Olivia and simply stared at her, wishing she would wake as Maya stepped about the room behind him. His gaze on her face had been so intent he barely lifted his eyebrows when Maya told him she was leaving for a bit or when a new figured appeared at her door.

Jonathan’s breath caught as he came within a few feet of Olivia’s bed and Elliot leapt to a stand upon noticing him. Eyes red and black hair shining even in the flat hospital light, Jonathan stared unblinking at Olivia.

Elliot stood silent not knowing if there was anything to be said or done. He knew that Cragen would have most likely notified Jonathan not too long after calling Maya, but Jonathan had been unreachable for days. Elliot shuddered at the thought of receiving the news from numerous messages left after days and days of calls.

“Olivia...” Jonathan muttered softly as he stared at her. He then glanced at Elliot. “Can she even hear me?”

Elliot nodded and Jonathan eyes welled before him. Watching in silent awe for the wealth of emotions flowing from the man, Elliot simply stared as Jonathan fell to his knees and sobbed at Olivia’s side.

Remembering the look of absolute grief and despair upon Jonathan’s face when he last saw him, Elliot slowly crept out of the room as Jonathan’s wails filtered into the corridor even through the closed door.

When he returned to the hospital the next day, Elliot immediately checked the visitor log for Olivia’s room, noting that Jonathan, Maya, Jillian and Sarah, had each come and gone in the morning hours and that a “P. Shah” remained still in the room.

With the name Shah and a conversation he had had weeks earlier in mind, he entered Olivia’s room expecting to see a slightly older version of Maya sitting in the room, but found instead an elderly woman slightly bent over Olivia’s unconscious form and rubbing something into the fingers that stuck out from her cast.

“What are you doing?” he asked immediately, his full interrogation voice echoing vehemently.

The Indian woman glanced at him for a moment before returning her attention to rubbing Olivia’s hand.

“It’s a kind of lotion,” she said in a voice surprisingly deep for her short-stature and mild face. “It’ll keep her hands from drying too badly while she’s in here. Hospital air is notably horrible for your skin.”

He crossed the room never taking his eyes off the woman. “Who are you? You only listed an initial on the visitor’s log.”

“My name is Priyal Shah, but you can call me *Mrs.* Shah.”

“You’re Maya’s mother.”

“Yes,” she said, the expression on her face turning sour for a moment. “I suppose I am.”

She moved to the other side of Olivia’s bed and squeezed a dime-sized drop of the white demulcent into her hand to rub into Olivia’s skin. Elliot could see that her eyes held the same kind of youthful spark that Maya had when she was laughing, but the rest of her vaguely familiar face spoke a story of a woman not younger than eighty.

“I think we’ve met before,” he said. “I’m Elliot Stabler. Olivia’s partner.”

“Yes, I remember,” Mrs. Shah said. “Serena’s funeral. These years later, I’m still shocked. She was such a nice young woman.”

“I didn’t realize you and Ms. Benson were so close.”

She sighed for a moment as if searching her memory for a scene from years earlier.

“We didn’t have much in common until I realized she worked at the university with my husband. Completely different college, though. The Humanities will never be the same without her. Always pleasant as long as she stayed away from that bottle. But, yes. We did get to know one another rather well over the years.”

“Through Maya?”

“She was a mistake,” she said abruptly, but then formed a smile. “But, she brought little Olivia into our lives, so I suppose she makes up for it.”

Elliot’s eyebrows furrowed at the comment. “A mistake?”

“Yes, a mistake. I was nearly forty-three-years old when she was born. My four others were nearly grown when she came around. There.” She rose from her seat having capped her small bottle. “She should be good for a few more days. I’ll send *that girl* in here with more later in the week. It’s getting harder and harder to make these longer trips into the city.”

“You mean, Maya? She’s here every day, in fact she was in here this morning. You probably just missed her.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Mrs. Shah said curtly. “Probably shirking her responsibilities as usual. *That girl* has been a disappointment from her very first step to the moment she tried to tell me something had happened to Olivia. She’ll most likely suffer from an extra long bout of imprudence and stupidity now that our Olivia won’t be around to tell her how to walk and breathe at the same time.”

“Oh...” Elliot said crossing his arms and taking a step backward, floored by the brass comments flowing from Maya’s mother’s eighty-year-old mouth. “Well, we all have somebody who helps us out. I’ve just now realized how much I’ve come to depend on Olivia myself.”

Mrs. Shah sighed as she slowly crossed the room. “Depending on someone is one thing, young man. Not being able to stand on your own two feet as an adult without someone strong like Olivia propping you up is another.” She paused and a small, sad smile pulled her at lips as she came near the doorway. “I’ve watched this one for a long time. Olivia was clearly the child we should have had instead of the spoiled thing that came to us, but...such is life. It was good to see you again, Detective. I hope to be notified if there are any other changes to her condition.”

Elliot nodded and she continued. “I’ve taken it upon myself to make sure she’s looked after the way her mother would’ve. Now, the driver’s been waiting downstairs for quite some time and if I leave him to his own for too long, he’s starts to find mischief. Has been nothing but trouble since the day he was hired. Probably should’ve married Mayanjula off to him so they could have their own brand of misfit children. Goodbye.”

She stepped from the room, leaving Elliot dumbfounded as he took the seat next to Olivia.

Munch came by a short while later and he tried to uplift Elliot’s spirits by cracking several jokes about what Olivia was going to do once she found out they had ransacked her apartment, but the light humor consoled him for only as long as Munch stood by the bed. By the time he had left, Elliot was left with the sinking feeling that Olivia might remain in a blank, vegetative state for the rest of her life.

He left the room to quiz Dr. Haddley about Olivia’s vitals and the possibility of other seizures or surprise infections and when he returned to the room to try and talk Olivia into consciousness, Maya had taken his seat, reading a magazine as if waiting to be seen during a doctor’s visit.

“Hey,” he said softly. “You’re back.”

"Yep. My client and I had another long argument today and normally I would've asked Livia if she wanted to blow off steam with a quick drink, but seeing as how she's slightly incapacitated at the moment, I decided to just be here for her for the time being."

"Where's Halloway? I know he was here yesterday."

"Sedated on another floor."

Elliot stared at her with wide eyes and she nodded.

"According to Jillian, he kind of lost it last night when he saw her and he became so hysterical that they had to drag him away. Then, he was throwing such a fit that he had to be sedated. I went to see him before I came back here."

"How is he?"

"He'll be fine. I think he's more embarrassed than anything else."

"Oh... I met your mother today," he said pulling the other empty chair in the room beside her.

Maya scoffed. "Bet that was an interesting conversation. Did she tell you how she always thought I was her biggest disappointment?"

"No," Elliot lied. "We really didn't talk that much."

"Well, that surprises me," Maya said without looking up from her magazine. "She's always liked telling people that I was the mistake."

The heart rate monitor beeped twice in a second, eliciting a tense, silent stare from the both of them until it began to chirp at a regular pace.

"You...uh," Maya began, "ever have that friend who you were certain your parents loved more than you?"

"You think your parents loved Olivia more than you?"

"I know it for certain. My mother used to say it daily. When all my brothers and sisters had moved out and it was just me, her and Dad...we'd be at the dinner table and she would say, 'Oh, I heard Olivia made the honor roll again. It's shame we can't a child like that over for dinner more often. Someone we could love and be proud of instead of...' Then, she'd trail off and stare at me."

"You don't really think she meant it, though?"

Maya smiled and shook her head. "Senior year of high school, Olivia got the lead in our school musical. And it was crazy too, she just came to me after school one day and said she'd auditioned and that she'd got the part. She wasn't even in the choir or did anything that would bring a lot of attention on her. It wasn't until after the play was over that I realized she only did it because her mother was going to be at this...conference or whatever while the play was showing.

"Anyway, I went to see every show and so did my parents, and after the last show...you should have seen them. They brought her flowers and candy and took loads of pictures. They'd even taped the last one and kept it as a keepsake. And the way they were looking at her that night...that look. Just so filled with this glowing pride and happiness...so, enamored with her. They never looked at me like that. Even after I'd graduated law school. They never once looked at me like that."

Elliot nodded slightly, hearing the hurt in her voice. "Everyone's parents do something to screw them up...My old man used to tell me I was good for nothing all the time. I'm third of four kids; three brothers, but our father acted like our sister walked on water. She would do anything she wanted and be perfectly fine, but the rest of us... Your parents don't sound like they were ever abusive though."

"Yours were?" Maya asked. When Elliot shrugged, Maya sighed and continued. "When I was little, really little, before I'd even met Livia, my mother would be teaching me how to tie my sari for the Diwali celebrations and any time I'd make a mistake, she'd just start screaming at me. She would say how stupid I was, how I was never going to be like my sisters, how she wished she'd had a miscarriage. It wasn't until I was older that I learned what a miscarriage was, and it hurt even more than when she had spat the word at me."

Maya paused, reflecting for a moment. "I'd asked Livia, when we were in the third grade, and we ended up looking it up in the dictionary, because she said *her* mother said that *she* wished *she'd* had a miscarriage too, but neither of us knew what it was. It just seemed like common sense to know...I think that was the moment Livia became more than just a best friend for me. Even though, I knew my parents cherished her and thought the world of her, far more than they ever could me, we...sometimes, she got it."

"Sometimes? You say that like you think Liv never really understood you."

"Oh, she understood. If there was anybody in the world who understood it was Livia."

"So why 'sometimes?'" he pressed. "From what I know about the two of you, you were two peas in a pod growing up."

"Because *sometimes* Livia acted like my older sisters. It was when she got that exasperated look that said she was annoyed with having me around. But, then there were other times when she did things just like I would've and those were the times when I knew she got it."

"Like when?"

She set down her magazine and gave Elliot her full attention. "When we were kids, just like sixteen, she was dating this older guy. I think he was one of her mom's students. So, she calls me this one day, *so* excited. David, that was his name. David wanted to get married and she was just so excited to be going, leaving. And, I'm listening to her go on and on about him and I felt really bad because then I had to ask the question: 'What are you going to tell your mom?'"

"And she was quiet for a really long time before saying that she didn't know and then changed the subject. But, later that night, she shows up at my house and she's really upset. I can tell she'd be crying the whole walk over. And, she's crying and telling me that she just needed to get away. That's all she kept saying. She had to get out, she had to get away. And so...we left. We got in my car and just started driving. We didn't have any idea where we were going, but we just drove. When it was like 3am, I just pulled over and made her tell me what happened."

"What had happened?"

Maya paused a moment staring at the floor, as if playing the memory of that night in her head. "She said she hurt her mom when she told her about David and that she didn't know what she was going to do."

"What'd you end up doing?"

"We drove around for a little bit more before we found this Bates-looking motel off Route 9. We stayed the night there and we started saying the craziest things. Like, what would happen if we just kept going. Just kept driving until we got to Canada. How we could start new lives away from our families and just...be." She paused and swallowed. "But...eventually my parents reported their credit card and their car stolen and

we had no choice, but to go back home. I think my parents would have probably murdered me if Olivia hadn't been there. She ended up staying with us for two weeks after that. I didn't even know what to say when her mother showed up. She was just standing there in the doorway and she had this look on her face like she was just...like she was just...a neighbor picking up some mail we'd been holding or something.

"I...I know it's not right to speak badly about the dead, but I never cared for Ms. Serena. I realized that when she showed up that night. I mean, if *my* daughter had been gone for two weeks, I'd be out of my mind worrying about her. Plus, after everything that had happened with David... Ms. Serena looked *rested*...like she didn't even care. And she and my mother used to get along so well, too. When Livia went back to her mother's house, my mother acted like Livia had just spent the night like she did when we were little. She and Ms. Serena both laughed and acted like everything was fine."

"Did your mother know what had happened?"

"Not the specifics. But, would your parents have been perfectly fine if one of your friends just started *living* at your house, without a call or anything from *their* parents?" Maya sighed. "I think that might be half the reason why I don't want children of my own. Aside from these crazy genes I'd be passing onto them, I wouldn't want to make the same mistakes my parents and other people make."

Elliot simply stared at her.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing...it's just that you Olivia are so similar at times."

Maya shrugged. "We used to get that a lot when we were younger. Especially during the summer. But in my mind the thing that separates us most is that at the end of the day, Livia loved her mother, but I...I still hate mine and I'll hate her in her grave, too."

Silence fell upon them, broken only by the sounds of the many machines monitoring Olivia's signs of life.

"Well," Maya said standing and gathering her things. She brushed away a tear that was attempting to escape from her eye. "I actually have work to do believe it or not."

"*You* have work to do," Elliot said with a smile. "Get outta here!"

"Yeah, every once in a while I pretend like I'm an actual lawyer and I need to check on a few other clients before they wise up and get better attorneys. See you around, Elliot."

Elliot gave her nod to signify goodbye and let his gaze fall upon Olivia, willing her to wake up before he had to go face the world again.

When he left for the night, he tipped the nurses at the station and gave them a list of names.

"If anyone comes by to see her who's not on the list," he said. "I need you to call me at this number immediately."

The floor nurse tacked the list on a bulletin board and gave him a small smile as he turned to leave the hospital.

Saturday February 24, 2007
2:07AM

A quiet lull fell over the fourth floor in an odd shift from previous early Saturday morning hours. Normally, the hospital buzzed with victims suffering with anything from alcohol poisoning to life-threatening gunshot wounds and the noise would filter upward to cause a stir on the higher floors, however no such bedlam was present.

Danica Rodgers sighed as she mulled over the large textbook that sat on the desk in front of her. She had been playing with the idea of taking the nurse practitioner's exam for years, but for one reason or another, had somehow talked herself out of doing it. With her recent night shifts taking a toll on her sleep, she had begun doubting whether or not she should even bother studying for the imminent exam.

The midnight shifts always seemed longest as they tended to drag on endlessly. Danica would find herself organizing files, taking a moment to stare at the clock, working on something else, and looking back at the clock only to see that just one minute had passed since the last time she had looked. The recent quiet made the boredom even worse and she stood quickly hoping to get her blood pumping enough to keep sleep at bay.

She had not had a dull moment in the past few days due to the most recent inhabitant of Room 108, one Olivia Benson. Danica had seen Olivia on the news and was mildly interested in her well being as it seemed she had gone through hell just to land in a coma weeks later, but the newness of the patient wore off quickly, even with the constant stream of visitors and especially cops.

Never had so many officers called or visited the floor in regards to one patient and Danica wished for another visit from one of them to break the monotony. Several days earlier they had witnessed quite the stir when a man from one of the wealthier families in the city came to visit Room 108 and fell into such a blaze of grief that he screamed himself into a panic and had to be admitted to the hospital.

Outside of him, a series of people from all walks of life had come by to see the patient. One of her favorites was the blue-eyed detective who came every day for hours at a time. He would always speak to her and the other nurses in a soft, but earnest voice, constantly wanting to be notified of the slightest change in the patient. Danica had half a mind to "accidentally" cause a problem with an IV just to get him to return when she wanted him.

A younger LPN, Sharisse McPhillips, came around the corner, having finished her set of rounds, and stepped into the semi-circle that created the nurse's station.

"They released that Holloway guy," Sharisse said as she flopped into the chair next to her.

"That's too bad, Danica said.

"He's dating that lady from 108, right?"

Danica nodded. "Yup. It figures too. He's rich and attractive, but he'll probably spend the rest of his life at her bed side while the rest of us go without a man."

"You just keep trying," Sharisse laughed. "You never know. I think I saw a movie not too long ago about something like that. The rich guy kept coming to see his wife who was a vegetable and then fell in love with either the nurse or the doctor. I think the wife eventually woke up though and caused a whole lotta drama."

"It figures. That's what would happen to me too."

"There's always Detective Pretty-Eyes to fall back on," Sharisse teased.

Danica fell into a fit of giggles. "You are too much, you know that?"

A light flashed just once on the display before her. It was not indicative of anything significant, but Danica rose to check in on Room 108 nonetheless. She turned on lights in the room, making its occupant appear ghostly pale at once and set upon checking the assorted monitors near the bed.

Having checked that each of Olivia Benson's vital signs appeared normal, Danica turned to leave, but a twitch of movement caught her eye as she did. She stood still, staring intently at the woman on the bed, waiting to see if there was another movement, but after several minutes of seeing nothing, she sighed and headed for the door.

Danica began to pull the door closed, but paused just before her foot had exited the room.

Did that sound just come from her? she thought.

She stepped back into the room and walked toward the bed, eyes furrowed, but fixed on Olivia. Five minutes went by without any other sound or movement and she soon heard Sharisse calling for her.

"Something wrong?" Sharisse said entering the room.

"Look at her," Danica said. "Tell me if you see her moving."

They stood silent for another minute before Sharisse rolled her eyes.

"I don't see anything. Besides, I heard her doctor the other day. They don't expect her to ever wake up."

"She's not brain dead."

"But, she'd be conscious by now if she was going to wake up. They don't even know what's wrong with her."

"I guess. It's just that I thought I saw her move."

"Wishful thinking. You and that one cop."

They left the room together and within an hour they had settled into a game of Hearts with two of the other nurses on the floor.

"How the hell did you just Shoot the Moon like that?" Kyle Sampson said hitting his hand on the counter.

"Just got it like that," Danica said smiling.

No sooner had the words left her mouth that the control panel to the right of the group lit several flashing lights and an alarm erupted from it.

All four rushed down the hall to Room 108, where its sole occupant tossed and convulsed in the narrow bed.

"It's another seizure," Kyle said trying to set her back against the bed.

"Careful!" Sharisse said. "She's torn the bandage on her side. She's already bleeding."

They each held her steady, but the convulsions grew worse coming in waves and hit an event horizon when her body contracted at the waist and burst to life. Brown eyes, red with burst blood vessels, flashed open at the same time her mouth gaped to emit a piercing sound that caught Sharisse so off guard that she released the struggling arm she had been holding only to be hit in the face as the cast-encircled arm quavered free.

An alarm blared almost as loud as the shriek, amplified by the ringing and beeps from the surrounding machines, and Danica, still holding on for dear life and yelling out for the doctors on call, closed her eyes as Olivia Benson screamed into the night.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Saturday February 24, 2007
Mercy General Hospital East

For the second time in so many days, Elliot found himself speeding up 3rd Avenue, passing cars as if they were standing still. He had received Maya's phone call in the middle of the night while he lay asleep on the old couch on which Kathy had set a pillow and blanket for him, and he left a quick note on the kitchen table to explain his hasty disappearance as he dashed out of the house.

When he reached the hospital, it was all he could do to keep from breaking into a sprint down the corridors. He had already run up the stairs having no patience to wait for the elevators at such a time.

It was far past visiting hours in the hospital, but between the NYPD and the generous donations made by Jonathan Hallows, his mother, sister and older brothers, those who had made Elliot's list were free to visit Room 108 at any time of night.

Elliot rushed into the room to find Olivia, still unconscious though she looked far better, and Maya sitting in the chair next to the bed reading a copy of Jane. She broke into a smile when stepped into the room breathing hard.

"Sixteen minutes from Queens," she said, eyebrows high. "That's got to be a record."

"Not a chance," Elliot said with a smile. "I know I broke that getting here last week."

He sat down in the chair beside her.

"They've got her sedated," Maya said knowing the question ready to spring from his lips. "Her doctor thinks that she'll be awake in a little while."

"But she woke up?"

Maya's smile faded. "Yeah, her nurses say that she was...um...screaming. And, it took them...you know...a while to calm her down." She sighed, shook her head and reopened her Jane as if it was her defense mechanism against the rest of her reality. "But, she should be awake in a few hours."

"You mind if I just sit here with you?"

"Please," she says smiling and removing her purse from the chair next to her. "I know she'll want to see you when she wakes up again."

He stared at Olivia, willing her to open her eyes; just to look at him and let him know everything in his life would be all right.

Maya glanced at him and lets out small chuckle. "I've already tried that Detective, and it doesn't work."

"What's that?" Elliot said in a bit of daze.

"Willing her to wake up." She smiled and turned the page of her magazine. "I'd been trying for over an hour before I gave up and figured I'd just wait her out."

"She's stubborn."

"You have no idea."

They both went silent for a moment.

"You don't you have to be working right now?" Maya asked not looking up from her magazine.

"Not at the moment. Technically speaking, I'm still on some kind of suspension in regards to the deputy inspector."

Her eyes met his, sincerity flowing in her face. "I'm so sorry. Look, if it had anything to do with what I said, I-"

"No," Elliot said shaking his head. "I lost my temper and I picked the fight with Olivia." He paused. "Nothing you said had anything to do with it."

"Don't lie to me, Elliot. I know it sounded very bad and I know Jillian and Jonathan didn't help any."

"What happened to me isn't your fault. It's me. Any of this that's affected my career is all on me." He sighed and ran a hand over his head. "I can't believe we even fought like that."

"Hey," Maya said. "I know the both of you. It was only a matter of time. The tension that I'd been hearing about...you two were either going to screw or throw down. Unfortunately, you chose the latter. Next time...just choose better."

She smiled at him and he could not resist returning it as his face grew warm at her suggestion.

"You've really known Liv since kindergarten?" he asked changing the subject.

She nodded returning her magazine. "Yup. Livia's been a part of every major moment of my life."

"Why do you call her Livia?"

Maya simply raised her eyebrows in his direction having not understood his question.

"You call her Livia," he said. "Not Liv or Olivia. Always Livia. What's with that?"

Maya smiled and set down her Jane again. "I told you, *Livia* and I met way back in kindergarten...."

"And...."

"Well, when I asked her what her name was....I didn't hear the "O." She said her name was Livia Benson. By the time, I finally figured it out, the "O" had fallen off and Livia just stuck with me."

"Yeah, but I've never heard anyone else call her that."

"I know," Maya said smiling. "Maybe when you've known Livia for thirty years, she'll let you call her by some random nickname that no one else does, too."

Elliot smiled while silence settled between the pair of them, marred every few moments by the hums and beeps of the several machines that hooked into Olivia.

Elliot sighed and felt his eyes begin to grow heavy.

She woke up.

Just the thought that she was not going to lie comatose in the room for the rest of her life took a weight off him and suddenly he felt the fatigue of the past few weeks pressing against.

"What's with you and your mother?" he asked quickly. If he could just keep talking, he could stay awake. He needed to be awake when Olivia was regained consciousness.

"She hates me and I hate her."

"Something must've happened though."

"I was born." Maya sighed when Elliot stared at her, pressing for more information. "I'm the youngest of five and when I say youngest, I mean *youngest* of five."

"How big is the age gap?"

"Let's see... My oldest sister, Lavanya, just turned fifty-eight and she doesn't like me either. My oldest brother, Rajesh, is fifty-six and Jaidev and Priyani are twins and they are fifty-four."

"That's a helluva gap. Are you close to any of them?"

"My sister Priyani calls every once in a while and Jaidev and his wife still live in the city, so we see each other kind of often, but I honestly haven't talked to Lavanya in at least ten years and could've gone without talking to my mother until she was dead if all this hadn't happened with Livia."

Elliot shook his head. "My father and I didn't have the greatest relationship when I was coming up, but I could never say I hated him like that at any point."

"Then you had better parents than me. Once *Mātā* goes, I'll be throwing myself a little party."

"Well as much she seems to love Olivia, I'm sure *she'd* be upset."

Maya set down her magazine and stared at Olivia for a long time before replying.

"Okay, but that's because..."

Olivia's listless form had not stirred in several hours, but the other occupants in her room laughed animatedly having shared stories about their experiences with said patient over the years.

"...so finally, Livia comes out," Maya laughed. "And at first, me and Jillian don't even notice 'cause we're both just admiring our own gowns and how *not* ugly they were. And I'm telling you, I'd've worn that dress at any occasion. It was just that fabulous."

"So, Liv has good taste in bridesmaid gowns?"

"Flawless," Maya says using her hands to express her opinion. "But, yeah. The dresses were perfect and we're just admiring ourselves in the mirrors, when I see something white out the corner of my eye."

" 'Bout time." Elliot laughed again.

"Seriously! So, I turn around and...my jaw drops. She looked like an angel. Absolutely gorgeous. You wouldn't've believed it. I mean the dress was this really, really beautiful Ralph Lauren and the veil...I mean it was just perfect."

Elliot nodded and tried to brush away the image of his partner literally glowing in a bridal gown.

"So, we help her up onto the pedestal thingy and me, Jill, the seamstress...we all just take a step back and just start smiling because she looked so great in this dress. And, I'm starting to tear up myself 'cause I'm remembering, you know, swinging on the swings at the playground and getting dressed up for our first school dance and stuff and Jillian was just standing there crying her eyes out."

Elliot smiles at the image that played in his head. The only images of Jillian Harfort he had were of her screaming and pointing at him like he was a criminal. It was

amusing to think of her in her twenties before the weight of the world began to pound upon her.

"So, we're standing there looking at her like, 'Wow! Livia, you look perfect!' and she turns around so that she can see herself in the full-length mirror. And, it was like this...second of...I don't know silence or something right before the storm because she's standing there, and at first she's smiling...but then her smiles fades and...Elliot, I swear to you, I've never seen someone turn colours that fast in my life."

"So what happened?" Elliot asked.

"Literally, all the colour starting from her forehead just drains out of her face. And, all of a sudden, she's nearly as white as the damn dress. So, I'm like, 'Livia? Are you okay?' And then, her eyes just sort of roll back her in head and down she went."

"You're kidding?"

"I wish I were. She just passed out, right there. Thank God the seamstress had seen it happen before because she was right on the ball and got to Livia before she hit the floor. So, when she grabs her, I'm standing there in shock and Jillian's just freaking out. And the worst part was, she wouldn't wake up. So, then we're at the hospital, in the bridesmaid's gowns, Livia still in her wedding dress. I'm starting to freak out 'cause it's been hours at this point and one of the doctor's had to give Jillian something because her nerves had already hit the breaking point...and then, Livia just wakes up and sits up smiling, like nothing had happened."

Elliot laughed, but when his eyes saw Olivia's still sedated form, the smile faded quickly.

"And I'm like, 'Livia! You totally just passed out in the bridal shop!' And she's looking around like she can't remember what went down. Then, I figure what hit her on that stand, came back to her because all the colour left her face again."

"What made her pass out like that?"

Maya shrugged, but answered anyway. "Later, when it was just the two of us she told me...She said she saw herself in that dress and then she could see herself in front of the minister who was going on about forever and she said she just lost it."

"Wow," Elliot said. "I just can't see Liv just passing out like that."

"You're telling me. I mean it was nearly fifteen years ago, but I've known her forever, and I'd never seen her do anything like that. Anyway, so then she tells me she just doesn't think she can marry Jason."

"Eight days before the wedding?"

"I know, it was awful. So, I'm telling her to just think about it and sleep on it before she did anything drastic. And you can just imagine the kind of state she was in. I mean she was asking *me* for advice."

"Yeah, I'd say she'd have to be pretty damn desperate at that point."

Maya rolled her eyes and smiled. "So, I leave and I call her to meet her for lunch the next day, but she doesn't answer the phone. I call her partner at that time, and he says she's taking a sick day."

"Olivia?"

"Exactly! So, I'm over to her apartment in like twenty minutes. I'm double parked and banging on her door. When she finally opens it, she's a mess. I mean she looked so pitiful and you could just tell she'd been crying all night. And that's when she tells me she broke it off with Jason the night before."

"Wow..."

"Yeah, it was nothing short of a disaster. I mean, it was a week before the wedding. Dresses had been made, flowers ordered, gifts bought, the venue saved. Oh, and they'd already got their license, like three days before."

"Good God," Elliot said shaking his head.

"Exactly. It was an absolute disaster."

"So, what was the problem? She just didn't want to get married?"

"Well, the way *I* understand it, Jason just wasn't the one. All she was saying was how she kept envisioning herself married to Jason, and the thought of it made her ill...literally. She said she just couldn't marry him, when she knew he wasn't the one."

"If he wasn't the one, then why even accept the ring?"

Maya shrugged. "Hey, I don't know! This was her madness not mine."

"Yeah, but she had to've said *something* about it."

"Look, all I know is that if a nice guy got down on one knee and offered me a ring, I probably would've accepted too."

"Without even thinking about it?"

"Well, you tell me," Maya began. "Think about when you proposed to your wife and tell me what you would've done if she sat there and *thought about it*."

Elliot stared at the floor. He figured that Maya had been so caught up in her story that she had forgotten the state of his marriage, but the words still stung.

Years ago, he had not really proposed to Kathy; it was more Kathy coming to him and saying that she was pregnant. He did what he thought was the right thing, but Elliot could not help wondering if Kathy was just like Olivia; accepting a proposal just because it was offered.

As Maya went on to tell him about the aftermath of the engagement, a question ripped through his mind: How different would his life had been if Kathy *had* thought about it?

That night, he spent the evening with his family until his children all ran out of the house to be with their respective friends, and he and Kathy sat on the couch watching television.

"How is she?" Kathy said lowering the volume.

They had dodged the subject throughout dinner, but Elliot could by the look in Kathy's eyes that she pressed the question out of her own curiosity, not only for their children's mental well being.

He shrugged. "Hasn't woken back up yet."

"But, was she talking when she did?"

"They just said she was screaming."

"Screaming?" she said eyes wide. "That can't be good."

"Seriously..."

Sensing that he did not want to continue with the subject, Kathy reached for the remote control, but Elliot batted her hand lightly toward the couch.

"Let me ask you something, Kath," he said. "What was it that made you say yes?"

"I don't understand."

"When I asked you to marry me...why'd you say yes? Was it just because you were pregnant with Maureen?"

"No, Elliot," she said softly. "I said yes because I loved you...like I still do."

He sighed. "Then, how'd we get here? Why can't we just sit here and be together waiting to bust the kids for missing their curfew just like old times?"

Kathy swallowed and shifted on the couch. "Because...Elliot, we're not the same people we were twenty years ago."

Nodding, he stood to leave, but Kathy quickly jumped off the couch with him.

"You can still stay, Elliot. You can just... You could just stay and come to church with us all in the morning. It would reduce the fight for the front seat for a day, at least."

"No," he said. "Not tonight. I'll see you at church in the morning, though. 'Kay?"

He left the house briskly, hoping she would not see the longing in his eyes and for just a moment, as he pulled out of his parking space, he mildly wished that Kathy had "thought about it" so many years earlier.

Sunday February 25, 2007

2:10PM

Elliot found the church service with his family fairly pleasant, though he could not bring himself to utter one word to Kathy given their conversation the previous night. He had not slept at all and though he suffered no new nightmares, his brain whirled with thoughts of many "what-ifs."

At church, they had lit candles together for Olivia and he even went to confession before making the drive to the hospital.

When he checked the visitor's log for Olivia's room, he noticed with a frown that Jonathan had stopped by after he and Maya had left the night and had stayed well into the morning hours.

"He slept in there," a bright-eyed nurse said. She wore a nameplate that read "Danica" on it and was dressed in the same pink scrubs as the rest of the nurses. "Is that Mr. Holloway you're looking at on the sheet?"

"Yeah," he said. "How'd he sleep in there?"

She shrugged. "We brought him another chair and a blanket from another room and he just made it work."

"Thanks," he said with a nod.

"No problem," she said bouncing on her toes and he headed for Olivia's room.

Maya sat next to Olivia's bed with what looked like a legal brief sitting on her lap and smiled at Elliot as he walked through the door.

"You missed Jonathan," she said. "It was so cute. He was wrapped up in a little blanket and was holding her hand when I got here early this morning."

"Yeah, the nurse said he slept here."

"Speaking of sleep, it doesn't look like you've had much of it."

"No, I haven't. Kathy and I... I don't know. You mind if I sit?"

"Course not," she said. "You don't have to ask me. She's your friend too. In fact... why don't you just stay? I'm in serious need of coffee and probably another shower. I've been up since about four. I really couldn't sleep either."

She left giving him a nod on her way out the door, and Elliot staring at Olivia, willing her to wake once more.

Minutes ticked by and every once in a while she would stir slightly or he could see her eyes moving behind her closed lids, but she did not wake.

As lay beside him, guilt weighed on his heart, clenching with every beat. Perhaps if he had done something, none of this would have happened. Maybe if he had stayed with her a little longer, Morse's tape would have caught what happened to her. Maybe if he just tried talking to her a little longer, the perp would have never snatched her. Maybe if he had been able to control his rage and had not gone to her apartment that night, nothing would have happened.

Elliot closed his eyes as he felt tears brimming and hoped that Jonathan was as far from the hospital as possible. Just when he had resolved himself to another day of wondering if Olivia would ever wake again, she stirred in the bed and a moan purred from her throat.

His eyes were fixed on her face, as he sat silent and still. By the time her eyes fluttered and slowly opened, the tears he had been withholding had slid down in his face.

With her eyes half open, Olivia blinked twice at the figure before her, trying to make the picture come into focus. She took in the taupe walls of her surroundings and noticed immediately that something drastic had changed. The rank odor of death seemed far away and she knew that he was nowhere near her.

She attempted to blink the blurriness from her eyes to no avail and took to making sense of every faculty.

What's that? Oh, that's just my finger.

What's this? It must be some kind of cast.

What are these? Some kind of tubes in my arm?

What's that noise? Sounds like a heart monitor.

Is that a blanket? It feels soft, so it must be.

Dear God...I'm hungry...

Olivia blinked around the room once more and shook slightly as she tried to force air out of her mouth.

"Heh...lo?" she breathed with a deep raspy voice that did not sound familiar.

"Liv?" the figure before her said.

The beeps of the heart monitor chimed in time with her own racing heartbeat as her eyes widened momentarily in fear.

He found me! No! I can't take anymore! But, no...this sounded different...better...good.

She took a deep breath and allowed her eyes to finally focus on the person in front of her.

"El-liot?"

He grinned from ear to ear. "Olivia. Yeah, it's me."

"Where...am I?"

"Mercy East."

"How...how..." She tried to form words, but her eyes fluttered and it soon grew difficult to remember what it was she wanted to say. Elliot stared at her intently and she

tried again, but when she could not force the air through her throat or make the muscles of her larynx contract properly, tears formed in her eyes and she whimpered instead.

"It's okay, Liv," Elliot said softly taking her bare hand into his. "It's okay."

Tears fell from her eyes for another minute, before she became silent and fell unconscious once more.

His heart pounded so hard he put a hand to his chest as if trying to keep it from bursting from his ribcage and he leaned in the chair to make himself more comfortable, never once releasing her hand. She had finally awakened; even said his name and he prepared himself to sit there for the rest of the night simply waiting for her to wake once more.

Elliot flipped through another page in the magazine that lay open on his lap. His right hand grasped Olivia's left and in the past several hours, while she did not wake again, he was comforted by the fact that her fingers would squeeze closed around his thumb every once in a while.

Jonathan and Maya sat next to one another on the other side of the bed speaking softly. When he had returned to the room, Jonathan simply stared at Elliot, his eyes narrowing upon noticing that Elliot held Olivia's hand tightly. Elliot returned the glare, but refused to let go. Thankfully, Maya came several intense minutes after Jonathan and broke some of the tension with her light-hearted chatter about how even the city seemed brighter since Olivia had awakened. Afterward, she and Jonathan fell into light conversation about summer plans.

"...yeah, they're almost done with the new room," Jonathan said to Maya mid-conversation. "The whole thing will be done by summer, hopefully. We should all go up and get away for a while in maybe August. By then, Liv will be running with the best of them again and you can bring...whoever you're hanging with at the time."

Maya gave him a playful slap. "It'll be Amit. Definitely Amit."

"Finally thinking about settling down, are you?"

"I think my own near-death experience with one Mrs. Garriston has taught me a lot about married men...like staying away from them."

"Is this the one who was supposed to leave his wife?"

"Well, they all say they're going to leave their wives, but this one actually started to do it and nearly got me strangled in the process."

Jonathan laughed. "Have you talked to him since?"

"Nope, nor do I aim to-"

Maya stopped mid-sentence as Olivia stirred in her sleep again and turned as her eyes opened.

"Hel-lo?" she said, again in the raspy voice.

Maya and Jonathan flew towards the bed and Elliot leaned in close to her, her hand still within his.

"Liv?" he said. "We're here."

"WhamI?" Her words came together in a raspy slur.

"You're at Mercy General Hospital," Jonathan said before Elliot could respond. "On the East Side."

Olivia nodded slightly, her mouth gaping.

“Jonphan...?”

“Yeah, it’s me.” He leaned over and touched her face, eliciting a small smile from her mouth.

“Han’t seeu ‘na wall.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ve missed you.”

She smiled again, but it faded quickly as her eyes slid out of focus. “WhamI?”

“Mercy Hospital,” Jonathan said glancing at Elliot.

Olivia nodded. “Myh?”

“Livia...,” Maya said in a sing song voice bringing an even brighter smile on Olivia’s face. “I’m here.”

“Wuz mah han?”

“You’re right here, Liv,” Elliot said squeezing her hand tighter as he spoke. “I’ve got you.”

“El-lit... WhamI?”

Elliot suppressed a sigh as the smile that had been on Maya’s face since Olivia woke slowly faded. “You’re at the hospital, Olivia. Mercy General Hospital.”

“N-tha easside?”

“Yes, Liv on the East Side.”

“Jonphan?”

“Right here Liv.”

“M’sorry...”

He burst into tears for a moment, but wiped them away smiling. “I’m just so glad you’re here, Olivia.”

He bent over the bed and kissed her on the cheek, creating another smile.

“Jonphan...”

“Yes.”

“WhamI?”

Elliot and Maya exchanged glances as Dr. Haddley quietly stepped into the room. Jonathan rubbed her other arm as he pulled his chair right next to the bed.

“You’re at Mercy General Hospital East, Olivia,” he said very slowly. “You’re on the East Side of Manhattan. In the upper nineties.”

“Hos-til...”

“Yes, you’re at the hospital.

“Ow...ow...get...”

Jonathan looked at Elliot, urging him to respond. He sat for a moment with his mouth agape, unsure of what to say. Of all the questions he had been prepared to answer, “How did I get here?” was not one of them.

“Liv, it’s Elliot,” he said softly. “You were outside. Do you remember?”

“Ow-sye...? ’M n’sye n’ow...”

“Yeah, but before,” Elliot continued. “Can you remember anything?”

“S’dawk...” Olivia mumbled, but before Elliot could ask another question the grasp by which she held onto his hand grew weak and her eyes rolled back in her head as fell back against her pillows.

“Is she gonna be okay?” Maya asked Dr. Haddley as she approached the bed.

"This'll probably continue for another day," she said. "It takes a while for patients to stay awake for much longer than a few minutes at a time when they come out of a coma, especially when they've undergone so much trauma."

"She remembered all of us," Maya said. "That's got to be good, right?"

"But, she keeps asking the same questions," Jonathan said staring at Olivia. "Or is something like that to be expected?"

"She's still trying to get her bearings. She's been unconscious for more than a week, not to mention whatever else she might have endured prior to getting here. When she's able to stay conscious for a little longer we should be able to see the extent...of the damage?"

"Damage?" Maya asked.

Dr. Haddley pursed her lips. "Her MRI did not show anything severe, but she sustained a concussion and we won't be able to see how badly she was hurt until she can stay awake for an extended period of time."

"What kind of damage, though?" Maya pressed. "Her voice is a little slurred now, but half of that's probably just painkillers, right? I mean, she recognizes all our voices, and she seems to know who she is. I mean, yeah, she's asking the same questions over and over, but she'll be fine, right?"

"We'll have to wait and see," the doctor said, the lines on her face looking deeper than ever. "The next step is to have her see a neurologist once she can stay awake, but it's good that you're here to talk to her. That way she remains stimulated and any injuries she might've suffered won't be aggravated."

She left a short while later after giving each of them her cell and pager numbers and urging at least one of them to stay with Olivia in case she woke up again. As Elliot had not released her hand in several hours and made no motions to do so, Jonathan stood with Maya, who said she needed something to eat before she collapsed from hunger. Before he left, he stared at Elliot with an expression infused with anger, sadness and sympathy.

"I trust you'll be here all night?" he said.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Well...good," Jonathan said. "I wouldn't want her to wake up again and be all alone. C'mon Maya. I'll get us something to eat and then I'll have them bring up a cot or something..."

They left and Elliot sighed as he picked up the magazine he had thrown aside when Olivia last woke and began reading the first article for the third time.

An hour later, Olivia stirred again. At first, Elliot had not noticed, having dozed off in his chair without the murmurs coming from Maya and Jonathan in the room.

"El-liot," she breathed and he jerked awake.

"Hey," he said. "How you feeling?"

She nodded, her eyes falling half-closed momentarily. "How...did I get...here?"

Her voice was still deep and dry, but her words had all but stopped slurring. Elliot stared at her for a long time as he still had not come up with a valid answer since she first posed the question.

"You were...It looks like you were taken from your apartment."

"I...I...what?" She rolled her head from side to side and whimpered like she was about to cry.

"It's okay," Elliot said. "Just rest okay."

Olivia shook her head, trying to shake the daze out of her head.

"I was...I was in a building..."

Elliot's ears immediately perked up and he moved closer to her. He did not have a pad or pen with him, but he was intent on remembering everything she was going to say.

"Do you remember where?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Som-," she swallowed painfully, taking a breath every few words. "Someone was there...He was there...He pushed the thing and...he had...the gun...Then he was...chasing me."

"Chasing you?" His eyes furrowed in disbelief.

"Broke my leg...", she said through a sob. "And... he was chasing... I had to run."

She was trying to run on her broken leg, Elliot thought. No wonder her leg had nearly shattered.

"There were...there were others..."

"Where?" Elliot said intently. "Were they with you?"

"Mmm...other women...Amy tried...I couldn't...I couldn't...help..." Her eyes rolled in her head and her breath began coming in gasps.

"It's okay, Liv," he said as he took her hand in his. "You're okay. Just stay calm."

However, her breathing increased in pace and her cheeks were flushed. Her heart monitor was raced.

"P-pain..."

"Something for pain?" Elliot said, his own heart beat beginning to pick up pace.

She nodded slightly, repeating "arm" and he was up a moment later.

"I'm gonna grab your doctor, Liv," he said. "I'll be right back."

The doctor on the floor adjusted several of her IVs and gave her a sedative.

"She'll probably be out again in a few minutes," she said. "I've given her a couple inflammatories. It's hard to tell how much pain someone would be in with so many broken bones."

A few minutes after the doctor had left, Olivia began to calm as the sedative began to take effect.

"Ow long've I been gone, El?" she said her words slurring again.

"We found you nine days ago...it had been nearly three weeks."

"Three weeks? Ohmagod..."

"It's okay, Liv," he said taking her hand again.

"Okay?" she said as her eyebrows furrowed. "W-when?"

"That Tuesday. Do you remember? That night I was at your place?"

She nodded, but Elliot could barely bring his eyes to meet hers. He had said and done so many things that night that he could not fathom an apology grand enough to encompass everything.

"Elliot," she breathed. "That...that was..."

But it what it was, Elliot did not hear as the sedative and pain medicine finally took hold of Olivia and she fell back asleep.

He took a deep breath and just rubbed her hand between both of his, in a state of disbelief. Fatigue bore on his mind and he wanted nothing more than to sleep for days

straight. Instead, he remained next to her, eventually taking her hand against his cheek as he rested his head on her bed and allowed his eyes to fall closed.

Monday February 26, 2007
Mercy General Hospital East
2:19AM

Olivia stirred against her drug-induced slumber and allowed her eyes to flutter open as a dull pain shot across her arm and shoulders. She sighed as she shifted slightly against the starched sheets and blinked around the room as she tried to remember where she was.

Hospital...Mercy East...Got it.

She looked to her left and smiled at the sight of Elliot with his mouth hanging open as he slept with his head resting next to her hand. To her right, Jonathan and Maya slept propped up against one another on a small cot and covered with a thin blanket. She swallowed, overwhelmed with thirst, but did not wake any of them, not knowing how long they had each been asleep near her and settled deeper into her pillows instead, content with the fact that the three most important people in her life slept within an arm's reach.

It was still dark outside and the air had the brisk feeling of the early morning. She knew the early mornings well having been awakened at two or three o'clock in the morning many times previously.

As her eyes darted about the room, one question rolled in her mind: What had happened to her?

The last thing she remembered was falling and something with black letters that read "Absolut," but other than that, everything was a blur of colour.

Olivia searched her memory for a summary of her most recent thoughts, but could only catch fragments. There was definitely a man to be feared, but she sensed he was not near. The name "Amy" had a meaning, but she could not remember in what capacity and she suddenly felt nauseated with the flashing memory of gaunt faces staring back her in the dark.

Shifting again in the bed, she noticed the casts on her arm, fingers and both of her legs, and did a quick inventory of the pain.

Left hand...clenched with Elliot's, but okay.

Right hand...Jesus that hurts, but still okay.

Left foot...left foot...

Olivia stared at a lump under her covers where she knew her left foot distended from the bed, but an odd feeling rested in her lower extremities rather than pain... nothing.

She pulled her hand from Elliot's and tried to sit up in the bed. Her body, weak from days of without use, did not obey the command, but even as she attempted to move, she felt nothing. No shift of the covers against her legs; no feel of the hospital gown moving across her thigh; no vibration of the sheet as she tugged it against her foot. Her legs were there, but were not at the same time.

Her breath caught as she focused every thought at moving her left foot, but it did not twitch. Panic set in and her hands began to shake as her breathing became erratic.

Again, she set her mind on her feet and visualized them twitching, thinking that the nerves must only have been asleep. She had the ability to move them; she knew it, yet try as she might, not the slightest movement could be seen under the blankets.

Oh, God! What's wrong? Move. Move! Oh, God! Oh, God!

"Help!" she finally screamed allowed jolting Elliot, Maya and Jonathan from their sides of the bed.

"Liv?" Elliot said standing immediately.

"Oh God! Oh God! Please help me!" she shrieked. "I can't move. I can't *move*! Oh Christ! Please! Someone help!"

Jonathan ran out of the room for the nurse's station and Maya stood away from the bed, shaking her head with tears streaming down her face. Elliot snatched Olivia's quavering hand and held it tight as she continued yelling.

"I can't move! Elliot, please help me! Something's wrong. I can't move my legs! I can't move anything! Please help me!"

"Liv," Elliot said trying to remain calm. "Just focus, okay? Focus on moving your foot."

"I CAN'T!"

Her face had turned red as every part of her body above the waist twisted in the bed as she screamed and cried.

"Just focus, Olivia!" he yelled. "Move your foot! Just twitch."

"No, I can't! Nothing's moving. I can't feel anything! Anything! Help me please! I can't move! Why can't I move!"

Jonathan ran back into the room dragging a young doctor by the coat collar. "Do something!"

The doctor called for several other nurses who pushed Elliot and Maya out of the way as Olivia dissolved into hysterical screams. They administered a sedative and Olivia stopped shaking almost immediately, but could not stop the flow of tears.

"Please help me..." she whispered, dark eyes wet.

Maya sobbed in the doorway as Jonathan stood with both hands tangled in his hair. Elliot had a hand over his mouth, his body shaking as the nurses spoke to Olivia in soft voices trying to calm her.

Five minutes had passed before Olivia's gasps had slowed to simply a steady stream of tears and the doctor pulled out what looked like the blunt end of a letter opener.

"Olivia," he said softly as he lifted the blankets from over her feet. "I'm going to touch your feet. Okay? I just want you to tell me if you feel anything at all? Even if it's just pressure. Just tell me if you feel anything."

He pulled the opener in a line across the back of her foot while Olivia had arrested her crying in hopes of focusing all senses on any feeling in her feet. Her eyes met the doctor's as he ran the opener across her legs again and when he let out a stifled sigh, her face scrunched as a scream exhaled from her lungs.

Maya ran to her side as she erupted in another fit of tears and pulled her into a tight embrace as they cried together.

"The...the neurologist," the doctor said in a somber voice barely audible of Olivia and Maya's cries, "a specialist, will be here in about an hour...on your words Mr.

Halloway, but...from just an initial analysis...I think she might be paralyzed from the waist on down.”

Jonathan leaned against the wall and sank to the floor as silent tears fell from his eyes and Elliot, having already shed nearly every tear his body had to give in recent weeks, stood stoic as the sounds of crying and vibrating machines echoed about the small room.

The heater that stood paradoxically near the window in Olivia’s hospital room sprung to life just as Elliot suppressed a shiver from the under the blanket on Jonathan’s cot. When Maya had finally been retched from Olivia’s somber form, Jonathan decided to take her home to rest and Elliot had remained in the room as Olivia cried herself to sleep.

He had tried to get some rest while Olivia slept, but his brain was such a flurry of activity that the solace of sleep evaded him. To his amazement, Jonathan had sent an “assistant” to the room bearing Elliot a clean shirt and also breakfast from the cafeteria on the second floor and the gesture, along with Olivia’s condition, kept any semblance of sleep at bay.

Once Olivia had settled, he had called Cragen with the news and the captain had rushed to the hospital to see her. He and Elliot spoke in hushed voices, but woke Olivia momentarily nonetheless.

She had stared at Cragen with large eyes and asked repeatedly who he was, before her eyes slid in and out of focus and she claimed to remember, though Elliot was doubtful as she did so with watery eyes that continuously glanced at her legs as if wishing them to move.

The neurologist, a Dr. Joseph Hammond, spoke to Olivia, wearing a casual sweater and the rumpled appearance of someone who had been shaken from sleep upon request of a member of the Halloway family, but left shortly afterward as Olivia grew increasingly irritated by his presence with each passing minute.

“I don’t need a neurologist!” she had shouted. “I need a goddamn therapist to help me get the feeling back in my legs!”

Her animosity continued as Dr. Haddley later tried to explain that there were treatments available for persons in Olivia’s condition. Olivia grew so angry that she threw a cup of water at the doctor for even suggesting the she would never walk again, screaming that “this” was not going to beat her.

Dr. Haddley later pulled the three into the corridor and suggested that the neurologist would have a second look at Olivia later in the week when she had had time to accept what had happened.

“But, she’ll be fine eventually?” Maya had said with wide eyes. “I mean, she’s just kind of numb from not walking for a week, right?”

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Haddley had said. “But, I don’t want to get your hopes up. The best we can hope for at this point is for her to be able to maybe stand.”

“But, she’ll never walk again...” Jonathan said deadpan.

“I’ve seen miracles before and there’s nothing that says-”

“But, short of a miracle,” Jonathan interrupted. “You’re just trying to put it as easy as possible. Olivia’s never going to walk again...”

The doctor had gone silent at that point, eliciting a new wave of tears from Maya.

Elliot got up to stretch his legs and spoke to the morning nurses on the floor for a bit, enjoying the diversion because they reminded him of when he and Kathy were still young as she worked as a nurse at a hospital in Queens.

When he returned to the room, Olivia was tossing and turning in her sleep and he held her again as he sat in the chair next to her. She mumbled indiscernible words in her sleep and as he began sit back in the chair to attempt resting his eyes again, her grip increased on his hand and her eyes flew open.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered with tears in her eyes. “Please. I can’t be alone. He’ll come for me again.”

“I’m not leaving you, Olivia,” he said. “And, I promise you, he’s not coming back.”

“Elliot...don’t leave me.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Liv.”

She nodded and rested against her pillows again as she fell asleep.

A short while later, Jonathan stepped quietly into the room with a coffee in hand. He sat in the chair opposite Elliot and sipped the drink while he and Elliot avoided each other’s eyes.

“Where’ve you been?” Elliot asked not knowing how else to make conversation with him.

“Making some calls and visiting my church. Jillian will most likely be over here later in the day. She asked if she could bring the boys, but I told her not to... I didn’t think Liv would be up to it. Has she woken up at all since we left?”

“Once. I think she might’ve been having a nightmare.”

“A nightmare...great.” His sighed as he stared at Olivia, but his expression quickly hardened as he glared across the bed at Elliot. “Is your precinct coming any closer to finding out what happened to her?”

“I don’t have the details. I haven’t left Olivia’s side in days.”

“And, I’m sure she appreciates that,” Jonathan said. “But, eventually she’s going to want to know what happened and I’d like to have answers other than ‘Elliot’s working on it.’”

He glared silently at Jonathan for a moment. “We *are* working on it.”

“That’s nice, but when are we going to have answers. I don’t know if you’ve met Olivia, but an answer like ‘we’re working on it’ is not going to suffice while she’s coping with the fact that she probably won’t walk again.”

“I’m not taking this from you,” Elliot said slightly raising his voice. “I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in over a month because of all that’s happened. *Everything* I’ve been doing has been focused on Olivia.”

“You’re right,” Jonathan said and Elliot’s mouth fell open for a moment as he had been expecting a full argument from him. “You have done...a lot for Liv. You were the first person to know. Not me. Not Maya. You were.”

Jonathan stood and crossed the room to stare out the window. “That said...I still expect results, Detective. I’ve already told you what Olivia means to me and I’ll have to suffer right along with her as she copes with this.”

“We all will have to.”

“But, it’ll be a lot easier if we could have a face and name to prosecute as we do.” Jonathan turned and glared at him. “Just remember this. While you and I sit here hoping for the best for Liv, whoever it was that took her is still out there. Whoever snatched her from her apartment, exposed her to something that gives her seizures, starved twenty pounds out of her and then tossed her in the garbage still walks the streets and could be the next person to walk through the door. I...appreciate everything that you and the rest of your squad did while she was missing, but if I’ve understood anything she’s told me about her job, this qualifies as an SVU case and I don’t want to hear about any bull between departments and precincts keeping you from investigating her case. Since you were the first person notified, the first person she saw when she first woke up...the first person on her goddamn speed dial...I expect *you* to be the one to find out what happened to her. Understood?”

“I don’t answer to you,” Elliot said. “Even if the rest of the city does.”

“That may be true, but the time is going to come when you *will* have to answer to her. I intend to be right there when you do and I...we will accept nothing but solid answers in the upcoming weeks.”

Silence fell over them broken only by Olivia’s murmuring in her sleep and they sat in the same silence until a knock at her door signified the approach of Munch and Fin.

“Brought her some chocolate,” Munch said. “If I’d learned anything about women from my failed marriages it’s that chocolate seems to cure all ails.”

“Her diet’s strictly regulated by her doctors,” Jonathan said, arms crossed.

“It’s just chocolate,” Fin said. “If anything, it’ll lift her spirits considering...”

“I said no.”

Elliot rolled his eyes. “Well, considering that the only person who has any *legal* grounds for making decisions in Olivia’s life isn’t here right now, it’s not up to you, is it?”

Jonathan glared at Elliot, before shaking his head and sitting on the cot on the other end of the room.

“How’s she been?” Fin asked.

“It depends,” Elliot said. “Her memory’s still a little shaky and we get a different version of her personality each time she wakes up. You just missed Angry Liv a couple hours ago.”

“Seen her before,” Munch said. “And she’s not to be trifled with.”

“Her doctor’s really don’t think she’ll be able to walk again?” Fin asked, a sad concern Elliot had rarely seen etched across his face.

Elliot opened his mouth to speak when Olivia’s hand gripped his hard.

“Hello?” she said, eyes flashing open.

“Yeah, Liv,” Elliot said. “It’s still just us. Got some visitors for you though.”

Olivia glanced back and forth between Munch and Fin for a moment before shaking her head apprehensively.

“You I know,” she said pointing at Fin and then looked at Munch. “But, I’ve never seen you before.”

Munch smiled weakly and stretched out a hand toward her. “John Munch. I’m sure you’ll remember later and then be sorry you did.”

She returned the smile as she shook his hand and looked at Fin. "Is that chocolate, Fin?"

"Best in the city," he said handing a package to her as Jonathan groaned from his cot.

"I can't open it," she said after struggling with the box with weakened hands for a moment.

"That's okay," Jonathan said crossing the room in two steps and taking the box from her. "We can open it later. Besides, you don't want any right now, do you Liv?"

"Guess not," she said despondent. Her eyes then brightened. "Fin...and you... have you met my Jonathan?"

They glanced at Jonathan and Fin rolled his eyes. "Yeah. We've met."

"Oh, okay." She shivered for a moment and her eyes rolled back in her head. Jonathan had taken a step toward the door, heading for the nurse's station again, when her eye snapped back open. "John...when'd you get here?"

Munch glanced at Elliot who shrugged slightly. "Not too long ago."

"Who's this?" she said pointing at Fin.

"Fin Tutuola," Fin said.

"What?"

"You just call me Fin. Remember?"

"Oh..." Olivia's eyebrows furrowed at him and she settled into her pillows as she turned toward Jonathan. "Where's Maya?"

"She went home to sleep for a bit. She'll be back soon though."

Olivia nodded, but her eyes slowly closed and all present could see that she was unconscious for the time being.

"We'll stop by a little later," Munch said as he and Fin headed for the hall.

"Hang on a sec," Elliot said stepping out of the room with them and closing Olivia's door slightly. "Have you found anything else on her case?"

"Brown's been on it 'round the clock," Fin said. "But, she's not coming up with anything else and she's trying to take on the rest of your open cases at the moment."

"She tried to talking to Mark Landon again," Munch said, "but apparently he just slammed the door in her face and there's not really anything left to go off of. Probably the best thing to do is see if she can remember anything."

Elliot ran a hand over his face. "You saw what just happened in there. She's not any shape to be probed about what happened to her. She can barely remember her name or stay conscious for more than ten minutes." He sighed. "What're we finding out on the Kreider copy cat?"

"Very little," Munch said. "We've been working with the Calbrach boy for days and he still can't give us much on an ID. First, he says the guy was taller than him, then he says the guy was his height. Then, the guy's older, but then he thinks he was closer to his age."

"But," Fin said, "there hasn't been another murder since Zachary was found."

"I guess that's always good news. Thanks for the update. I don't know when I'll be back yet."

"We understand," Munch said and they parted ways as Elliot walked back into the room where Jonathan paced in front of Olivia's bed.

"You know, I don't appreciate being disparaged like that," he said.

“I’m sure you don’t, but if you weren’t such a prick, I don’t imagine you would be.”

“You don’t have the...authority to make decisions about Olivia. You’re really not a lot more than a co-worker.”

“And, you’re not a lot more than a boyfriend,” Elliot said. “And, trust me. I’ve seen them come and go quick in the years I’ve known Liv, so don’t think for a second that just because you’ve slept with her, that gives you any bearing on her life either.”

Jonathan glowered at Elliot, but kept silent. Elliot returned his gaze to Olivia’s sleeping face with the thought of the two-carat diamond that still sat on his coffee table ever-present.

As much as it annoyed him, out of all the men Elliot had seen come in and out of Olivia’s life, Jonathan was the only one with whom she appeared to be reasonably happy for any length of time and the thought that he might have to deal with him for longer than the two years he had lasted, hurt him almost as much as the idea that Olivia might never walk again.

The two sat in silence for close to thirty minutes, each staring at Olivia, but shooting one another the occasional scowl, until Olivia began to groan and stir loudly. Her body then convulsed and eyebrows fluttered as Jonathan yelled for a nurse.

“It’s another seizure,” Dr. Haddley said minutes later.

“When are these going to stop?” Jonathan said, his voice cracking.

Dr. Haddley held Olivia’s shoulders against the bed with another nurse, while trying to keep clear of the brace that kept her collarbone in line. Within a few seconds, the seizure had passed and Dr. Haddley left them alone. They watched her patiently for twenty minutes before she stirred again.

“*Myshah...*” Olivia mumbled with her eyes half open.

“Liv?” Elliot asked taking hold of her hand again.

“*Myshah,*” she repeated.

“We don’t understand Liv,” Jonathan said, bringing an annoyed expression to Olivia’s face.

“*Kisa jagaha hai, Myshah?*”

Jonathan and Elliot glanced at one another, but Olivia pressed in gibberish.

“*Yaha bāta yaha hōnē vālā idhara. Kisa jagaha hai yaha?*”

“Oh my God...” Jonathan sighed.

“*Myshah!*” Olivia shouted, eyes narrowed.

Jonathan rubbed his temples. “I don’t understand what she wants. I’m calling a nurse.”

“No, call Maya,” Elliot staring at Olivia who had begun crying.

“What? Why? She’s probably on her way over here.”

“Just call her damn it!”

Within ten minutes, Maya rushed into the room where Olivia lied, eyes closed and crying in large gasps.

“What’s happened?” she said, sitting down in the Elliot’s seat as he stood.

“She’s talking in gibberish!” Jonathan said. “*He* said to call you.”

“Livia?” Maya said. “It’s Maya.”

Olivia’s eyes opened and a wet smile spread across her face. “*Myshah...kisa jagaha rakhanā tuma hōnā?*”

“Holy shit! It’s not gibberish,” Maya shouted grabbing Olivia’s hand. “She looked directly at Olivia and spoke very clearly. “*Sakanā tuma samajhanā mujhē*, Livia?” Olivia nodded and Maya shook her head, mouth gaping.

“What the hell’s going on?” Elliot said.

“She’s speaking Hindi,” Maya said her eyes like saucers.

“Wait a minute,” Jonathan said. “What do you mean Hindi? Like the language? Like in India...Hindi?”

“Yeah...” She turned to back Olivia whose hand shook from combined confusion and fear and spoke in Hindi. “*How are you feeling?*”

“*I’m fine, but what’s wrong with them?*”

“*They don’t understand Hindi*, Livia.”

“*Neither do I, barely.*”

“*But you’re speaking it now. You don’t notice?*”

Olivia squinted at Maya who stared back with large, worried eyes.

“What is she saying?” Jonathan said in a high-pitched voice.

“She didn’t know she was speaking Hindi,” Maya said.

“How could she not know?” Elliot said.

“Look at the look on her face!” Maya said. “She hasn’t got a clue. She said she thought she was speaking English. We need to get the neurologist back in here.”

Jonathan had pulled out his cell phone and had crossed the room a moment later and Olivia tugged at Maya’s arm.

“*This isn’t English?*”

“*No, it’s not.*”

“*Are you sure?*” Olivia said glancing at Elliot who looked horrified.

“*I’m sure. It’s not English.*”

“*Maya, I don’t remember any Hindi.*”

“*Apparently, you do.*”

Olivia ran her right hand over her face, slightly scratching her cheek with the cast. Her eyes fell toward her legs and she burst into tears as Maya hugged her insisting that she would be all right.

“Circle?” Olivia said, her eyes hopeful.

Jonathan sighed and Elliot ran a hand over his face as Maya placed the white card that held the outline of triangle to the back of the large stack in her hands.

They had been quizzing Olivia with the flash cards the neurologist had given them for several hours and while she had regained her use of the English language and could recognize most words again, she still confused objects and faces in her head. She had trouble remembering what number came after ten and how to tell time, initially, but got better as the day progressed. At one point, however, she had even called Jonathan “Elliot.”

Dr. Hammond saw Olivia that afternoon and after a series of tests, deduced that she was simply suffering from side effects of the coma. He expected her to make a full mental recovery, yet had much lower expectations for her ability to walk.

Though tears still formed in her eyes each time she attempted to move her legs, Olivia seemed to be coming to terms with her lack of mobility. Dr. Hammond had informed them, after a second MRI, that the swelling in her brain had all but subsided, yet he could not account for what was causing the paralysis.

Maya attributed this as a positive, meaning that since the doctor could not identify what was causing the paralysis, there was no reason that Olivia would not be able to regain use of her legs. Jonathan and Elliot, however, were less optimistic when Olivia began confusing their names and struggled to read a book Maya had brought her.

“We already did that one,” Olivia said with an irritated voice. “That’s the square.”

“We’ve done them all already,” Maya said setting down the cards, but holding out the last again for Olivia to see. “If you could just get this last one, we’d let you sleep.”

“Just give me five minutes...” Olivia mumbled.

“No,” Maya said loudly and Olivia’s eyes flew back open. “This one...what is it?”

Elliot stood near the window watching the sunset as Jonathan lied on the cot on other side of the room. They both agreed that Elliot needed a break, but Elliot said he refused to leave, while Olivia still struggled with discerning a circle from a triangle.

In truth, Elliot simply hated the idea of leaving Olivia alone with Jonathan. Their earlier conversation was still fresh in his mind and there was a paranoid shiver that ran through his body any time he imagined them alone.

“My head hurts and so does my arm...guess I should be glad my legs don’t hurt considering all that’s happened, eh?”

Maya held out the single card again and Olivia shook her head, but answered.

“Triangle?”

“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“It’s a...yeah, it’s a triangle.”

Maya broke into a smile as Olivia settled against her pillows and closed her eyes.

“Elliot,” Maya said with a sigh. “You look like hell. Let me take you out to dinner and you can go home and rest for a bit. That cot looks mildly comfortable, but trust me. It isn’t.”

After several minutes more of Maya’s light nagging, Elliot finally agreed to leave, giving Jonathan a dirty look as he did, and later found himself in a bright restaurant in Midtown.

“I’m surprised they let me in here looking like this,” he said from behind a short menu.

Maya shrugged. “That’s why I picked it. They’re kind of lax on the dress code.”

“Thanks.” He paused, his mind mulling over the events of the past day. “You know, when you told me your family had taken Liv to India with you, I didn’t really take in what that meant. I knew she knew a little of a lot of languages, but I had no idea she even knew that much Hindi.”

“Well, she was close to fluent by the time we’d gone over there, but I figured she’d forgotten most of it. I rarely speak it in front of her anymore.”

“How’d that happen, though? I mean, I don’t think that’s one of the classes offered at any high school?”

“Not really,” Maya said with a smirk. “I guess she just sort of picked up.”

“When you were kids?”

“Yeah. She was always over for dinner or sleepovers or something when we were little and I guess Ms. Serena mentioned something to my mother because all of sudden my parents started speaking it in front of Livia. I think Ms. Serena just wanted her to learn another language that you wouldn’t readily learn in high school. It’s so strange that she’d randomly speak it like that, though.”

“Guess we never know what lies in the subconscious.”

“Guess not...”

They chatted for a while longer before parting ways and Elliot finally fell into his bed, having not seen it in two days. He slept much longer than he wanted and by the time he had showered and dressed again, it was past six in the evening. When he got back to Olivia’s room, he found it empty except for her and mumbled bad words about Jonathan as he took his place next to her sleeping form.

He picked up the old magazine he had read several times already and began his fourth read of the inane articles until Olivia started to stir in her bed. She tossed and turned with her eyes closed at first and then began yelling as her arms flailed about her.

“Liv...” he said softly trying to hold onto her.

Her jerking ceased at the sound of his voice, but she cried against his arm, whispering “Elliot, don’t leave me” for several minutes longer, before falling unconscious once again.

Another hour passed without any sign from Jonathan and Elliot grew increasingly aggravated until Olivia slowly opened her eyes and broke into a smile when she saw him.

“Hey,” she said with a sigh.

“Hey. How are you feeling?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Kind of tired...and a little ashamed.”

“Ashamed?” he asked through furrowed eyebrows. “Ashamed of what?”

“Myself and how I reacted to all this.” She hovered her arm over the lower part of her body and he sat back in his chair, astounded by her sudden shift of coherency.

“I’m not the first person to go through this,” she continued. “And, I won’t be the last. This won’t beat me, Elliot.”

“No one thought as much for even a second.”

“Where’re Maya and Jonathan?”

He shrugged. “Maya threw me in a cab hours ago and I thought Halloway would be here when I got back.”

“Hmm...I remember him talking his cell. I don’t remember who he was talking to though. Why’d Maya have to put you in a cab?”

“Cause I hadn’t left here in days.”

“Days? Why not?”

“I was worried about you.”

“Elliot,” she said rolling her eyes with a smirk. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

He stared at her for a very long time before speaking again. “I’m going to worry about you, Olivia. After all this, I’ll be *worrying* about you for the rest of your life or at least mine.”

“You don’t have to though.”

“I don’t have to do a lot of things, but I do them anyway.”

"Didn't your mother ever tell you that if you worried too much you'd get premature wrinkles?"

"No," he laughed. "At this point, wrinkles are probably the least of my worries."

"You've lost weight..."

"Yeah, I have."

"Worrying?"

"Probably. Think I'm working on an ulcer too, but the jury's still out on that one."

"You've had that burn in your stomach for ages," she said. "When are you going to have a doctor look at it?"

"You sound like Kathy?"

She scoffed. "I don't know if I should be happy or angry to hear that."

"I'm just happy to have you talking to me like normal."

"Honestly, Elliot. You're in a hospital. Just grab one of the doctors and tell him your symptoms."

Elliot simply shook his head. "I'll worry about me when I'm done worrying about you."

"Which we've just established is probably never going to happen, so you might as well have a doctor look at you now. Seriously, Elliot. You don't look good. You look like you're sick."

"I haven't been eating or sleeping all that well in the past couple weeks, Liv," he said rubbing his forehead.

"Well, what's been going on?" she asked, concerned. "Did you find Kreider?"

"God, Olivia," he said laughing at the absurdity of the scenario. She lay incapacitated and yet, she remained committed to the job.

"Why aren't you at the precinct?"

"Cause I'm here with you."

"But, if Kreider's still out there, Elliot, I'm not nearly as important as getting him off the streets before he hurts another kid."

"We found Kreider."

"Where?"

"It's complicated."

"Donaugh?"

"Kind of, but we got him."

"What about Drover?"

"Found him too."

Her eyes narrowed at him, scrutinizing him in the way that only Olivia could. "Then, what's going on? Why do you have that look in your eyes that says something's off?"

"Look, you need to rest and I-"

"Elliot! Just tell me."

"The murders," he began with a sigh, "they started back up again about two weeks ago. We think it's a copycat."

"Of Kreider?"

"Yeah. Same MO, even down the box and lack of witnesses."

"Who've you been working the case with?"

"A little upstart, Alexa Brown."

"I've met her. She's a good cop, although...I doubt she's really SVU material. She's way too emotional. You can see it in her eyes."

"She's a pain in my ass if she's anything."

"So, why are you here?"

"There's nothing to go on, Liv."

"Well, there's got to be something. There were surveillance cameras from some of the storeowners near Tompkins Square after the third boy we found out there. If there's tapes, then maybe there's something..."

Her voice faded as she noticed the look in eyes at the mention of "tape."

"We already checked," he said trying to move along the subject. "But, don't worry about it for now. Just focus on getting healthy."

"What are you keeping from me?"

"Liv...you really need to just-"

"What are you keeping from me, Elliot?" she pressed. "I'm going to find out eventually, so you might as well tell me while it's just me and you."

He stared at her, unsure of how to begin.

"Look, Elliot," she said beginning to get agitated. "Whatever it is, just tell me."

"Okay...Do you know a guy named Harry Morse?" She shook her head. "He lives in the building across from yours. Apparently...he's been stalking you...for quite some time."

Olivia blinked at him, searching for further understanding in his eyes. "Stalking how?"

"He's been taking your picture and...videotaping your apartment for the last five years."

Olivia let out her breath and stared at the ceiling. "Oh God. Is he the one who-?"

"No," Elliot said. "We've looked at him every way possible. He's not the guy."

"So, you've got this guy to look at and the killer of these new kids and you're still sitting here worrying about me."

"Liv, I'm technically suspended for the time being anyway, so I've got the time."

"What?"

"It's not official, but between IAB and the deputy commissioner, I'm under a... verbal suspension."

She nodded, but looked unconvinced. "I still don't get it. Does this Morse have something to do with you being suspended? And why the hell were you suspended in the first place? God, please don't tell me you did something rash when you found Drover."

"No," he said. "I wasn't the one to find Drover."

"Then, what happened?"

Elliot focused on the fitted sheet stretching across the mattress under Olivia weight, feeling her gaze boring into him.

"This guy, Morse...He taped your apartment all the time and he was taping that night."

"So? I still don't understand."

"When you disappeared, he came into the precinct with a tape of that night. It showed the whole fight...except for this six-minute gap, right at the end when you cuffed me."

"You were suspended because of our fight?"

"Liv..." he said unsure of how to phrase the words. "You were *gone*. We had no idea what happened to you...we still don't. But then Morse walks in with a tape showing me and you going at it, but doesn't show me leaving your apartment."

"They think you did something to me?"

"If you'd seen the tape, Liv. We've busted people on far less evidence."

"But, Elliot...It's you. I mean Cragen didn't think that you'd done anything?"

"He didn't really have a choice. Everyone saw us arguing that Tuesday and then with the tape, plus what Maya and your friend, Jillian had to say, it was all Cragen, could do but suspend me."

"What did Maya and Jillian have to say that could've matter?"

He sighed. "Maya said you told her you worried about what I might do when I saw you took the Drover file."

"And Jillian? I didn't know the two of you had even met?"

"We hadn't, but she said you'd mentioned my temper to her and it just fueled the fire."

Olivia stared down at her hands and shook her head. "Elliot, I'm so sorry."

He laughed. "Liv, you have absolutely nothing to be sorry about. I'm just sorry that you even have to go through this."

"I don't remember anything else, Elliot. It's frustrating."

"You might later. Just focus on getting better. The other side of my desk is getting lonely."

"Do what you need to do," they heard Jonathan yelling from just outside the door. "I want Brandt and that other German doctor and I want them here by the end of the week...I don't care what it takes. Just make sure it gets done. Liv!"

He had come through the door speaking loudly on his cell phone and flashed a perfect smile when he saw Olivia awake and alert.

"Hey Babe!" Olivia said breaking into a smile just as wide.

"How are you feeling?"

"Good as I can be, I guess."

Jonathan glanced at Elliot and he nodded. "She's been fine. Talking to me like old Liv."

"Old Liv?"

"And by old," Elliot said laughing, "I meant the wonderful Olivia we've all come to know and love."

"Ah, I see. That's better."

Jonathan sat beside her and stared at Elliot until he rose and squeezed Olivia's hand before heading for the door.

"Where are you off to?" Olivia asked.

"I need to, uh...check on the kids. They've been asking about you almost daily and I need to give them a status update. I'll be back later, okay?"

She nodded and turned her attention to Jonathan once the door closed. "Where've you been? Elliot seemed kind of annoyed when I asked where you were."

"Yes, well, Elliot and I haven't been on the best of terms through all this."

"You haven't been arguing, have you?"

"Define arguing."

"Jonathan..."

“Yep, you’re definitely the same old Liv.”

“So, really. Where were you? I expected to see your pretty face when I woke up.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry. I had to make some arrangements.”

“Such as?”

“Your doctors are saying you can’t walk, Liv.”

“I know. If anything, I can remember *that* little conversation quite clearly.”

“I’ve been making arrangements with some specialists to look at your... situation.”

“What kind of specialists?”

“The best money and a good name can buy.”

“You know I don’t want you doing-”

“Olivia,” he interrupted. “If there was ever a time you needed to just let me dote and attempt to spend every dollar of my inheritance on you, this would be it. Just thinking that you’re hurt like this is too much for me and I’m going to use every avenue I’ve got available.”

“Like spreading around the big bucks?”

He shrugged. “I’m a Hallows. It’s in the blood, I suppose.”

She laughed and squeezed his hand.

“You’re really feeling better?” he said staring at her intently.

“Yeah, I mean...things are starting to make sense. I can’t really remember anything about what happened, but I’m starting to get little flashes of what happened before.”

“What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I don’t know. Elliot yelling I think...but he’s not the one who did this to me,” she added quickly.

“Okay...”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“Well, maybe tomorrow I’ll bring in a laptop and I’ll show you what we’ve all been dealing with these last couple weeks.”

“Elliot’s already told me. Something about some video?”

“Some guy...some stalker Olivia, was watching you twenty-four hours a day and he caught you and Elliot having this knock down, drag-out fight on his camera.”

Olivia shook her head. “That’s just crazy.”

“You’re telling me you didn’t have a fight with him?”

“Well...yeah, we fought. That I remember, but he’s not the one who did all *this* to me.” She pointed at her legs and Jonathan’s expression grew somber.

“Olivia...” he said as his eyes turned red. “I am so sorry.”

“What are you sorry for? You didn’t do this to me either.”

“But, I...I should’ve called or something.”

“Jonathan, this isn’t your fault.”

“But, I was going to...that night. I stared at the phone until two in the morning wanting to call, but I didn’t. If I’d just called you, none of this would’ve happened.”

“Yeah, but how do you know that?”

“This guy just came and took you...If I hadn’t been such a jackass, then I’d’ve been there with you and he never would’ve got you.”

Olivia sighed. “Wow, I’ve done it...”

“What’s that?”

“I’ve got a Halloway to admit he’s a jackass.”

“C’mon Liv. I’m serious.”

“You’re worse than Elliot, you know? You didn’t do this to me and so you shouldn’t be worrying so much about what didn’t involve you.”

“But, I can’t help it. I love you so much and I almost lost you.”

“Oh, Jonathan,” she said in a mock British accent. “I’ve gone *bright* red.”

He started laughing, but then broke into tears and she rubbed his forehead, running her hands through his hair. Jonathan leaned close to her bed, nearly lying with her as his tears fell heartily from his eyes. She hugged him and continuously ran her fingers through black hair, reassuring him that “it was okay” as he wept into her shoulder.

“So, when can we see her?”

Kathleen pressed the question to her father with large eyes and Elliot set down his fork full of potatoes with a sigh.

“It’ll probably still be a while. She’s still really sick.”

“Will she be okay?” Lizzie asked, eyes as bright and inquisitive as her sister’s.

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Elliot said.

A sobering silence fell upon the table and Elliot cleared his throat as he attempted to change the subject.

“How are the recital pieces coming...*Elizabeth*?”

She rolled her eyes. “Good. Dickie had people over yesterday even though he knew I had to practice.”

“Oo coulda prak-tis ‘nee-time,” Dickie said with a piece of steak stuck in his cheek.

“Don’t talk with food in your mouth,” Lizzie said. “It’s gross.”

He let his mouth gape to display the masticated meat in his mouth.

“Oh, grow up, would you?” Kathleen whined.

Dinner continued for another twenty minutes in the same fashion, and after letting Lizzie win a very long game of chess, Elliot found himself having a glass of wine with Kathy at their kitchen table.

“Another language? Really?” Kathy stared at him with wide eyes and took a sip from her glass.

“Yeah, it was wild. But, she seems fine now.”

“Fine enough to have the kids go see her?”

“No,” Elliot said, shaking his head. “Not even close. I’m still not sure if it’s really hit her yet.”

“It probably won’t. I’ve seen patients before who would start to lose it years after paralysis.”

“I think Halloway’s pulling out all stops, though. I heard him on the phone. He’s having some doctors brought in from Europe.”

“Well, at least there’s a hope.”

“I just don’t want him to get her hopes up. We’re just now able to talk to her and I’m not looking forward to starting over if these doctors can’t do anything.”

“How’s that other girl you’re working with doing?”
He leaned back in his chair and smirked at Kathy who began laughing.
“Is she still that bad?”
“I guess she’s doing okay. I haven’t seen her in a couple days.”
“Well, I’m glad you stopped by, but you look like hell, Elliot. Are you doing all right?”
He shrugged. “Well enough...considering.”
“Have you been eating? Sleeping?”
“Sure. Why not?”
“Elliot...”
“I’m fine,” he laughed. “But...I should probably get going.”
“Really?”
He suddenly felt very sleepy, but did not want to leave the warmth of the house.
“Yeah, let me just use the bathroom.”
“Use the one in our...the one upstairs. None of the kids are ‘fessing up but something happened to the one down here. I’m having a plumber come out on Friday.”
“You should’ve called me. I can look at it.”
“I knew you were busy with everything that’s been going on and it’s just the toilet.”
He nodded. “Give me a minute and I’ll have a look.”
Upstairs, he heard Kathleen and Lizzie talking softly in their room and crossed his old bedroom to use the bathroom. In the small bathroom’s soft light, he got a good look at himself and could finally see what those around him had meant.
He had visibly lost some weight and the circles under his eyes looked like they would never disappear. His hair looked slightly thinner and he could swear he could see sparkles of grey here and there.
As he turned off the light, Elliot stared at his old bed and sighed. It seemed so inviting that before he could stop himself, he had sprawled on his stomach held his face to his comforters.
Just five minutes, he thought. I just need to lie for here five minutes and then I’ll be fine.

Tuesday February 27, 2007
Woodside, New York

Elliot rolled onto his side, an odd, comfortable feeling coursing through his body. Squinting against the sunlight that poured against his closed eyelids, his ears perked at the sounds of running water a few meters away from him.

He jerked awake and saw that he was in bed, but not the hard one that sunk slightly in the middle that stood in his apartment. It was a soft bed with sheets that felt smooth against his skin. Sitting up to rest on his elbows, he realized he was shirtless, but still wore the jeans in which he had eaten dinner.

“Oh, you’re up?” Kathy said brightly as she left the bathroom.
“Yeah...did I sleep here?”

She nodded. "I came up here after ten minutes to see what had happened to you and you were out cold. I didn't have the heart to wake you, so I just...shifted you over."

He stared at her embarrassed, missing her terribly and they made small talk for several minutes before Kathy left for the day, leaving him with swirling thoughts. He wondered whether the calm in his chest was from the idea that Olivia seemed to be coming back to herself or the fact that he had slept so soundly in his old bed. Either way, he slept without the slightest vestige of a nightmare for the first time in days.

When he finally arrived at the hospital to check on Olivia, Munch and Fin were already in the room laughing with her. It died down once he knocked on the door and she beckoned him closer as Munch and Fin left the room.

"Hey you!" Olivia said. "They got my TV working. I think I may have to try one of these Rachael Ray recipes."

"I see they snuck you in more chocolate."

"Of course."

He sat in the chair beside her with a mild smile on his face at change in her appearance. Her eyes seemed brighter than they had in the past few days and she smiled more, but she still had the appearance of someone recovering from a serious illness. Her face was still rather thin, her eyes had circles to match his own and he guessed she had yet to gain anything to bring her back to a healthy weight.

"How are you feeling overall?"

"Good, but kind of anxious at the same time. Like I'm ready for something to happen, but I don't know what."

"You think you'll be up to some questions later?"

"I don't see why not, but I can't really remember anything right now."

"What's the farthest back you can remember?"

"Being cold."

"That it?"

"Just being cold and then lots of light, followed by a lot of pain and then I woke up and you were staring at me." She sighed. "What if I can't ever remember?"

"Don't worry about it just yet. Maybe it'll be better if you didn't for the time being." He stood. "Suspension or no suspension, I've gotta check in on Brown."

"To make sure she's still holding down the fort?"

"Or make sure it's not burning down. Are you going to be okay if I leave for a bit? I called Maya, but I don't want to leave you by yourself."

Olivia grabbed the remote control and turned on the television that was mounted to the far wall. Bob Barker stood on a stage being hugged repeatedly by a large woman wearing a shirt that read "Team Pierson."

"I'll be fine," Olivia said turning up the volume.

He leaned over and gave her a quick peck on the cheek and left the room as Maya strode down the corridor with a thin book in her hand.

"Hey! How is she?" she asked.

"She's up and doing great. Almost back to normal."

Maya grinned wildly. "Oh, I'm so glad. I'm surprised to see you leaving though."

"I've got to check in on a couple cases, but I'll be back. I'll see you in a bit."

She waved and stepped into Olivia's room as she turned off the television.

"Hey!" Maya said with a beaming smile.

"Hi..." Olivia said curtly. She did not return Maya's smile.

"Elliot just told me you were almost like your old self. How are you feeling?"

"Did you know he's been suspended?"

"Yeah," Maya says, surprised at the sudden anger in Olivia's voice. "He told me a while ago."

"What did you say?"

"Olivia, why are you so angry?"

"What did you say?"

"Wow, I was picturing this going far differently..."

"What did you and Jillian say?"

"Whoa, Liv. I-"

"*What* did you say?"

"I didn't want to say anything!" Maya said her hand shaking from the quick shift in her own mood. "Some guys from *your* precinct pulled me into an office and grilled me, like *I* did something wrong!"

"You didn't do anything wrong."

"You're right. I didn't. But, you had just vanished and from the way they were talking to me...I just told whatever I could in case it could help."

Olivia was quiet for a moment. "Did you really think Elliot had done something to me?"

"Livia, I..." Maya began. "I didn't want to think it was possible. But...before I went down there, someone sent me this stupid video that showed you and Elliot fighting...and I just didn't know what to think."

"So, you told them that Elliot was responsible for what happened to me?"

"No!" Maya yelled tears forming in her eyes. "I just kept saying that he couldn't...*wouldn't*! I just kept saying it because...I figured if I said it enough, I'd really believe it."

Olivia scoffed. "I can't even believe I'm hearing this. I can't believe you would think my partner would...I mean, you've met Elliot."

"I know." Maya said. "I *know* Livia. It's just that with seeing that video and with what you said about him going crazy if he found out you took that file...I didn't know what to think."

Olivia's eyes fell to study her blanket as she tried to hold back tears.

"I'm sorry, Livia." Maya said. "But, you were gone and nobody knew what happened to you. I just...I just..."

"It's okay, Maya. I didn't mean to yell at you. It's just that the last thing I remember was Elliot in my apartment and then I wake up and four weeks of my life have passed me by. And, I don't have the pieces to pull together even a blurry memory."

The tears that had welled up in her had spilled down her face generously.

Maya sat down on the side of Olivia's bed and pulled her into a hug. "See, this is what I wanted. I would cry, you would cry and then we both watch Lifetime movies and go through our yearbook for the rest of the day."

Olivia laughed and pulled one her boxes of chocolate from the table next to the bed. "Here. Open this and crack open that book. I'd all but forgotten what a nightmare 1987 was..."

They talked about old times, laughing at each other's yearbook photos from nearly twenty years earlier and were in the middle of watching a movie together when Jillian knocked on the door.

"Oh my God," Jillian whispered with watery eyes. "You look so much better."

Olivia sighed. "Well, when I last looked in the mirror in that drawer, I'd thought I looked like I got hit by a truck, but thanks anyways."

"I'm serious, Olivia," Jillian said as she lightly padded toward the bed. "The last time I saw you, the doctor's were debating about whether you'd even wake up. It's like a miracle."

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic, Jill. I can't remember much, but I know it's not in your nature to be such a drama queen."

"Are you...is the p-paralysis real?" she stammered glancing at Maya.

"Yeah, well, seeing as how I've been trying to just wiggle my toes here for the past hour and nothing's happened, I'd say yes."

Jillian put her hand to her mouth and burst into tears. Olivia outstretched her bandaged arm and pulled Jillian into a hug.

"It's okay, Jill," she said. "I'll be fine."

"Fine?" Jillian said pulling away from her. "You were gone for weeks. How can you say this is fine?"

"Because, Jillian, I'm trying to be optimistic."

Jillian shook her head. "I want to be optimistic too, but I can't. Not when we still don't know what happened to you."

"Let's just talk about something else for a bit," Maya sighed.

"No," Jillian snapped. "We're going to talk about this. Liv, no one knows what's happened to you. No one. As far as we know, you're partner could've--"

"Absolutely not."

"Do you remember what happened to you, then?"

"I know Elliot didn't do anything to me."

"You don't understand, Olivia. There's a vid--"

"I've heard. There's a video of Elliot and I arguing. That doesn't mean anything."

"Not arguing," Jillian pressed. "Attacking. He had you pinned to the floor."

"I'm telling you. Elliot didn't do anything to me. I can specifically remember Elliot walking out and slamming my door shut."

"What else can you remember?"

"Nothing. And believe me, I've been trying."

"So, if you can't remember anything else, how can you be so sure of what happened that night?"

"You know what?" Olivia said her jaw set. "I think I'd like to just be alone with my thoughts right now."

"Liv..."

"I am not going to lie here and listen to people accuse Elliot of something I know he didn't do."

"We're just trying to be realistic here, Liv," Jillian said.

"I don't care! Okay? I've already told you Elliot wasn't there and I won't listen to you bitch about him. Go!"

Maya stared at Jillian and shook her head as she picked her coat up from her chair.

“Liv, we just...” Jillian began, but Olivia held up her hand to silence her.

“No. I don’t want to hear it. We can talk again when you come to terms with the fact that Elliot’s a good person and who I *know* would never hurt me.”

Olivia settled into her pillows and flipped through television channels until mildly familiar characters caught her eye. On the screen Sami Brady and Lucas Roberts were setting the plans of their wedding reception when a surly EJ stepped into the room and Olivia flipped off the television as she sighed and stared at the ceiling.

Her mind was a blur of colour as memories came in and out of focus like ripples disturbing the reflection of figures staring into water. In all honesty, she could not remember if Elliot had left that night or not and while she was certain there was a figure present throughout her time in the dark, she could not discern a face through the murk. While she would not let her mind consider the topic, the fact still remained; Jillian had made a valid point. She did not remember much of anything and who was to say what really happened that night if she could not ascertain a clear avowal of the situation.

She closed her eyes and allowed the fatigue that followed her exertions with Maya and Jillian to close on her body, but as she began to fall asleep, for the first time since she became aware of her surroundings, Olivia did not wish for answers and instead, feared what the truth might bring.

“You at least need to finish it, Liv,” Elliot said pushing the plastic plate on the rolling table that hovered over the bed toward Olivia.

She scrunched her face at the dry turkey meat and half-warm, half-raw string beans that lay on the plate. “Didn’t you promise to bring me a Ruben?”

“Not me.”

“Oh... Might’ve been Munch.”

Elliot sighed with a contented smile on his face as he leaned back in the chair. Maya had called him in close to a panic hours earlier and he worried that Olivia had fallen back into suffering from psychosomatic problems. When he arrived at the hospital, however, he saw that Olivia was alert, though she seemed less happy to see him than she had on previous visits.

Olivia shifted her arm and pulled the series of straws she had jury-rigged into her cast to scratch the skin under her cast. “I can’t eat any more of that stuff. What happened to my chocolate?”

“There’s two empty boxes in the trash over there. I’m sure if Holloway saw that, he’d have a fit.”

“Why? Has he been trouble recently?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but paused. A part of him wanted to spill the events of the past weeks, detailing every last word Jonathan had spat at him, while another part remembered the look on her face when he last saw she and Jonathan together.

“He’s just been concerned. That’s all.”

“Well, what has been going on since I’ve been...gone?”

He rubbed his face and launched into a story recounting his past month without her, leaving out the more gruesome details where he thought it necessary. Her eyes never left his as he continued and by the end, she was insisting he call some of the newspapers so that she could set the record straight.

“Can you remember though?” he asked.

She sat quietly staring at her feet for a moment. “I know I wasn’t alone.”

“Yes,” he said nodding as he remembered her saying the same words days earlier.

“There were at least...three, maybe four...I can’t remember her name...Angie, I think? Maybe Annie?” She put her hand to her head and squinted as if in sudden pain.

“It’s okay,” Elliot said. “Take your time.”

“Maybe there were more...I just remember it being so dark...I think there were people. Yeah, there was definitely more than four...like fifteen or twenty...and then they were all-”

Her breath caught and she shivered as her eyes rolled back in her head. Elliot grasped her whole body tight as she seized and convulsed, shaking the bed in the process. When it was over, Olivia blinked around the room confused about what had happened.

As the realization of what had transpired set in, tears rolled down Olivia’s face and Elliot rested against the bed as he held her.

“I can’t Elliot...” she said. “I can’t move. I can’t walk. I can’t feel anything.”

“I know. It’s okay,” he whispered into her hair.

“Elliot...God...What am I gonna do? I can’t walk...Dear Jesus...What am I gonna do?”

Wednesday February 28, 2007

10:26PM

“She’s been coherent for a couple days now. I think we can take her at her word.”

Cragen’s chair was turned away from his office door and he spoke into the phone with a low voice. The idea of even having the conversation annoyed him, but he did not want any of his detectives to see the expressions on his face as he attempted to avoid a full argument with his own superior.

He had gone to see Olivia earlier in the day and while he was delighted by seeing her awake and lucid, he was disheartened by her appearance and the fact that she seemed to have resigned with clear certitude that she was never going to walk again. Only one other officer in his command had seemed so at ease with such a calamity and he was the eighth cop Cragen had buried after he suffered a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head.

“I’m sure she means it,” Deputy Inspector Felton said, “but I’m not ready to take it as the Lord’s honest truth. She’s been through a lot and I don’t want to pull all the heat from Detective Stabler until I know where we stand.”

“The words came out of her own mouth,” Cragen pressed. “She said he didn’t do anything to her and I believe her.”

“Well, she’s a good detective, but we’re keeping our own investigation open until we know for certain what happened.”

“How much more do you need? She said it herself.”

“Well, you’ll forgive my skepticism, Captain, but I don’t think that the words from someone who just woke up out of a two-week coma from being beaten nearly to death and who was having trouble even speaking in her own native language as short as two days ago can be trusted! She’s his partner and if anything, I’d assume that she wouldn’t *want* to believe that something this violent could happen between them. Let’s not forget that that she can’t remember what happened to her for the past month, but she’s *absolutely* certain that Stabler didn’t hurt her. If you take a step back from the situation, Captain, you’d see there are holes all over this.

“Elliot Stabler is a good detective. He didn’t do this to her.”

“But, there’s a video circulating all across the globe of him tackling her and holding her in a headlock just before she disappeared.”

“Ask Detective Benson’s doctors. She wasn’t out in the elements all that long. Elliot’s been on her case since the second something looked up. If he was the one hurting her, we would’ve seen some kind of sign of it.”

“That doesn’t exempt him from this.”

“What do you need?” Cragen yelled, finally exasperated. “A signed affidavit! The *victim* says he’s not involved!”

“And the *victim* has a close relationship with Detective Stabler. The *victim* is just coming down from the shock that she may never walk again and *victim* is struggling with the psychological backlash over what’s happened to her. Now, I’ve got witnesses eight people deep, all saying that Stabler and Benson were on pins and needles in the weeks before her disappearance and that tape doesn’t help anything. Halloway is pulling out all stops on the situation and because she was the lead detective that helped nail down Kreider, we’ve got Whickfields, Richardsons and every other old money family with kids in this goddamn city asking me questions about this! We’re not taking the heat off Stabler until we have a suspect.”

Cragen sighed as he put down the telephone receiver and wondered if he just imagined a new crease in his forehead. For the past month, a light police detail had been ordered on Elliot, only following him and noting his whereabouts from time to time, and Cragen had made a third attempt to get it removed, deeming it unnecessary since Mark Landon and Diana Willex first emerged to clear him.

Felton began the investigation without his knowledge, claiming that it would be easier to discover the “truth” if they investigated without so much public stigma. Cragen knew that the word of two people was not enough to stop the background investigation, but with Olivia insisting that Elliot was not involved, he felt the need to try again.

The deputy inspector remained unconvinced by Olivia’s surety of the facts only as they pertained to Elliot and as he ran a hand over his face, Cragen thought about his own skepticism. Rationally, it made sense to keep a case open on Elliot while there was still no one to prosecute, but emotionally, Cragen hated the idea of having any kind of investigation run on his two favorite detectives.

All the good thoughts and prayers notwithstanding, a question still remained: If Elliot did not nearly kill Olivia, who did?

Unknown Time and Place

Lost. His precious was lost.

He had read that in a book once, had he not?

Yes, a precious thing being lost. He could now understand how it felt.

As soon as she had gone, guilt coursed through him once the anger subsided. She was, of course, his and he should not have given up on her so quickly. In truth, he had *not* had enough; he was simply frustrated by days of effort and nothing to show for it save for a wound on his side, the marks on his wrists and the taste of her skin still on his teeth.

Not once in all his years had one of his possessions escaped. Jumped through a window while running on a broken leg? If that was not the epitome of vigor, he did not know what was.

He had gone to retrieve her that night and found that she was lost. Stolen from him.

The room where she had lain, nearly broken, seemed so empty now. She was so unlike the others, though they were now trying to follow her example. The window had to be boarded completely lest one of the others attempt the same thing. He already had to get rid of one of them since her departure. She was ready to raise an all out revolt and it had to be quashed immediately.

He sighed for the first time in years and stared at himself in the mirror.

Skin that had not seen sunlight in more than a decade glowed faintly in the dark. Perhaps he should simply retire. Call it “quits” while he was ahead. Obviously, he was getting sloppy as the years passed or else she would never have been able to leave.

Anger surged through him once again as the memory of her standing defiantly before him came to view.

He had never once had an escape. Not once. And he would be damned if he was going to allow his possession, something he had bought and paid for, to wander round free.

He passed the room, its stench pleasantly overwhelming and his resolve was set.

He had to have her back in his possession.

No matter what it took. He needed her back.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Sunday March 18, 2007

Mount Carmel Hospital East

A smile played across Olivia’s face as she stared into the small screen of the digital camera that flashed a shaky video. The music that played from it touched her heart and nearly brought a tear to her eye as it elicited both longing and remembrance for her own youth.

Elliot had taken the video of Lizzie’s piano recital weeks earlier and had brought it to her shortly afterward, but Olivia enjoyed watching frequently and it was simply an experience in itself listening to Lizzie play the works of the old masters and also a piece

that she had finessed as a listless college student who doubted what she wanted to do with her life.

Four weeks had passed since she had first become continually conscious of the world around her and she was never for want of gifts or company.

Every day friends, old and new, other cops and neighbors paid visits to her and while they all looked happy to see her, she had to learn to prevent a look of annoyance from crossing her face each time someone would comment on how much weight she had lost or how different her face looked, as not one person had the ability to keep such comments to his or herself.

Each day Olivia had struggled to relearn how to do simple tasks, such as sitting upright without aid and doing everything with her left hand as her right remained inside of a cast and each day she realized something new she could or could not do.

She could feed herself with her left hand; she could not lean too far to either side of the bed without the risk of falling completely. She could lean on her elbows for short amounts of time, move every muscle above her belly button and assist in the removal and entrance of her catheter at various times of the day; she could not feel anything from the slightest brush to the hardest pinch from her hip bone to her feet.

Even with the move to the new hospital where Doctors Brandt, Li and Schoene performed various tests to help stimulate the nerves in her legs, Olivia had all but given up hoping for the ability to walk and shifted her focus to making her upper body as limber as possible, much to Jonathan and Elliot's dismay.

Maya had been helpful, noting that the muscles in her stomach and arms had all nearly atrophied, and aided her daily to complete the exercises needed to get back what she used to have, but both Jonathan and Elliot insisted on performing the same stimuli tests on her feet and legs, only to be despondent later for lack of desired results.

All disappointments in regards to her paralysis aside, she remained positive. The seizures, which had initially occurred at least once a day, had slowed to the point that her new primary doctor, a Dr. Jakob Androse, expressed that he thought she might stop having them completely by the time of her pending release from the hospital weeks down the line.

Olivia turned off the camera and flipped through the television channels, discerning the time from the various daytime television shows for which she and Maya had developed a healthy appreciation.

Maya, like Elliot and Jonathan, visited her every day, for hours at a time and most of the time they simply laughed together like teenagers in high school. They watched their "stories" together, swooned over the young and attractive male nurse who helped change some of Olivia's bandages and teased one another. Maya had even taken to calling Olivia "Stilts" again like she did when Olivia had hit her growth spurt at fourteen and grew nearly four inches in one summer without gaining any weight. Maya had also made sure that when people came to visit that Olivia looked as healthy as possible.

When she caught wind that Adam and one of Olivia's ex-boyfriends were coming to visit, Maya had brought Olivia's "good brush" and make-up, insisting that Olivia could look anyway she wanted when it only she, Elliot and Jonathan were around, yet when "others" came, it was imperative Olivia stray away from what she coined as the "I-have-just-been-whisked-from-the-gates-of-death" look.

An hourglass rotated on an invisible pedestal on the television and Olivia grabbed her remote control again, not wanting to sit through a series of commercials. She gave up eventually and lied against her pillows to stare at the myriad of cards, letters, pictures and balloons that decorated the large new hospital room that was being paid through Halloway family money.

Most of the outpour of gifts and trinkets came from people she had never met who said they had simply prayed for her, while some came from people to whom she had not spoken in years. Her most cherished, by far, was the handwritten letter she received from the little boy who had found her so many weeks earlier, reading:

*Deer Mis Oliva Binson,
My name is Deondre Meekham and I am 7 ½ years old. I like to read and I like French fries. I found you in a dumpster with my Uncle Ray and I hope you is ok now cuz you was very white and I was scared. Mom says you was on tv cuz you was gone but now you is okay cuz we found you. I hope you feel better soon.
Deondre*

The various visitors had also caught her by surprise. Several nights after being moved to Mt. Carmel, a ten year old girl with a familiar face stopped by with her mother. It was several minutes into the conversation, before Olivia could place the little girl.

“D’you remember how you played for me when I was sick in the hospital?”
Amarie Otom had said as she pulled a shining violin out of its case.

“Yes, I do.”

“Good, ‘cause Momma says you’re sick and I wanted to play for *you* this time.”

That night, Olivia could not stem the flow of tears that had been motivated by Amarie’s rendition of a rasping “Greensleeves,” and though Elliot and Maya had asked repeatedly what was wrong, Olivia still cried herself to sleep.

The next day, her cousin, Allison, had brought her seven-week-old son, Patrick Kyle, to the hospital so that Olivia could hold him for a short while and after the visit, she found herself wondering if she would rethink the prospect of children, assuming she was still capable of carrying.

Most surprising of all was her visit from Kathy. When she came through the door, Olivia half expected to see the Stabler children following behind her, even though they had visited with their father weeks earlier, and she was embarrassed to be slightly unnerved that Kathy would come see all on her own.

“How are they treating you here?” Kathy had asked.

“Everything’s fine,” Olivia had answered allowing a brief silence to waft over them as she considered her last interaction with Kathy’s daughter.

“Kathy...I, um, never really got a chance to apologize to you about the situation with Kathleen.” Kathy nodded and she continued. “I was able to talk to Elliot about it for a while, but you and I never got a chance to-”

“Don’t worry about,” Kathy said. “There’s no apology necessary. Kathleen trusts you and...now at least, I’m glad she knew she could talk to you.”

Olivia smiled weakly at her. *Well, she can’t hurt me anymore than I am now*, she thought.

“Kathy, I need to tell you something.”

Apprehension spread across her eyes like ink and Olivia swallowed hard.

"It's not really that important since it was so long ago, but I can kind of tell that you've been wondering why Kathleen even thought of coming to me with her questions..."

"Well, it hasn't been keeping me up at night, but I *have* been wondering."

"Okay. Well, last January, my friend and I were out at a bar opening and we saw Kathleen there. I swore to her that I wouldn't say anything after she promised she'd clean up her act a little, but I just wanted you to know...Or I just needed to get it off my chest."

"Was this The Rox?"

Olivia's jaw fell. "You *know* about it?"

"Yeah, of course, I do," Kathy laughed. "She blurted it out to me one night not too long afterward. All she really seemed concerned about was whether or not I was going to tell Elliot. I told her I wasn't grounding her. I was just disappointed, but she stayed in for the few three weeks anyway."

"That was our end of the bargain. I told her she should help out around the house and that she shouldn't be going anywhere, as if she were grounded."

"Disciplining my own kids, now?" Kathy said with an eyebrow arched.

Olivia's breath caught and she pursed her lips, but Kathy just smiled.

"It's okay, Olivia. If Kathleen hadn't looked like she already got in trouble that night, I would've done the same. And...she listens to you and I know that's probably helped a lot." Kathy sighed. "Anyway, I just wanted to see how you were doing."

"My doctor says I'm coming right along."

"Good," she said smiling. "I need you to get well, because this other girl that's supposedly watching Elliot's back doesn't know her ass from her elbow."

Olivia's favorite nurse, Jesse, smiled brightly as he entered her room with her meal, such as it was.

"I've got your lunch," he said approaching with the large tray. "Where's your entourage today?"

"Gave them the day off," Olivia said. "I figured they could use it."

Jesse laughed. "Okay. We've got a turkey and Swiss on whole wheat, some baby carrots, a fruit cocktail and a sugar-free drink for you."

"Oh boy..."

"At least it's more or less good for you, eh?"

Jesse chatted with her for a short while before he left to continue his rounds and sighed as attempted to make sense of the meal before her. While the food at Mount Carmel was a far cry better than that of Mercy General East, it was still hospital food, notorious for its lack of taste. Most of her meals, much to Dr. Androse's dismay, came from things she had coaxed from her visitors.

Cragen had brought a sandwich from her favorite deli when he had last come to visit, though it was more of a way to bring a sort of peace before the proverbial storm. His visit, while it started benign as one friend to another, irritated her as he treated her like a victim and constantly made her repeat herself to make sure she stuck to her story.

Olivia's memory, rather slowly falling into focus, sprang forth with clear shots of time like random photographs detailing someone's life in an album. A gaunt, worried face stared directly at her; darkness and cold overwhelmed every part of her being; piercing eyes glared at her from behind the barrel of a gun.

Though she could not remember much, she made certain to remain clear on one aspect of her story; Elliot had not hurt her. She reiterated it to Cragen, his superiors, reporters who had infiltrated the hospital, her friends and well-wishers; everyone. Elliot was there, he left and *then* someone else came after her and, yes, she was certain it was not Elliot.

The actual memory was really not much more than a haze of grey, but the parts she remembered most, she kept to herself. Her brain readily retained the feel of Elliot's body nearly lying on top of her, smell of his aftershave or the touch of his skin as he ran his lips across her shoulder. When the memories flashed to mind as Elliot had leaned over to hug her, she had decided then and there not to reveal them.

It was the heat of the moment, she had said to herself.

While she knew the very mention of the near event on the floor of her apartment would most likely reduce the strain of interrogation, she knew there were enough rumors floating around about them and did not want to inflate them further especially when she saw the looks Elliot and Jonathan gave one another when they thought she was not paying attention.

Elliot visited every day for close to an hour in the mornings and then again later in the day until she fell asleep most nights. He made sure to check her visitor's log each time he arrived, arranged to have an officer at her door and quizzed her about the names he did not recognize.

"Honestly, Elliot," she had said. "The guy who attacked me isn't going to march in the hospital to see how I'm doing. Especially when there's a cop at the door."

Elliot just shrugged. "I can't afford to take any chances."

Jonathan welcomed the security measures and it seemed to be the only thing upon which the two men in her life agreed. Elliot and Jonathan had argued heavily on everything from her initial move to the new hospital to setting limits on daily visitors. Olivia would pretend to sleep when it appeared that their arguments were heightening and only Maya would venture to step into the fray putting them both in place by noting the final decisions, should Olivia be found unfit to make them herself, rested on her.

"Hey Stilts!" Maya said as she entered the room carrying a large bag. "I brought something for you."

"I hope it's a slice from the Lower East Side," Olivia said pushing away her plate. "Because I can't eat this."

"Sorry. Dr. Androse actually sat us down individually and talked about not letting you sneak chocolate and other crap."

"And that's fine, but you need to get me something else to eat."

Maya laughed and set her bag on Olivia's bed. "Look, I didn't know if you would've even wanted these, but I thought they'd be good for a laugh."

"What are they?"

"Newspaper articles from a couple months ago. But, the cool thing is, they're all from psychics and stuff commenting on you."

"What do they say?" Olivia asked.

"Well..." Maya said pulling out several cut articles at once. "This one says that you were kidnapped by faeries. And, this one here says you ran off to the island where Elvis, Tupac and Amelia Earhart are."

"No way!" Olivia laughed and pulled several from Maya's pile. "That's crazy."

“This lady’s great too. She was on The Tessa Show a while back. ‘Olivia Benson’s story is a tragic one, found too commonly in a city such as New York, but what pains me most is that the police do not seem to want her body found, otherwise they would have contacted me in regards to the firsthand information I have on her whereabouts.’”

“Firsthand? Whatever.” Olivia shook her head. “Oh! Look at this one! ‘Ms. Benson’s spirit lies somewhere other than what we know of as heaven and earth. She’s outside of our world and I think, no, I know, she shan’t be returning.’ Good God! The things people print!”

“I know,” Maya said. “And, I found a great one about alien abductions in that crazy newspaper ‘The Threat Among Us.’”

They laughed together for several hours during which Olivia informed a glum Maya that “cute Adam” had patched up things with his girlfriend and they caught another soap opera, The Maury Show and Oprah before Maya left to speak to another client who had called upon her legal assistance to beat a drunk-driving arrest.

Jonathan and Elliot stepped into her room, one right after the other and she exchanged nervous conversation with them until she grew tired of the tension and proclaimed that she wished to be alone with her thoughts for the night.

As they left, Olivia pulled her covers around her body preparing for a night’s rest, when she felt something odd, as if her body was jerking and itching simultaneously. She moved about the bed unsuccessfully trying to cease the problem, and it was only after a full minute of finagling something with which to scratch that Olivia realized she had been absent-mindedly scratching an itch on her thigh.

Monday March 19, 2007
7:57PM

Elliot strode down the bright corridor, nodding toward the faces he had come to recognize after weeks of daily visits to the hospital. He had eaten a nice meal with his family and had spoken at length with his daughter who was beginning the last stretch of her time at Hudson University.

Maureen had decided to pursue her Master’s degree at Columbia in the fall and she also announced, to Elliot’s utter consternation, she and Justin had considered moving in together once they graduated. Kathleen and Lizzie had beamed at Maureen, while Elliot and Kathy had sat silent after announcement, neither one of them able to recover immediately from the shock that their first child had truly struck out on her own.

Slowing his step as he approached the nurse’s station near Olivia’s room, he frowned slightly as he noticed a woman he did not recognize signing the pink sheet that had been reserved for all of Olivia’s visitors.

The closer he came, the more he saw of her, noticing that she was a middle aged, brown-skinned woman and the faint memory of Maya mentioning sisters came to mind.

“Hi there,” Elliot said as he leaned on the counter next to her while trying to read her name.

“Yes?” the woman said.

He stuck out his hand for her to shake. "I'm Elliot Stabler. Olivia's partner. I don't believe we've met before."

She nodded. "Oh, okay. *You're* Elliot. I'm Priyani Iyengar. You know my baby sister, Maya."

"Yeah, of course. Nice to meet you. Are you coming or going?"

"I was just leaving when the officer down there insisted that I sign the sheet to leave as well."

"We're just trying to keep tabs on everything considering what's happened."

"I guess it's understandable, but when *you're* here as often as Maya tells me, I don't know just how necessary it is."

He sighed. "Yeah, I've seen a lot of Maya these days."

"You don't sound so upbeat about it."

"Well, she calls a lot and I don't really mind, it's just that we don't really have a lot in common outside of Olivia, but I like hearing stories about when she and Liv were kids."

"Maya does have the tendency to cling. She's probably just latched onto you because Olivia's not out and about, but I wouldn't worry about it. I've watched them both grow up and the only reason that they're both still alive is because when one falls, the other one usually catches. Maya's just lacking her crutch right now."

"So, I guess I'm the closest thing she's got to a substitute, eh?"

Priyani smiled and nodded. "Probably. I have to go, but it was nice to meet you, Elliot."

They parted ways and Elliot ran his finger down the names of Olivia's visitors for the day.

Maya Shah, yes... Sylvia Whitmore, okay...Samuel Lauper, yes, the neighbor... Jillian Harfort, yes... Jordan Harfort, Jeremy Harfort, her boys... Kenneth Randall, okay...Jonathan Holloway...Aileen Holloway, might be his mother, and Priyani Iyengar...

"Hey!" Elliot said a moment later as he stepped into Olivia's room. "I see the cast is off."

Olivia happily waved her thin arm that was free of its itching menace. "Yup. They cut me out of it this afternoon."

"Where's Holloway?"

"*Jonathan* is having dinner with his mother and has promised to order an extra meal just to have something decent to bring me. How are the kids?"

"Doing good. Although, Maureen's just told us she and her boyfriend are planning on moving in together after graduation."

"Wow. Big step."

"A wrong step."

Olivia sighed. "He's a good kid, Elliot."

"I'm sure he's an excellent kid, but I still don't like the idea of him shacking up with my daughter. She's too young."

"She's older than you were when you got married."

"And, we had to get married because we were too young, too. I know how this works. She'll be in school and he'll be at a firm somewhere and then one thing leads to

another. She'll get pregnant and have to drop out and then she'll never get to do what she wants with her life."

"How about thinking the cup is half full once in a while, Elliot?"

"The cup's not half full, Olivia," he said. "In fact, when it comes to that situation, the cup's damn near drained. Change of subject, though. How are *you* doing?"

A sly smirk spread across her face. "I'm well, Elliot. I'm doing well."

"Just well? How's your collar feel?"

"Healed."

"Are you getting your grip back in your hand?"

"A little, but I liked the idea of being ambidextrous for a while."

He stared at her for a moment. "What are you leaving out?"

"What makes you think I'm leaving something out?"

"Something happened, didn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Halloway proposed, didn't he?"

Olivia's eyes grew to twice their size. "What?"

"Okay, I guess was wrong."

"Yes, very wrong."

"Then, what's with you? You've got that look on your face like you do when you think you're hiding something good."

She shrugged and smirked. "Just happy to be alive, I suppose."

"Well, good...Cragen wants us all to talk to you again...when you think you're ready."

"Bring it. I'll give you everything I've got."

"Good to hear. You look tired though. Why don't we save it for another night?"

"I met Aileen Halloway today. Just withstanding her looks that bore through my soul took a lot out of me. It would have been bad enough just having to talk to her as any old person on the street, but she's my boyfriend's mother on top of it. She's giving me that look. The one that says she wouldn't care if I was the ambassador to another country, she still wouldn't like me."

"I'm sure she loved you."

"I'm sure she didn't, but I never do well with the parents anyway."

"Still," Elliot said. "That's a big step. Meeting his mother. I guess things between the two of you are back on track?"

Olivia sighed and stared at him for a long time. "I don't really know where we are at the moment. Everything feels like it's back to normal, but we still haven't talked about what happened."

"I'm sure it'll all work out."

"Yeah..."

Olivia's voice trailed and she quickly changed the subject to Elliot's most recent case.

While no other murdered boys had been found, there was still no evidence and nowhere to begin looking for answers. Public outcry had waned by the time Zachary Calbrach was out of the hospital and as other cases continued to appear, Ryan Daly and Andrew Shaw were set to the side, waiting for more information.

Elliot discussed some of his caseload, his dislike for Alexa Brown and the differences in the department since Olivia had left for a while longer before he was called out to a new crime scene.

“Hey, could you do me a favor?” Olivia said as Elliot stood to leave.

“Anything.”

“Well...I’m going to need you to...how do I put this?”

“What is it?” he asked suddenly apprehensive. “Just tell me.”

“Yeah...well, can you pull down my blankets a little more so that they cover my feet?”

Elliot’s eyebrows furrowed as he approached the end of the bed. “Okay...Any reason why?”

“Yes, well it’s kind of chilly in here and my toes are getting a little cold.”

He pulled at her blankets for a moment, but paused when he noticed something moving beneath the blanket. His eyes grew wide when he caught the significance of her statement and all but pulled off her blankets to see Olivia slightly wiggling her toes.

“How long...?” he tried to say, but gasped and laughed at the same time, taking away his breath.

“Since about yesterday,” she said beaming at him. “I couldn’t figure out what was going on at first. Then I realized what I was feeling and I’ve spent most of today practicing on just my feet.”

“Oh my God, Olivia...I can’t believe it.”

“See? I told you the cup was half full.”

He laughed and tickled her feet. She let out a girlish shriek as her toes quivered.

“Stop! I can only move them so much and that tickles!”

Elliot smiled and felt his chest burn as he tried to hold back tears. “Bet you’ll be able to write with your feet again in no time.”

“Well,” she said laughing. “Next time, bring a pen and I’ll practice.”

In another moment, he had wrapped both arms around her, and he held her like he had weeks earlier, feeling genuinely thankful for the first time in months.

At a knock on the door, he released her slightly and upon noting Olivia tense in his arms, let go completely, knowing that Jonathan most likely stood behind him.

“I’ll see you later,” he said and quickly headed for the door without looking at Jonathan.

“What was that about?” Elliot heard Jonathan say as he began to close the door.

“Jonathan,” Olivia said. “I’ve got a surprise for you...”

By the next day, news of Olivia’s steady recovery had spread through the hospital and doctors specializing in neurology and spinal injury from across the city had come by to see Olivia.

As the day wore on, Elliot could see Olivia’s patience wearing thin, but at the same time, her face seemed brighter and she looked healthier than she had in a long while. She had gained some weight and did not look so much like someone who had stepped out of a concentration camp, and even though she had not been outdoors, she had regained some of her natural tan.

Jonathan and Maya were completely elated by the news, though Jonathan was visibly irritated about hearing the news second after Elliot, but all three stood by as she endured a series of tests to see how much progress they could expect for her to make.

Though the team of doctors had been impressed by the fact that Olivia not only had sensation below the waist, but could also make slight movements if she concentrated, they agreed the most that could optimistically expected was for Olivia to perhaps stand unaided, but that walking or running was no longer a possibility. Only Dr. Androse dissented, saying that he believed Olivia would make a full recovery within a year's time.

Even with the news, the four celebrated and Jonathan would pinch her lightly on the legs just to hear Olivia say "Stop that, damn it" each time.

It was late by the time Olivia's eyes began to droop and Jonathan had offered to drive Maya home when Olivia sat up in her bed.

"Oh, hey," she said as Elliot was leaving. "Someone needs to go check on Evelyn Rivers if you haven't already. I mean, she was already kind of fragile that Monday and I'd told I'd be by to see her that Wednesday. I'd all but forgotten about her considering. She's probably blown up my cell phone by now."

Elliot sighed as he stared at her. He knew the moment was coming when he would need to tell Olivia what had happened, but he had hoped that he could have saved it for several months more.

"What?" she said.

He shook his head and she squinted at him.

"Is...is she okay?"

Elliot's eyes dropped to the floor. In all his life he never felt like he had failed her as much as he had at that moment.

"Elliot...?" she said, her voice catching. "Is she okay?"

He gave a slight to his head and Olivia could feel her eyes begin to tear.

"What...Diorel? Please don't tell me he hurt her again."

"No," he said. "Diorel's at Rikers."

"Then, what happened?"

He took a deep breath and pursed his lips. "Olivia, she's...Evelyn's dead. She killed herself."

Olivia closed her eyes and a tear escaped her eyes before she could stop it. "How? When?"

"She slit her wrists a few days before you woke up."

Olivia nodded with wet eyes and coughed to cover the sob that had built in her throat. "Did she leave a note?"

"She...she said that she couldn't let Diorel do to her what she insisted he did to you."

She sniffed back a tear and shook her head. "That's just...I don't even know. I mean did I everything I could...it wasn't enough."

"Olivia," he said. He crossed the room in three steps and was at her side a moment later. "This wasn't your fault."

"I let her down, Elliot."

"No. It was all me. I saw the signs...she was calling for you everyday...she left message after message, sounding worse and worse. She kept saying that Diorel had to've done something to you and that he was coming for her next. She was going downhill quick. I just didn't see it in time."

Olivia leaned back into her pillows. "I work so hard to get her away from him, Elliot, and he managed to kill her anyway."

“Liv...” he said softly, but she just shook her head and turned away from him.
“Just...just go. I just want to be alone for a bit.”

He stared at her for a full minute before leaving. Everything in his soul was urging him to stay, but he continued walking and three days had passed before Olivia’s mood showed any signs of change.

Friday March 23, 2007
6:21PM

Olivia sighed as her arm missed the far table again and pouting slightly, she rested back against her pillows.

She had been stretching for the box of chocolate Maya had intentionally set just out of her reach and even after moving the bed as much as she could while still lying on top of it and extending her fingers as far as they would, she could not reach her quarry.

Several days had passed since Elliot had informed her that Evelyn Rivers had died despite all her efforts and there had been an outpour of candy and treats sent to her from other officers in her precinct and other friends in attempts to placate her.

A slight depression had overwhelmed Olivia’s spirits as she was plagued with thoughts of what must have been going through Evelyn’s head in her last living moments. Any time she managed to sleep, she woke after suffering nightmares of Evelyn crying out for Olivia to help her, but Olivia could only get to her just as she slit her wrists.

Though she had pressed him for details, Elliot remained adamant about only offering what he thought Olivia could handle, much to her annoyance and thus left her dealing with her own imagination in combination with the vague memories that constantly plagued her thoughts. Every once in a while she would wake feeling brutally cold though the heat in the hospital room blazed or she would find herself suddenly nauseated to the point where Maya had to hold back her hair as she vomited into a shallow bucket. She knew the problems were caused by memories of a dark place and continually pushed the thoughts aside, yet she had nothing else on which to ponder and when her mind turned to Evelyn’s tragic end, the depression would settle further into her psyche.

Olivia eventually welcomed the gifts, yet to the point that she had abstained from eating the meals prepared by her nutritionist and doctors. Worried that she might be endangering her health, Maya had insisted that the treats and outside food stop coming, and even threatened to file a legal suit to keep visitors away from Olivia, but somehow unapproved food would appear in the room.

Through a channel of uninformed visitors and orderlies she would reward with a wink and a smile, Olivia received what she wanted on a consistent basis and though her doctors warned that without a proper diet, she might risk further health problems when she was finally strong enough to leave the hospital, Olivia did not care.

The news of Evelyn’s death weighed upon her heavily from the fact that she could not do anything to stop it, to the idea that she never even had the chance to say her last goodbyes. She had asked politely at first, and then later demanded that she be allowed to at least visit Evelyn’s grave, but her doctors, and especially Elliot, were against it.

Several small bruises had erupted on Olivia's arms and legs and her doctors feared that she might be reacting poorly to the vancomycin used previously to treat the pneumonia that had seemed to linger in earlier weeks. A mild cough she developed had turned into a new infection and while the drugs that pumped through her IVs appeared to be working well, no one wanted to even risk exposing Olivia to the New York air when her body was still so weak.

Infection was also possible from the wound on her side that had become a dull, continuous ache that would sometimes bleed if she shifted too quickly. All the while, melancholy mixed with anger anytime Olivia realized that everyone around treated her like a fragile victim and if there was one thing she knew she was not, it was a helpless victim.

When Maya had discovered the contraband chocolate behind her pillows, she had snatched it immediately, scolded Olivia for not caring about her well-being while so many others did and set it just out of reach as a constant reminder of the potential damage that could be done if Olivia did not follow her doctors' wishes.

Olivia huffed in frustration as she glanced at the perfectly balanced meal that lay to her left. She was hungry, but out of simple determination and stubbornness, she refused to eat it.

Her foot twitched as she intended to kick out in chagrin and a grimace fell over her face as she imagined Maya, Elliot and Jonathan staring at her like she was a sick child who needed to be told "no."

She turned on the television and caught the last bits of a commercial flaunting a fight between two grown men for the next episode of a talk show and Olivia rolled her eyes wondering if the tension between Jonathan and Elliot would erupt into such a fight.

The looks and snide exchanges had increased since Elliot had told her about Evelyn and she heard Jonathan insist on more than one occasion that Elliot had only said something to keep her subdued. The very idea of the suggestion annoyed her to no end, yet Elliot's responses toward Jonathan were just as ill-tempered. What infuriated her most was while Jonathan was behaving no different than his smug temperament was apt to show, Elliot no longer even pretended to tolerate Jonathan's company.

They argued like embittered siblings over anything from whether or not the position of the window blinds would eventually shine light into her eyes to who would assist Olivia with her physical therapy each day. Most of the time, Maya kept her opinions to herself, though occasionally she too would snap at Elliot and Olivia felt the need to side with her.

She had seen him become protective of her to the point where it was nearly territorial in the past, but never had Olivia seen an adulterated rage spew from Elliot in regards to one of her beaux. Try as she might to get some kind of information from Maya as to what might have turned their relationship from barely cordial to inflammatory, she insisted there was nothing to tell.

Jillian and Fin had been fairly more forthcoming with information, yet they told two very different stories. While Jillian pressed that it seemed apparent when she was missing, that Elliot had done something to her and was stymieing all efforts to find her, Fin insisted that Jonathan had exploded in the squad room enough times to ignite the place and turned an already tense situation into a near debacle. She did not know whom to believe, though they both sounded as if they were telling the truth and she had heard

snippets of conversation at random points during her hospital stay that shed some dim light on the problem.

When trying to make sense of Evelyn's suicide, the arguing between Elliot and Jonathan aggravated Olivia to the point where she would insist on being alone and threw them both out of the room, where they would continue their boisterous arguments in the halls.

"You just need to make it difficult for her, don't you?" Elliot had once yelled from behind her closed door.

"Me?" Jonathan had shouted in return. "What about you? You're standing over her, telling her 'no' like she's one of your goddamn tribe of kids!"

"Fuck off, Halloway! I've already dealt with enough of your bullshit to last me a lifetime. You don't know Liv, like I know her and I know why she's dealing with all this the way she is."

"You can shove the high and mighty attitude, Copo. I don't give a damn. She's a grown woman who can make her own decisions and she doesn't need you telling her what she can and can't do."

"If you weren't so fucking busy trying to make up with her, you'd realize how goddamn ignorant it is to let someone who's suffering from multiple bronchial infections outside so they can breathe in all the city's pollutions and catch something she can't get rid of."

"And if you weren't so fucking caught up in your trivial problems, none of this would've even happened. She probably got taken because someone was trying to save her from you. Or do think I've forgotten about the tape shows Faithful Detective Stabler throwing my Olivia into a headlock on the goddamn floor!"

"I don't have to explain myself to people who threaten cops in their homes."

"Don't act like you're gonna threaten me with me that."

"I'm not threatening shit. It's a fact. You pulled an unlicensed weapon on me and I have every right to throw your little rich ass in jail for it. Not to mention, Liv was shot with a Smith and Wesson."

"Fuck you for even suggesting it, you bastard! I wasn't the one who half destroyed Olivia's apartment the night she disappeared and I wasn't the one who kept the world in the dark about it until I was faced with the proof that I'd been caught. I should've shot your lying ass when I had the chance!"

"Yeah, you probably should've. Then, you'd be prison and I could be helping Olivia instead of dealing with your bullshit right now!"

Olivia shifted on the bed and wiggled her toes until the familiar pain returned to her left thighbone that had not yet healed after her injuries. She glanced at the shimmering box of chocolates that lay out of her reach and sighed again. As she lied back into her pillows, her mind whirled and, after a bout of inspiration, she grabbed the fork from the hospital food tray and with it, began reaching out to the box of her desire.

She stretched as far as she could with the fork in hand, but just as the fork tip grazed the edge of the box, she felt a prick at her neck as if she had strained something and dropped the fork as she swore at the pain. Her hands shook as she still leaned out of the bed and before she knew what was happening, her body seized. As she fell forward, everything turned dark as a large crack rang through the room in conjunction with a sharp pain shooting through her head.

The grey before her eyes slowly formed into the cream colour of the ceiling at which her eyes now stared and the sound of feet running across tile echoed through her head.

“Jesus Christ!” a voice yelled. “There’s blood everywhere! Get the rest of the staff. Hurry!”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Wednesday March 28, 2007
Mount Carmel Hospital East

Elliot quickly stepped off the elevator of the sixth floor of the hospital and walked down the long corridor toward Olivia’s room with an over-sized card that he intended to help bolster her spirits in hand. His stomach burned as he quickened his pace and he was reminded of his doctor’s orders that he try to reduce his stress to keep his small ulcer from increasing. With his partner having fallen into a new level of depression, he knew there would be no relief and he, along with Maya and Jonathan, feared she might not come out of her lull.

When the nurses had found Olivia five days earlier, she had just suffered a severe seizure, but its aftermath was what caused the drama. Olivia had not simply seized, but it appeared that she had been leaning out of her bed when it happened, causing her to fall from the bed, cracking her head on the floor and re-fracturing the arm that had just recently healed.

The head injury had seemed severe at first, and following it, Olivia had initially lost the ability to sense anything below the waist again. Her neurologists insisted that it was only a mental phenomenon, but the suggestion irritated Olivia to the point that she had stopped responding to their questions altogether and had taken to staring across her room with a silent scorn set upon her face.

By the next day, she was able to move again, but the reality of her limitations had finally set in and Olivia fell into a psychological spiral. She would not acknowledge visitors to the room and refused to speak as she stared for hours at a spot on the far wall. She had not been very accepting of the hospital food prior to the accident and afterward, refused to eat anything even after hours of Maya’s tearful pleading.

For the first time in a long while, Elliot sympathized with Jonathan when he retreated in tears after Olivia’s doctors were forced to pump nutrients into her system via her IV bags. In just several days of only intravenous pumps, Olivia’s face had regained its gaunt, pale appearance and Dr. Androse stressed that unless she came out of her depression, she would continue to deteriorate.

The depression had become so severe that Olivia did not move a muscle when it was time for her catheter or bedpan to be changed, and she lifelessly allowed the physical therapists to move her body about instead of participating in her recovery.

When it became apparent that Olivia had become completely despondent, Elliot was ashamed to admit that he pointed fingers at anyone he could find. Maya was first on the list as it was she who had placed the box just out of Olivia’s reach, causing her to strain which most likely caused the initial seizure. Maya, in turn, let out her own

frustrations by screaming that Elliot's constant bickering with Jonathan was what drove Olivia to seek solace in anything other than meals given to her. Jonathan attempted to jump on the Elliot-bashing bandwagon but was met instead with the full blaze of Maya's fury over Olivia's state as she called him an arrogant bastard who created more problems in Olivia's life than any other beau she had ever had.

The anger and finger-pointing flared sometimes while still inside Olivia's room, which would elicit the few verbal responses Olivia was willing to give; they included the most foul language that Elliot had ever heard her use and she called each of them any name that came to mind, from simple curse words to racial slurs. Her angry tirades would include telling Jonathan that he was an elitist snob who deserved to die alone, that Elliot was intent on screwing up her life as much as he had his own and that Maya was simply a pathetic basket-case who would probably die from some venereal disease she picked up from sleeping with multiple men at the same time.

Though they knew she never truly meant what she said, her words still stung and created an even tenser atmosphere. In the days that followed, Olivia had been met by several psychiatrists who had no effect. Her state deteriorated rapidly and the fear of an imminent suicide was ever present on Elliot's mind.

He knocked on her door, though he knew she would answer and found Olivia lying on her side and staring at a space just below the window.

"Evening, Liv," he said softly as he entered the room. He set up the card beside the window near a plethora of older gifts and cards and sat in the chair beside her. His seat obstructed her view of the space her eyes held, but she did not blink nor did she avert her eyes as Elliot sat beside her.

A tray on wheels hovered just over her bed and on it sat a sandwich, carrots, a fruit cup and green Jell-O and Elliot pulled it closer to her, drawing a grimace and a twitch of her eye.

"You need to start eating, Liv," he said. "This can't continue. Your body can only stay on the IV for so long before... You just need to eat something."

Olivia shifted on the bed to face the ceiling instead and he sighed.

"Come on, Liv," he said grabbing the small bowl of gelatin. "You've got to eat something. Just a little of some crappy Jell-O and then I'll sneak you in something."

Without shifting her gaze or saying a word, Olivia used her cast-ridden arm to brush the bowl and the small plates off the tray in one swoop and let them fall to the floor opposite Elliot with a crash.

"Liv," he said, running a hand through his hair. "If you don't eat anything, they're gonna have to hook you up to another IV and you'll be in here even longer."

She scoffed and it caught his attention immediately.

"Yeah," she said with an unusually deep voice and condescending tone. "I'll be in here longer. Doesn't really make a difference how long I spend in here."

"What are you talking about?" Elliot asked concerned. "It matters. It matters to all of us. We all want you to get better."

She shook her head. "This is such bullshit."

"Liv, if you could just start eating again--"

"I was attacked!" she screamed suddenly. "Weeks...no, *months* ago! And I'm still here, and he's still out there!"

"Olivia..." he said.

"And you know what's even more aggravating, aside from losing my every shred of goddamn independence? You don't even have a fucking clue what happened to me!"

"Liv, we're-"

"You're *working* on it! I got it! That's all I'm hearing Elliot. Everyone's on it. Everyone's working my case. Everybody's so concerned about poor Olivia and everyone's doing their best to help to me."

"Liv...we are..."

"I don't fucking want your best! I don't want you coming in here everyday to cheer me up! I want to the goddamn person who did this to me! I want him dead! I want his fucking balls nailed to my door!"

"Olivia," he said trying to choose his words carefully. "We are doing all that we can to figure out what happened, but there's no evidence and if you don't remember what happened either, there's only so much--"

"So, this is my fault!" she screamed. "I'm minding my own goddamn business and this guy comes after me and now, it's *my* fault that I was attacked? Great job, Detective. Did Cragen send you to a class to learn how to blame the victim so perfectly?"

"Liv, please..."

"This is all just bullshit. I get it now. I understand why people lose faith in the cops. It's been months and you don't have a fucking clue!"

"Olivia! You're a cop and you know we're doing everything we can."

"No, Elliot! Clearly, we must be the most incompetent group of assholes in the world. I mean, even if I get out of here--"

"Liv, you're gonna be fine. You've just gotta start eating something! You're bones will heal. You're--"

"It's all bullshit and you know it!" she screamed. "Someone...attacked me, gave me something that's going to cause seizures whenever God feels like having a laugh at me! And what's worst is he's still out there! I fell out of a goddamn window and still had to be found by some assholes going dumpster diving!"

Her every word cut through his skin and he just wanted to melt down in front of her.

"If I hadn't taken a fall, you probably would've never found me! I'd've been...there...in some warehouse, never to be seen or heard from again! This...this is bullshit!"

"Liv...what matters is that you're here now and you're gonna be--"

"Be what, Elliot! Fine? I'm gonna be fine! Is that what you were about to say?"

"Liv, you're gonna be fine." She sat up slightly in the bed. "I can't *fucking* walk, Elliot! Even if I get to the point where I can stand, I'll never be the same. I'll never take another goddamn step! Never! I'll never be able to do the job I love ever again! My life is over and this...monster is still out there! How can you sit there and tell me I'll be fine!"

Elliot sighed and sat silent as her words echoed in the room.

"You know what?" Olivia said after a minute's silence. "I don't want anything from any of you people anymore."

"Liv..."

"You can take all these bullshit gifts from people who didn't give two flying fucks about me after my name stopped being on the news...Take all the cards, balloons and all that shit and take it the fuck out of here. And, then you can just dump me in

whatever rat hole hospital the department's willing to pay for and you can all just fuck off."

"Please...Olivia..."

She shook her head at him, a scowl set on her face and tears brimming in her eyes. Her words reverberated in the air for a moment, before she shifted on her side, turning away from him and pulled her blanket around her as she spoke slowly.

"All of you...and you especially...can just go fuck yourselves and leave me to die in peace."

Sensing that Olivia had said her fill, Elliot rose from the chair and left the room, dialing his brother's number in his phone as he walked.

"I don't know what to do," Elliot said a half an hour later at Debbs' bar with his brother across from him in the booth. "I'm just starting to wonder how deep she'll go before all this is over."

"She'll come out of this," Bryce said. "She's just depressed because it all seems so unfair, because it is. I mean, she's probably asking herself, out of eight million people, why'd this guy have to come after her."

Elliot shook his head. "It was worse than when Colleen was fighting her cancer. I mean...she's just losing it."

"Well, can you blame her? After everything that's happened, she's probably never gonna walk again and she's right to be angry. This guy is still out there and he could be anywhere. On the street, on the train...in the damn hospital just waiting for her to be alone. I'd probably be acting the same way."

"We're doing everything we can, but warrants for the area keep getting denied, the evidence on her clothes lead to nowhere and we've nothing else to go on. There's no leads, no new suspects, nothing. It's almost as bad as when she disappeared."

Bryce took a sip of his drink. "As bad as the case looks, you owe it to her find out what happened. If she disappeared right after you left her apartment, something had to've happened that night to set this guy off. Either it was you two rolling around on the floor or maybe just a case of the crazies, but after all that's happened, you owe her this. *You* need to find out what happened."

"I know, Bryce. I've already resigned to that."

"Well, if you know, then do something about it. Go with your gut. There's gotta be something that you overlooked. Maybe even something you set aside once she was found. Now's the time track back and piece together what happened, otherwise...even though it's not your fault, she'll never forgive you for not finding the guy."

That night, Elliot found himself alone in the small room where Morse's videos had been kept, watching and re-watching the night that Olivia had disappeared. When he and Munch had gone to find Morse's uncut tapes, he was so certain there would be something significant on them, but so far the tapes had given them nothing.

The version of himself on the television screamed red faced at Olivia and he sighed as she screamed in return. The look on her face was reminiscent of the expression she held that day. He knew the depression and anger would eventually subside, but he could not be sure of how long it would take. He had not seen her so angry since the day that Kreider first disappeared and while he was able to stem some of the rage with an apology, he deemed no apologetic words capable of diffusing Olivia. Just the same, he

was still glad to simply have her around screaming at him, rather than still searching aimlessly for her.

The Elliot on the video came through Olivia's door again and Elliot watched as the Olivia on the screen threw a set of dingy golden keys tied together by a black string and briefly caught the corridor lights, down her cami shirt.

He paused the video and stared at the screen. A clear memory of finding one of those keys on the floor of Olivia's apartment sprang to mind and he pictured the key in his head. She had snatched two keys together, but he had found just one separated from its brother on her floor.

Allowing the video to play, he tried to remember every move that he and Olivia had made that night, but could not get past brushing against her shoulder. He had, however, been certain that he had not seen the keys again that night. If he had, with his quarry found, the fight would have ended and would have had Drover's information.

Morse's video turned into a spray of snow and then eventually a blue screen and Elliot sat staring at the screen for several minutes before turning off the monitor. At his desk, he saw the open case files and felt a familiar burn in his stomach at thought of telling other victims that he had made no progress on their cases either. He had done little outside of worry about Olivia in the past few days and he could see from the condition of his desk that Alexa was struggling to stay afloat.

He snatched his keys off his desk with a sigh and walked toward the elevators. They jingled in his coat pocket and Elliot could not stop a bemused smirk from spreading across his face as a play-on-words crossed his mind.

The keys, he thought as the elevator doors closed, are the key.

Tuesday April 3, 2007
10:06AM

"We can't start going through financial records like that, Elliot. You know that."

Casey leaned back in the chair behind her desk and sighed. Though it was still early in the day, her eyes had the appearance of a civil servant who had worked a twelve-hour day. She and McCoy were in the midst of Owen Kreider's trial and the stress from the case was pressing on her. Elliot knew Casey would soon be calling on he, Munch and Fin as to testify in the case and she pressed on each of them the importance of their testimony. Olivia was the only detective to interview Kreider on more than one occasion, but with her current health problems, she was no longer a viable witness.

Elliot had entered her office asking for a warrant on financial records even though it was a long shot. In the past week, he and Alexa had combed through the records for chemical distributors they had received early, this time searching for anomalies. They had found seven individuals, all male, in the Tri-State Area who had ordered nearly a gallon of the chemicals that made up components of the chemical found on Ryan Daly, Andrew Shaw and also on Olivia's apartment floor and clothes. Of the seven, three only listed PO Boxes as addresses and no further information could be found, hence the decision to retrieve their financial records.

“There’s gotta be something you can get us,” he said to. “I’m desperate. Anything at all.”

“If we’re going to get anything, I would need something specific to go off of. We can’t go traipsing through these people lives based off nothing.”

“Other than a hunch?” Elliot said shaking his head and paced the office for a moment before stopping short. “How about just general public safety? I mean how many gallons of this stuff could any individual need?”

Casey’s eyebrows shot toward her hairline. “That’s an excellent question...a specific one I’m sure a well-worded warrant might help answer.”

She pulled a blue draft from her files as Elliot grinned and an hour later, he and Alexa were reviewing the financial records for Marvin Guildenhall, Roman Landanorak and Gage Rhospryer. They sat next to one another for hours, silently pouring through pages of paper, when Elliot glanced at Alexa over the stack in his hand.

“What?” He said noting her furrowed eyebrows.

“This guy...” she said and showed him a name she had circled on her sheets. “This Roman Landanorak...his stuff is a little screwy.”

“How so?”

“Well, apart from being one of our main guys on the chemical list, he lives a very small life. All I see here is a single bank account and there’s five thousand dollars just sort of sitting there. He’s got a credit card, but it’s got a zero balance and there haven’t been any charges on it in years.”

“What about rent or utilities?”

“Nothing. All he’s got is that five thousand that just appeared from a PayPal transaction a couple months ago.”

“Well, he paid for the chemicals somehow,” Elliot said. “He’s got to have more than just that.”

Alexa flipped through a few sheets and frowned. “Okay...So, there was about a thousand in that checking accounting a couple months ago...Well, this is interesting.”

“What is it?”

“The only other money in that account was received through a PayPal transaction, *and* it was for only the exact amount that was paid for the chemicals.”

“Really?”

“Yeah...sounds like somebody trying to run something fraudulent.”

“What’s the e-mail address? Maybe we can start tracking it send it off to computer crimes.”

“It’s one of those free, untraceable accounts.”

Elliot’s eyes narrowed. “What’s this guy’s address?”

“There’s just a PO Box.”

“In the city?”

“Yup.”

“Let’s pay them a visit.”

“So, let’s get this straight,” Cragen said as Elliot and Alexa stood in front of his desk. “This guy is buying these chemicals for ‘Personal Use’ as it says on those

statements, he's got a checking account and a credit card that don't get used and sends in the payments for his post office box by faulty money order."

"And, he hasn't been by to check his box in months," Alexa added, crossing her arms. "Sounds like a thorough alias to me."

"What about these other people?"

Elliot shook his head. "They were a little harder to find, but we found them. The one lives on 130th. He says the stuff he buys works on the roaches that keep creeping into his apartment and the other is in the village and looks like he might be using them to aid in his drug problem, but is more or less clean. This guy we can't find anything on."

"What's his significance to your cases, though?" Cragen asked.

"Well," Alexa said. "The compound that Melinda told us about was found in both Olivia's apartment and on the two boys. It's shaky, but it's a link between the two and I'm willing to bet this Roman Landanorak is involved. There's just too many coincidences here for him not to be."

Cragen glanced at Elliot. "You agree?"

"I do, but this guy just creates more questions than he solves. I mean he's made himself just about as untraceable as somebody could get. How are we supposed to find him?"

"Same way we track down any other pedophile. He's left a trail somewhere. You just need to find it."

An hour later, Elliot stood leaning against his desk while Alexa, Munch and Fin threw out whatever ideas about Roman Landanorak that came to mind. Munch, to Elliot great annoyance, had taken to repeating the name.

"It just sounds like a made up name too, doesn't it? Roman Landanorak. What the hell kind of name is that?"

Elliot shrugged. "All I know is it's not Irish."

"It's not anything. It's the perfect alias. I just like saying it. Roman Landanorak. *Roman* Landanorak."

"We got it, John," Elliot said rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Roman, Roman, Roman," Munch repeated. "It's a crazy name. Isn't it an anagram for moron or something."

"Moron's got an O," Alexa said rolling her eyes. "Moron..."

"Hey, it's close though, right?"

"All right, let's just focus for a second," Fin said. "Maybe the name has some kind of significance?"

"Yeah," Alexa said. "I wonder what kind of significance could *Roman* have..."

"I'm talking about the last name," Fin said glaring at her. "Maybe it's a city. Somebody's hometown."

Elliot scoffed. "In this city? It could be anyone's hometown."

"But, that's got to be Polish or something, right?"

"I think we're screwed on this name thing," Elliot said. "We need to get the surveillance tapes from the post office. Maybe we can see who's been by that box in the past couple of months."

"Great." Alexa said sardonically. "More video tape."

"Roman Landanorak." Munch repeated. "Landanorak...Landanorak...Kind of reminds you of your old buddy Landon, doesn't it? Landon...Landanorak."

“You’re reaching,” Alexa said.

“It’s what we morons do, right?”

Elliot rolled his eyes, but the smirk on Munch’s face faded quickly and Elliot’s eyebrows shot upward as he noticed.

“John? What?”

“Nothing...don’t worry about it.”

“Fine,” Elliot said, grabbing his coat.

“Where are you off to?” Alexa said. “The post office?”

“No, that’s your job. I’m paying Morse a visit.”

“Again?” she whined. “Elliot, how many times are you willing to torture him?”

“Until he’s willing to give me the answers that I want.”

Striding behind the familiar orderly, Elliot approached Morse’s cell, with his mind turning. While the idea of some unknown person running around the city calling himself Roman Landanorak was still intriguing and ever-present in his mind, Elliot’s thoughts surrounded only an offhanded comment Morse had made months earlier that was jarred by Alexa’s snide comments toward Munch.

Morse was standing at the window with his hands crossed behind his back. Even standing several feet away, Elliot could see that Morse had retrogressed further since he had last seen him. There were pink blotches on his scalp where his hair had continued to fall out and he was so pale that he seemed brighter than the light coming from the window.

“Morse,” the orderly said. “You know what’s up.”

Morse turned on the spot and Elliot saw that his eyes had even lost their sharp hue and looked almost grey in appearance.

“You’re back again?” he said.

“Yes,” Elliot said.

“Needing more information, I suppose? Perhaps another name?”

“No, I’ve got a name, but I do need more information.”

Morse laughed, flashing grey teeth. “You’re a machine, Detective. That much I’ll say.”

“And, I say you look like hell.”

“And, so do you. I trust things aren’t going well with Olivia.”

“No, they’re not.”

Morse simply shook his head and Elliot could see that he had lost more weight. Between his height and weight, he barely looked older than Dickie.

“How are your doctors treating you?” Elliot said.

“I don’t need a doctor,” Morse said. “I’m not crazy. When they come, I usually tell them to kiss off. They stopped coming about three weeks ago, so I figure they’ll just leave me in here until the money runs out...which we know will never happen. But anyway, you’re standing there glaring at me...”

“I need you to elaborate on something from a couple months ago.”

“Why is it always what *you* need? What about what I need?”

"Fine. What do you need, keeping in mind, there's nothing I can do to get you out of here?"

Morse paced in front of Elliot, his eyes never leaving him. "What's she look like now?"

"Look, we can do that later. Right now, I-"

"No! We can do it now. What does she look like? I haven't seen her in months. It's half the reason I'm wasting away in front of you. I need to know."

Elliot sighed. "Fine...She's, um...pale 'cause she's been sick lately. Not as pale as you, but getting close...Her hair is...long. It's halfway down her back and it's her dark brown, natural colour."

"Good, good. What else?"

"She's very thin. From everything she's been through and the fact that she hasn't been eating now, I think she's lost close to thirty pounds overall."

"Why hasn't she been eating?"

"She just hasn't been up to it because...she can't walk and she's frustrated. And, she's very, very bitter."

"Well, what did you do to her?"

"I didn't do anything."

"Of course you did. There's always something with you. And if there's something wrong with her, it must have been because of something you said or did."

Elliot thought silently for a moment, then narrowed his eyes at Morse. "Are you going to help me out or not?"

"What did you do to her?"

"Nothing. She fell," Elliot said crossing his arms.

"And where were you when she fell? Why weren't you there to catch her fall?"

"I was...busy."

"Busy...I see. Busy doing what? Probably readying yourself to duke it out with Hallows, right?"

Elliot froze, but Morse laughed.

"Look," Elliot said nearly shouting. "I need you to clarify something for me."

"Fine. What?"

"That night, when you first came into the precinct, you said something."

"I said a lot of things that night."

"But something you said stuck with me and I've only now really given it any thought."

"Okay..."

"When you were talking about how you...watched Olivia, you said you watched her, but that you weren't the only one. What'd you mean by that?"

Morse shrugged. "I wasn't the only person watching her."

They stared at one another for a minute before Elliot rolled his eyes.

"Care to elaborate on that at all?"

"When I was working for the super over there, I grabbed her keys, made a set for myself and went to work. But, when I went in there to install the cameras, there were already some installed. Someone else was watching her besides me."

"And, you didn't think to move them or unhook them?"

"Why would I? They were obviously smitten as well. Who was I to intrude?"

Elliot turned on the light in the evidence locker on SVU's floor and headed straight for the cabinets that held Morse's catalogued cameras. He brought them out to the floor several minutes later and began to set up each of them on a table.

"What are you up to, Stabler?" Munch said.

Elliot shook his head and continued to take out each camera out of the box.

"Elliot?" Fin said approaching the scene. "What's going on?"

Alexa had also stepped toward them, noting the expression on Elliot's face.

"Fifteen..." he mumbled.

"What?"

"Fifteen! We took fifteen cameras from Olivia's apartment."

"And?" Munch said.

"And, the answer's been in front of us this whole time. Morse told us he set up twelve. Not about ten or twelve. Not around a dozen. He specifically told us twelve."

"So, maybe he miscounted," Fin said. "Maybe he lied."

"C'mon Fin. You were there. He looked at us in there and said twelve. Why lie about the number of cameras? He told us everything. Every single thing. As much as I hate the bastard, he's been honest with us from the start, so why lie about something small like this?"

"Maybe he figured that we wouldn't find them," Munch said. "I'm willing to bet he wanted to continue his little peep show."

Elliot shook his head.

"Twelve of these are Canons. These other three are Minoltas. And look at the map they made of where each one was found." He laid the map flat on the table. "We found three double sets of cameras. Two in her living room, two in the kitchen and two in her bedroom. What's the point in setting up two cameras in the same place?"

Fin and Munch were silent allowing Elliot's mind to fly.

"Morse said that he wasn't the only one who was watching Olivia...that first night we had him in here. Someone else had the same idea. Someone *else* was watching her."

"But who?" Munch asked. "The videos Morse took only go back five years like he said."

"But if these cameras were there before Morse set up shop, there's no telling how long they've been there."

"That's right," Munch said. "They could've been there for decades."

Elliot scoffed. "John, look at them. These are digital cameras. That means they're newer. Liv's been in her apartment for close to ten years and they haven't been up there that entire time."

"So, there's our problem," Munch argued. "These are new cameras in her apartment, but we've got video surveillance of her place going back five years and nowhere in those five years do we see somebody stepping in there to replace anything."

"But there's nothing that says if he had the balls to break into her place and put these up once, that he couldn't break in and replace them when he needed to. If someone else has been watching her like Morse was, they would know when she left for the day and when she got back home. They could've done it at any point."

“But that still doesn’t solve the problem of what’s not on Morse’s tapes.”

He slammed his hands on the table. “Why has this got to be so goddamn hard for everyone else to get! There’s something *here* that needs to be dealt with.”

“It’s not on Morse’s videos,” Munch said. “Cut or uncut. If someone broke into Olivia’s apartment, we should’ve seen it on Morse’s tapes.”

He threw each of the cameras back in the box in a haphazard fashion and took the lot a floor down to the technology guru that worked with SVU. There Morales confirmed that the alienated Minoltas were expensive and less than two years old.

“But, each of them have these transmitters to tape from a distance,” Morales said as he looked over the cameras.

“Is there anything special about them?” Elliot asked.

Morales shrugged. “Give me a bit and I’ll see what I can do.”

Elliot returned to squad room, angry and disheartened; angry that no one else seemed to see eye-to-eye with him, disheartened to know that the age of the second set of cameras meant that Munch was right. If they were installed separately, Morse’s videos would have caught something.

“Alexa,” he said storming toward her desk. “Give me your notes on Morse’s videos. I want to see everything you marked down as an extra visitor.”

“Um...” Alexa said shifting through several items on her desk.

“Now!” he said. “I need those files now.”

His heart was pounding and he felt ready to put his fist through a wall out of utter frustration. Alexa’s hands were shaking by the time she managed to pull a disorganized stack of papers bound by a paper clip from her bottom desk drawer. Elliot snatched it from her and leaned against her desk as he leaved through it with narrowed eyes.

There has to be reason why the guy didn’t show on the tapes, he thought as he passed though another page marked “Odd Visitors.”

“No,” he said tossing down the stack. “There’s got to be more. What about the unedited videos? Where’s your notes on them?”

Alexa shifted in her seat slightly. “I...I don’t have them. Andrea has all of that.”

“Set up everything again in that room. I want to be able to go through the unedited tapes again.”

Alexa nodded furiously as he stormed from her desk and across the floor looking for Andrea Cooke’s desk.

“Andrea,” he said once he had found her desk. “I need you to get me all your data from Morse’s unedited tapes.”

Andrea continued typing at her monitor, pausing briefly to raise her index finger.

“I don’t have a minute. I want them. I need them now.”

“One *minute*, Elliot,” she said her eyes never leaving her monitor.

“I told you,” he continued. “I don’t have time to wait on this. I want your notes.”

“And people in hell want ice water. You’ll have to *wait*.”

He slammed a hand on her desk. “Andrea! I need those files!”

A framed photo of Andrea, two young boys and a large black man slid backwards and lied facing the ceiling and reflecting the overhead lights to the point that the image under the Plexiglas could not be seen.

Andrea glared at him for a long time, his heavy breathing the only noise between them and he suddenly remembered a time not too long ago where Andrea needed to tell

him something, yet he had been too brash and careless to ask what she had wanted. His breathing slowed as his anger subsided, though his last shout into her face still hung over the air above them and the glare in Andrea's eyes bore through his soul.

"I understand that, *Detective*," she said in a low voice as she began to sift through papers on her desk. "But, you will speak to *me* in a civil tone. Now, I am *not* Alexa Brown. I don't report to you and I won't drop every single thing in my lap like some dutiful underling just because you think it's more urgent than anything else on my plate. I am also not Olivia Benson. I will *not* take verbal abuse from you just because you're in a hurry or don't feel like giving the common courtesy of allowing me to finish typing my damn thought. And also unlike Benson or Brown, I am not the least bit afraid of you. You can stomp your feet and slam your hands on my desk like a petulant child all you want. I don't give a damn. I grew up with four older brothers, so some slight threat of violent anger isn't going to motivate me at all.

"Now, if you want something from me, and I tell you just one minute, believe me. In just one minute, I will get you anything that you want as long as you speak to me like a normal human being. So...do you care to try this again?"

Elliot sighed as he digested her words as his anger subsided. Half the reason the ulcer in his stomach had worsened was because of the stress of Olivia's disappearance and Kreider's case, yet in both situations, his impatience and anger had thrown all objectivity to the side and opportunities were missed. He shuddered to think what other oversights had been made through a haze of recreant rage.

He pursed his lips and took a step toward her to speak in a low, soft voice. "If you have a minute, Andrea, I really need those files...please."

She shook her head at him and pulled a set of bound paperwork from under the shortest stack of papers. "I guess that's an improvement, but you still may think about those anger management classes they offer here."

"Thank you," he said as she handed him her paperwork.

"Anytime," she said with a smirk. "By the way, what were you looking for?"

He explained his theory about the discrepancy with the cameras and the lack of evidence to support his claim.

"Well, why didn't you say so, Oh Impatient One?" She took the stack from him and flipped through several pages. "I remember...It would have been about two years ago on the tape. There was some kind of blip or something in the video..."

"You remember that out of all those videos?"

"Well, I wouldn't have," Andrea said running her finger across her notes, "but I thought it was just so weird that she had to reset all her clocks and everything when she got home after the blip. When I rewound it, I saw that there was a ten-minute gap in the tape. Here it is."

"And this was in the unedited video?" he asked taking the notes from her.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. I meant to tell you a month ago, but you were too busy being rude to hear me so I just filed it away. The hard drive number and time stamp on the video are listed right there. Watch it for yourself."

He read over the notes, written in Andrea's words that were so clear and concise, he could imagine the scene before his eyes as he stood.

Elliot glanced at her. "I could hug you right now, you know?"

“Please don’t. Just remember to be a little more polite in the future...at least to me.”

He could not repress a momentary smile on his face as he raced for the video room. Within the hour, he had found the clip and had watched it several times, noting it played precisely as Andrea had written.

“That means,” he explained loudly minutes later to Fin, Alexa and anyone else who could not block out the sound of his voice, “that whoever set up those new cameras must have known that there was a possibility he might be taped on Morse’s. I’m betting he cut Liv’s power. Morse’s cameras ran off the wiring in the apartment and if the power went out, they’d stop taping.”

“This took some planning,” Fin said, arms crossed. “For him to have thought all this through? I mean who would think to cut her power just to keep from being seen?”

“The same kind of person who would think to kidnap a cop and hold her captive for two weeks,” Alexa said.

Elliot’s phone rang from his pocket and the other two dispersed as he answered it.

“Stabler.”

“Elliot. It’s Morales. I finished comparing your two sets of cameras and I found something that might help the case. The twelve Canons are set up for long distance manipulation.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning somebody as far as a half-mile away could still control them without any problems. Very expensive stuff.”

“Well, those are Morse’s. I’d expect nothing less. What about the others?”

“They’re different. They’re still high end, but their transmitters are much weaker, intended for distances that are something along the lines of two thousand square feet.”

Elliot pursed his lips as he boggled the information for a moment. “All right. Thanks.”

“Hey,” Munch said as Elliot approached his desk heading for the coat rack that was close to the coffee stand. “Where’re you off to?”

“Landon’s. Morales just told that the three extra cameras were set up for short distances, and as the woman who lives next door to Liv doesn’t seem like the stalking type, he’s our first target.”

“You have a minute first?”

Elliot opened his mouth to insist that he could not wait on Mark, but the image of the frame on Andrea’s desk reflecting the ceiling popped to mind and he nodded instead.

“I found something you should see. I was thinking about how the name Landanorak sounded so made up. So, I ran it through an anagram website to see what I could come up with.

“What’d you find?”

“Nothing at first. Most of the results produced garbage, but then I took a good look at the last of the hundred results it gave: Ark La-An-Don.”

“La-An-Don?” Fin said. “Kinda sounds like Landon, don’t it?”

Munch nodded. “That’s what I was thinking. So, I put the little guy’s name in the search, but couldn’t get anything akin to Landanorak.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s probably just a coincidence,” Alexa said drawing narrowed eyes from Munch.

“But, I was determined,” he continued as if Alexa had not said anything. “I looked up Landon’s parents, his schools, whatever. It just bothered me that the name sounded so similar.”

“Did you end up finding anything?” Elliot asked.

“Actually...” Munch handed Elliot a sheet paper with Mark’s information. “I found out a lot about ole Marky boy, but I looked over the most interesting thing. Look at the full name at the top.”

“Mark Aaron Landon,” Elliot read.

“Yep. And I’ll give you just one guess what kind of name the anagram search pulled out of ‘Mark Aaron Landon.’”

Alone, Elliot stepped onto the eighth floor of the Village apartment and walked steadily down the corridor that led toward Olivia’s vacant flat.

Alexa insisted that they could not base their investigation off of an anagram and refused to go, noting that she did not want to be involved if Elliot was going to behave the way he had the last time they visited Landon, and Munch and Fin were called out on a new case just as they were about to leave. He had half a mind to ask Andrea, but vaguely feared another glare from her and struck out on his own.

“Come on, Landon,” Elliot said after pounding on Mark’s door for several minutes. “Open the door.”

“Leave me alone!”

“I just want to talk.”

“You can talk through my attorney! Go away!”

“Landon,” Elliot said. “I’m not trying to pin something on you. You’re Liv’s neighbor and I just need some information. If you wanted to help her, you’d let me in.”

Elliot waited silently for a reaction and started to give up, when a full minute passed before there was even the slightest sound from behind the door. Mark cracked the door just so he was able to glare a small eye at Elliot.

“What could you possibly need from me?” Mark hissed.

“Just...can I come in for a second?”

“No. I don’t want you going crazy when there’s no one here to help me. The last time I let you in here, you damn near tore my apartment apart. I’ve only now got most of it straightened away.”

Elliot sighed. “Look, I need to talk to you and I can’t do it like this. Can you just let me in for a second so we can talk like men?”

Mark slammed the door shut, but as Elliot began to walk away, he heard the door chain sliding and the door across from Olivia’s empty apartment cracked slightly.

“Thanks,” Elliot said once inside the apartment.

“Don’t get comfortable,” Mark said as he stood in the middle of the living room with his arms crossed. “You’re not staying long.”

“You’re right,” Elliot said. “I won’t be staying long. I’ve only got a couple questions for you.”

“Like what? What else could you possibly have to ask me?”

“Well, we were looking through some records and found-”

“And, before you get started, I’ll just say it now. I didn’t do anything to Olivia.”

“Yes,” Elliot said. “I’ve heard you say it before.”

“Well, it’s as true now as it was then.”

“I got it, so you can drop the hostilities. Anyways, we’ve already got our sights on somebody, so I know you’re clean.”

“That’s right. I am.” His expression softened as Elliot padded slowly about the apartment. “So, if you’re already looking at a suspect, why are you really here?”

Elliot shrugged. “Basic information.”

“Like what?”

“Does the name Landanorak mean anything to you?”

Mark squinted at him. “Landanorak? Oh, so now I’m supposed to pull random information like that out of my ass? How the hell should I know what Landano-whatever is?”

“No need to get testy. I was just asking a question.”

“You’re always just asking a question and that’s how you begin. If I’m not careful or *testy*, I’ll end up cleaning up everything in my apartment again.”

“Look, I’m sorry, all right?”

“*You’re* apologizing to me? What the hell are you up to?”

“Nothing,” Elliot lied, just above a whisper. “I just came here to make amends and ask for a little bit of information. That’s all.”

Eyeing him suspiciously, Mark crossed the room and stood near his door. “Well, thanks just the same, but you can go now. I’m not sure how in the mood I am to take on one of your apologies, such as they are.”

“Just give me a second, Landon. Now, does the name ring a bell or not?”

“In what capacity?”

“Any. A city. A last name. A friend of yours?”

“I knew it. You’re looking at somebody named Landanorak and before I know what’s happening, you’re going to cost me thousands in legal fees when you drag me back down to your precinct for no reason.”

“Look, I just want to know if the name has any meaning for you.”

Mark shook his head. “No. That name has no meaning for me. Are we done now?”

Elliot stared at the floor for a moment when an idea popped to mind.

“Are you at all interested in how Liv’s doing?”

Mark’s eyes grew wide. “Yes. Yes, I am. How is she?”

“Not doing too good, Landon. She’s very sick and in the throws of a depression none of us can seem to bring her out of.”

“I see,” Mark said nodding. “What’s been happening? Why’s she been in the hospital this whole time?”

“She’s been having some problems with her legs. We’re not sure how bad the paralysis-”

“Paralysis?” Mark said. “She’s paralyzed?”

“Well, she’s getting some feeling back in her legs, but her doctors don’t know if she’ll ever be able to walk again.”

He let out a long sigh and an imperceptible expression spread across his face.

“You know,” Elliot said as he slowly paced across the room, “you’re the only person who’s relatively close to Olivia who hasn’t been by to see her yet.”

Mark shifted on his feet. “Yeah...I’ve been, uh...meaning to. I just...I’ve been trying to work myself up to seeing her...I just don’t think I’ll be able to handle seeing her like that.”

“I’m sure she’d like to see you though,” Elliot continued. “Especially right now. She’s...she’s been so down lately and I’m sure a friendly face might cheer her up.”

“Yeah,” Mark said nodding. “I just...you know...I’ve been thinking about it... Has she asked for me at all?”

“No,” Elliot said quickly taking a look around the apartment that looked similar to Olivia’s only inverted.

“Oh,” Mark said softly. “Well...I mean, I guess I am *just* a neighbor. She probably just forgot about me since she hasn’t seen me in so long.”

“And like I said...I’m sure she’d like to see you.”

“I just wish there was something that I could do,” Mark said crossing his arms. “I mean, I just feel so helpless, you know? I’m really starting to feel it...the emptiness that’s coming from her side of the aisle way. It’s kind of like the way it was when her mother moved out of that apartment all that time ago.”

Elliot nodded and as he did, light from the window across the room caught a glimmer of something near the door. He moved his head again as Mark prattled on, but could not see the glimmer again.

“Well, thanks,” he said absentmindedly.

“If I can be of any help,” Mark said extending a hand as if offering Elliot the door, “please just let me know. But, don’t start accusing me for anything anymore.”

Elliot walked toward the door as Mark opened it for him. “I’ll keep you posted.”

As he turned to walk down the hall, the glimmer of light caught his eye again. He glanced at the spot on the floor from which it came, and felt his heart jump into his throat.

“Please be sure you do,” Mark said and closed the door.

Elliot stood staring at the closed door for a moment, stunned and unsure what step to take next. His first thoughts were to immediately speak to Olivia, but he quickly shook the thought away from mind. She would not be able to help with this. Cragen would need to need know and his next stop would surely be at Casey’s office.

Elliot let out the breath he was unaware that he was holding and began walking toward the elevator. When the doors opened after what seemed like an eternity, he felt the urge to grab his gun and go running back down the hall, but let the elevators close once he was inside instead. His own glossy visage reflected back to him in the elevators distorted metal, but instead of seeing himself in the hazy mirror, the only image in Elliot’s mind was one of a small, smudged and dirty, golden desk key stuck in the lower corner door frame of Mark Landon’s old apartment door.

Wednesday April 4, 2007
7:12AM

Elliot paced back in forth in Cragen's office rubbing his forehead as a shooting pain coursed through his temples. Mark Landon's face floated before his eyes and each time he blinked, Elliot felt ready to throw things across the room.

He and Cragen had been arguing for twenty minutes already over Mark and Cragen stood steadfast, refusing to pull out all stops in arresting him.

"I know what I saw, Cap," he said.

"But, there's no way we can go barging into Landon's apartment and expect to hold him just on that."

"Don!" Elliot shouted. "We've got to get him and we need to do it now! How many coincidences do we need to stack up against him before we're willing to grab him?"

"There are more problems with Landon than those coincidences account for."

Elliot shook his head. "Don... The second set of cameras we found are for short range and Landon's right across the hall. Every single person we've talked to about Landon describes him as a crazy little man who seems possessive of Olivia. We see it on the tapes. He's always dropping by and always shows up with things for her right when she needs them. How would he know if he wasn't watching her from right across the hall? Those newer cameras are his. There's no question in my mind. And, I know Olivia and she's never even set foot in Landon's apartment, but we found her hair and her prints in his place, not to mention the goddamn key!"

"Elliot..."

"No. Look I know what I saw that night. The reason I even went for Liv was because I wanted the damn keys she'd thrown down her shirt. I just wanted the keys. The two of them were together and then all of a sudden, one of them is stuffed under Landon's doorframe. We need to arrest him."

"I would love to arrest Mark Landon, but we don't have anything to keep him on and *if* we arrest, I'm certain he'll run, as soon as he's released on bail. You need to look at the problems as they stand. Landon is her neighbor and has been for years. Anything we find in regards to hair, prints...keys can be attributed to that. Anything could have floated, fallen or rolled six feet across the hall and into Landon's apartment over the years. Problem number two: We started looking at Landon *before* Olivia was found. Which means that we were searching him up and down at the same time Olivia was being held captive. Don't forget, that when Olivia was missing for just two days, you were in that apartment, twice and didn't see or hear anything.

"Now, from the canvasses we've done in the surrounding buildings where we found Olivia, nothing's been found and Landon's not associated with any of them. The closest thing that has any relation is some guy's warehouse of probably pirated movies. For all intents and purposes, Landon hasn't been East of Broad or North of 14th in years and Liv was found on 90th and that creates a problem. Now, Liv's not cooperating any longer, but before she fell she had pieced together some guy who doesn't look anything like Landon, which means that the victim...the *witness* has already discounted Landon. Also, we still can't connect Landon with this mystery chemical purchaser. And don't give me that garbage about the anagram. If we send Casey to a judge with that, they'll laugh us all out of the unit. Until we can definitely link him to the chemicals or East 90th, we've still got nothing."

“Not nothing,” Munch said as he and Fin entered Cragen’s office. “We got a call this morning from Zachary Calbrach’s mother. He’d had a nightmare last night and said he knew what his attacker looked like. Look at what the sketch artist came up with.”

He handed the sketch to Cragen whose eyes went wide. “Holy shit...It looks like Landon.”

“We took it around Zachary’s neighborhood,” Fin said as Elliot snatched the sketch and glared at it was just visibly shaking hands. “The neighbor who said she’d seen someone hanging around the school before Zachary was attacked. She ID’d him instantly.”

They each stood silent for a moment as Cragen shook his head.

“Bring him in.”

Four detectives and their captain stood silently in a semi-circle each pondering the same question as Mark Landon was held in an interrogation room down the corridor. Having waived his right to council in writing, Fin made sure of it, Mark had been sitting in the interrogation room for close to five hours staring stoic at the far wall.

Calmly suppressing his rage, Elliot had arrested Mark, read him his rights and threw him into an interrogation room while he and the rest of the unit ransacked Mark’s apartment, taking anything they thought might have potential in the pending case. They took his computer, bank records, Olivia’s desk key and a key to her apartment as well as accessories from his wardrobe.

Inside the apartment, Elliot had an epiphany, remembering Olivia mentioning that she remembered being under something, but also unable to call out when she heard his voice. Under his guise, they flipped Mark’s bed and found a disturbance in the dust that was about Olivia’s size. Elliot tore through the apartment for the second time and had CSU swab the bathroom sink that glowed faintly under a black light.

Melinda compared the swab to her previous samples and ruled that the substance in Mark’s bathroom was not only identical to that found on the boys and Olivia’s clothes, but it was the precise concentration and mixture. She then compared fibers from Mark’s clothes and found one of his belts a perfect fit to the object that had been used to kill Ryan Daly and Andrew Shaw, yet not for the previous murders. To make matters worse, she also deduced that of the two sets of male hair found Olivia’s clothes, Mark’s was present.

Mark’s computers were given to Morales who discovered that a large number of files had recently been wiped from his hard drive. As Mark had performed multiple recoveries on his system, it took the better part of the day, but eventually Morales was able to see the last files Mark had deleted. The largest file was a lengthy video clip that showed a very different play of the night Olivia disappeared.

Instead of turning to snow as Elliot pinned Olivia to the floor, Olivia struggled against him and hit him in the groin, enabling herself to wriggle free. Elliot came after her again and she slapped him once on across the cheek and then hit him on the eye. His face grew red as he grabbed both of her arms and for a moment, Olivia flew through the air as Elliot launched her forward and she crashed against her wall, causing all of her pictures to collapse to the ground.

As Olivia slid toward the floor, Elliot's breathing slowed and he put a hand to his head as if realizing what he had done and stepped away from her with a disquieted frown set on his face. Olivia however, snapped her head up and launched from the floor in his direction. She hit him twice on either side of the face and screamed as she kicked him in the stomach; Elliot cowered slightly, trying in vain to fend off her blows.

He whirled around her and managed to pin her to the floor for a moment before she elbowed him in the stomach, hit him across the face and was able to flip him onto his stomach where she pulled a set of handcuffs from her desk, cuffed his arms behind his back and stood several feet away from him, leaving him on the floor as she gasped for air.

Olivia crossed the room, poured herself a scotch and in between sips breathed "That...is why...you can't...have...Dro...ver's...file..." She then unlocked him and he sprang from the floor to glare at her, his own breathing ragged. "Just...give me the file," Elliot had said on the screen, but Olivia shook her head and pointed towards her door. He stepped toward the door and quickly left, but not before announcing, "I can't fucking stand you." drawing a single tear from Olivia's eyes. She stared at the door that was opened just a crack for a moment and then turned to stare at the trashed apartment as she burst into tears.

She wept for a moment and then jumped at the sound of knocking at her door. Olivia crossed the room, reached for the doorknob, and then Mark, clear as day, jumped at her, holding a white cloth. She struggled for just a second before she collapsed and in less than thirty seconds, Mark was attempting to throw her over his shoulder, but he could not lift her properly with his short stature and resigned to dragging her across the floor. He stopped just once when it appeared that she had caught on something. He pulled at her shoulders and something gold flew back into her apartment as he continued dragging her into his own.

Cragen had mildly reprimanded Elliot and informed him that he would have to be docked a week's pay for his actions just to keep the deputy commissioner happy, but also mentioned that nothing would be entered into Elliot's record.

"You just got your ass kicked so well by Olivia," Cragen had said, "it seems cruel and unusual to do anymore to you."

Yet, all humor had been laid aside as the severity of the situation emerged. Based on the accuracy of the previous sketch, Zachary Calbrach had been brought into the precinct to view a line-up and he identified Mark as soon as he stepped through the door. With Zachary's proclamations of "That's him! That's him! That's the guy!" the detectives were left trying to piece together a motive. Mark Landon had killed Ryan Daly and Andrew Shaw and attacked Zachary and Olivia and the question of motive hung in the air.

"Why both?" Elliot said, breaking the silence. He spoke more to himself than anyone else.

"He's a nut," Fin said.

"Even they have reasons."

"Yeah, but the real question is how would he have done it?" Munch said. "The murders, I mean. How could he have known the intricate details of the case?"

Silence befell them momentarily.

"Her desk," Cragen said. "When we first went in there with CSU, you noticed it, Elliot. You said it looked like something was missing from her desk and she had one of Jacob Lewendale's files with her."

"But, when would he've taken it?" Alexa asked. "He's not on the tapes."

"Probably the same time he took her," Munch said.

"Why though?" Fin argued. "If I'm looking at this right, he killed Ryan Daly and Andrew Shaw to take the heat off of us looking too closely at him for taking Olivia. But, if he killed them as an after thought, why would he take the files up front? That's saying like he knew what else he would've had to do before he did it and I'm not willing to give Landon that kinda credit."

"You don't have to," Elliot said, crossing his arms. "Morse's tape cuts out before Landon grabbed Olivia and starts again that same night. But, he stops taping completely that Saturday. Morse thought he knew what happened and figured Olivia wouldn't be coming home. The last of his videos ends about an hour before he came in to see us and Landon would've had all the time in the world after that to duck under the police tape and snatch Jacob Lewendale's file."

"This is unbelievable," Alexa whispered.

"For real," Fin said. "I mean...how crazy do you have to be to start killing little kids just to cover something you did?"

"I just wish we had a motive," she said.

"He killed the kids to cover for Liv," Munch said. "He's an extra special breed of crazy. I'm not surprised he took a page from Kreider."

"Yeah, but...I mean Kreider was simply certifiable. So, was the stalker, Morse, for that matter. But, Landon...what could've possibly driven him to do this?"

Elliot began walking towards Mark's interrogation room. "Let's find out. All the extra special crazies at least have a good story to tell."

Mark bolted upright as Elliot barged through the interrogation room door and quickly sat in the chair across from him. He glared at Mark and took in every part of his small stature, from his doleful, beady eyes, to his terracotta-coloured hair. Mark returned the stare, but the fire had gone from his eyes and he showed signs of fatigue and resignation.

"We've been doing some investigating," Elliot said. "As it turns out, you've been up to some stuff, haven't you?"

"The boys weren't my idea," Mark said quickly.

"Of course not," Elliot snapped. "You only stalked them, raped them and strangled them all by yourself. Why wouldn't all of that have been your idea?"

"There was a man. I can tell you where he is. He calls himself a kind of art dealer, but it's really just strange porn. Anyway, he's the one who suggested the boys."

"Why do you know this man? And why would you just sublimely follow when he asked you to do something? Are you a sheep too? You can't come up with your own thoughts, so you follow everyone else."

"That's not true. There was man."

"Right. Right. This fictitious man who had Olivia."

"He's not fictitious. He's the one who took her later and if she's hurt at all, it's all because of him."

Elliot's eye twitched as he stared at Mark. "Why did you take her?"

"I didn't have a choice."

"Of course you did. You had two choices: to go about your business or jump at her with some stuff you bought and mixed specifically for this purpose and hold her hostage for days and days. Why'd you choose the latter?"

"*She* wanted me to look after her."

"She who? You're not making any sense."

Mark sighed and stared at the table for a moment. "I've lived in that apartment since I was eighteen. The woman who lived there before...Serena...she was so nice to me after my mother had died. She would say that she'd always wanted a son, but wasn't about to have any other children."

"So, what happened Landon?"

"I...I don't know. It started out fine at first. I just wanted to see her all the time and so I visited her a lot. Then I met this daughter she had been talking about all that time and she would say to me that she would marry Olivia off to me. She kind of joked about it, but I kind of liked the idea and I wanted to know more about her."

"Is that when you started video taping that apartment?"

He nodded slowly. "I just wanted to know what they were talking about it. Serena was the closest thing I'd had to a mother in a long time and I just wanted to know what she was like with her own kid. And, then she went uptown and Olivia moved in and...she wasn't like her mother. Olivia was always gone and she really didn't do much but say hi or goodbye to me when she was coming and going."

"But, you kept taping her anyway?"

"I had to," Mark said his momentarily wide. "That was the last thing Serena had said to me when she left. To keep a look out for her baby girl because she worried about her all the time. She said Olivia worked a job that wasn't good for her and she was alone a lot. She said Olivia could be self-destructive which I found kind of ironic since she was drunk herself quite often, but she always so good to me even when she was. And then...and then Serena died...and I didn't know about it. The only reason I even knew was because I'd seen Olivia crying in the apartment and I knew I had to see what was wrong, because that was what Serena had asked me to do."

Elliot shifted uncomfortably in his seat, not allowing the expression on his face to soften. "And then what happened? Were you angry because Olivia didn't tell you something? Is that why you took her all these years later?"

"N-no...I was just...I just made up my mind to keep looking after her because that was the last thing Serena had told me to do. So, I did. But..." Mark sighed and closed his eyes. Elliot could see the slightest vestige of a tear forming on his eyelashes, but Mark quickly brushed it away with his hand. "Like I said, Olivia wasn't Serena. She wasn't as nice to me and she just sort of looked at me like this little man who she had to put up with because she wanted to keep her rent control. And then there were the men. Not a lot of them, but enough for me to know what Serena had been talking about when she said that Olivia was self-destructive."

"If it wasn't just some tall guy she'd met and wanted out the door the next morning, it was some arrogant bastard who made her feel bad about herself. And, then of course, there was you." He glared at Elliot. "When I first saw the two of you argue in her apartment, I wanted to come after you right then, but I didn't. I should've but I didn't."

"I didn't do anything."

“But, you’d argue with her. Even way back then. And, then when I saw her letting herself being bullied by these others, I just didn’t know what to do. She kept letting it happen, too. There was even one who’d hit her and she still kept him around. And all that time, I was always doing everything I could to be a good friend. If I thought for an instant that she needed something, I made sure to get it for her. I was always good to her.”

“By stalking her?”

Mark shook his head. “By just helping her out when she needed it. I figured if I just kept offering myself as somebody she could lean on, other than you, she’d come around.”

“But she never did, did she?”

“She said I was nobody to her. *Nobody*. I...I would do anything for her if she asked me to, but I nobody to her. I was the only person in the world who wouldn’t have hurt her and yet...I was nobody. Halloway was the one who didn’t want her to have a life outside of him and yet I was nobody. You were the one who burst into her apartment like goddamn madman and left her in tears when you did, but I was the one who was nobody. After I saw what happened that Tuesday, I knew something had to be done.”

“For her own good...”

“Right. Between you and these destructive people in her life, I knew it was only a matter of time before she was going to get killed by somebody and I’d’ve let Serena down.”

Elliot stood and leaned on the table right next to Mark.

“That’s a great story, Landon. Touching, really. You attacked Olivia to save her from herself because it was what her mother would’ve wanted. Yeah. A really good story. If it was a movie, I’d go see it.”

“It’s not just a story. It’s the truth.”

Elliot laughed. “You are a piece of work. You’ve been looking me, my co-workers, my boss...anyone and everyone. You looked all of us in the eye and swore up and down that you hadn’t done anything to Olivia. You got your attorney in here, insisted that we were harassing you, and swore that all this was ridiculous. And yet...here we are. Two boys are dead, one will never be the same and then there’s Olivia. For what?”

“I already told you that the boys weren’t my idea.”

“Yes, of course. This guy. This art dealer you’ve made up.”

“I didn’t make up anything about him,” Mark said, the fire returning.

“And I’m supposed to take that you at your word on that one?”

“I’m telling the truth.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“I don’t see why you’re being so difficult about this-”

Elliot snatched Mark by the shirt and pulled him off the ground so that his feet barely grazed the floor tiles.

“I am being...difficult because you assaulted my partner and killed two kids to cover it up.”

Mark shook himself loose from Elliot’s grip. “I didn’t assault Olivia. Okay? You’re the one who threw her against a wall.”

“Don’t even try that with me. You’re the reason she can’t walk.”

“But, I’ve already told you that that wasn’t me. Are you really that thick? I mean you ransacked my apartment while she was still gone and you didn’t find her. I s-sold her, okay? I sold her to this guy and he did all this other stuff to her, not me.”

“And you and your midget lawyer are free to argue that when you’re on trial for your life.”

“When I gave her to the guy, she was perfectly healthy.”

“Except,” Elliot said taking a step toward him. “For that little chemical you mixed in your bathroom. It’s giving her seizures and it’s probably half the reason why she can’t walk right now. You call that perfectly healthy?”

“Well, I find that absolutely laughable coming from you. Didn’t you insist that Olivia was ‘perfectly fine’ when you had left her? We both know what happened that night and there’s no way you can say with a straight face that she was fine. I took her to keep her from being attacked by you again. I knew that next time you were going to kill her.”

“So, why the break down?” Elliot asked as he rolled his eyes. “Why sell her off if you were supposed to be her great protector? Do you think you did Serena Benson proud by doing it?”

Mark stared at spot on the wall just beyond Elliot and narrowed his already small eyes. “She...she didn’t want me. She’d always bat me away from her. There were the lowest forms of life going in and out of that apartment, but she wouldn’t let me touch her. You she’d let rub your mouth all over her. Halloway...God, she’d let him do anything at all, but when I tried to...”

“But, even through a haze of drugs, she still fought you off.”

“Olivia thought that she was too good for me. It was only when I had her in my place that I started to piece together the past years. She would never just knock on my door to see how I was like I would do for her. She pretended that I never even knew her mother...She would never even give me my mail when it ended up in her box. Instead, she’d just leave it in a lump next to my door. I realized she wasn’t a good person and I didn’t see the reason in keeping her around anymore. I knew that he was wanting someone to use in his new work and I just gave her up.”

“For five thousand dollars.”

“Willingly. I would’ve honestly done it for less, but I didn’t want him to get cold feet about taking her if I was too low on the price.”

Elliot stepped toward Mark as he backed across the room and leaned very close as Mark stood pressed against the wall.

“You literally sold her into slavery to be dejected and starved until this *guy* was done with her. Who are you to say Olivia wasn’t a good person? The reason she didn’t like you was because she saw you for the person you were. She saw that you were nothing more than small-minded bigot and she had better things to do with her time than associate.” Elliot shook his head. “You’re a sad little man and if there’s any justice in this world, hopefully you’ll be dead before your sentencing.”

“I’ve made some mistakes,” Mark said. “But, I-”

“Mistakes! You strangled three boys for absolutely nothing!”

Mark flattened himself against the wall, trying to back away from Elliot’s berating tone. Elliot paused and an image played before his eyes as he stared at Mark. At first he had Mark’s throat in his bare hands, squeezing and squeezing as he turned

colours. Then he saw himself drawing his weapon and simply squeezing the trigger into Mark's head until the clip was emptied. He had half a mind to drag Olivia from her bed and let her pummel the life out of him as well. Vision after vision crossed his mind, but after a full minute he shook his head and walked toward the door.

"Hey," Mark said. "What's going to happen to me?"

"You'll die a horrible death at a young age."

"But, I'm not the one who threw her out of a window. That other guy is. And he's the one who told me to do all that to those boys?"

"Did he tell how to stalk them?" Elliot seethed. "Did he tell you exactly how to sodomize and beat them? How about strangling them? Did he tell you that?"

"You don't understand..."

"I understand. You're full of shit. You killed those boys and whatever this other person you've made up did to Olivia, you're the one who sold her to him. Does that even register to you? You *sold* another person. You *murdered* two young boys. You're an absolute horror of a human being."

Elliot turned to walk again, but just before he got to the door, he sighed. He stepped toward Mark, drew his fist and used every bit force in his arm and threw Mark across the room from the force of the hit. When he left the room, he drew concerned stares from the Munch, Fin and Cragen, but he did not care.

It had to be done, he thought as left the squad room for Olivia's hospital. *He's just lucky I didn't do more.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Monday May 7, 2007

Mount Carmel Hospital East

Olivia smiled at the newest letter that had been delivered with her morning mail. It was another handwritten letter from the boy who had found her, Deondre Meekham, and she read it twice before she set it upright on the side table.

When Mark Landon had been arrested, she broke into her first smile in weeks and upon reviewing all the other cards and letters of encouragement she had received, she decided to return a letter to the young boy. Jillian had asked her repeatedly why she did, and while she could not find the words to express her concern with Jillian, Olivia felt obligated to make sure the boy who had found a body in the trash was still mentally healthy, and it was also a nice exercise for her own mind. She corrected his grammar much like her mother had when she was his age, and with each new letter he wrote in turn, his fundamentals increased and sounded much better than he had in his first letter.

The sudden urge to use the bathroom hit her pelvis and she pulled the covers off the bed and shifted slowly as she eased herself into the black, cushioned wheelchair that sat next to the bed.

Her recovery over the past month had been slow; much slower than she would have liked. Physical therapy began as soon as she had re-trained her body to accept food once again and Olivia had held a vision of herself defying all odds by standing and nearly walking on her first day. Instead, the day had been spent training her back and stomach

muscles to work in conjunction and keep her upright once again. The entire circumstance had the otiosity that kept Olivia's active soul awake at night. Though she willed her mind to improve and pushed her body as far as it would go, it took several days before she could move her legs enough to simply shift off the bed and another full week until she was able to pull herself to a wobbling and aided standing position.

Elliot constantly reminded her that being able to move at all was miraculous by itself as her doctors had been quite sure that she would remain paralyzed from the waist down for the rest of her days.

Using her arms, that had gained twice their strength in recent weeks, she pushed on the chair's wheels and through a number of gymnastic maneuvers she managed to use the toilet and rolled herself out of the room and down the hall to visit the nurse's station.

Olivia hated the wheelchair when it was first brought out to her, thinking that it was some kind of black swathe that would be used to keep her technically disabled for life. Its cushions were plump and it had pockets at its sides for carrying objects of various sizes. The chair was not one of the simple wheelchairs used temporarily for hospital patients; it was meant for long-term use. However, once she was able to get herself in and out of it without help, she felt a freedom she had not sensed since she first left her mother's house at eighteen.

At first, a foreboding gloom perused her thoughts as she considered the idea of being confined to the contraption. The urge to strike out at anyone around her and grow angry again was great as she realized how much she had taken the ability to stand or walk for granted. A palpable helplessness overwhelmed her mind and she struggled for many days to keep from drowning in depression once more. What incensed her most was that there was no recourse. She could not talk her way out of it; she could not fight her way out of it. As said by the recent amputee that had resided down the corridor, she would simply have to live through the experience.

She eventually grew to love the mobility afforded through the chair since her legs still did not respond properly and made the best of the situation. When there were the fewest amounts of people on the floor, she and Maya would laugh themselves into hysterics as Maya would give Olivia a running push and then hop onto the back of the chair as they both careened down the corridors reminding them both of the shenanigans of their youth. Olivia would goad other wheelchair bound residents into races and eventually was able to perform tricks in her chair as well as discover new nuances such as how to bounce down sets of shallow steps and turning around hairpin corners at accelerated speeds.

Maya, Elliot and Jonathan visited her at regular intervals collectively pleased to see her convalescing considering her demeanor in the previous month and Olivia eventually apologized to each of them individually for what she had said. Even remembering her coarse words caused her to wince in shame, but all anyone responded was "I understand."

"Hey," Olivia said as she applied pressure to her wheel handles and came to a stop just in front of the station. "When you have a minute, can you have someone look at that bathroom again? I just want to make sure it's clean."

"It's no problem," the bright-eyed nurse said. "We'll have someone there in just a bit."

Olivia smiled at her, nodded at the cop posted near her door and headed back to her room. She had always had an aversion to public restrooms and as she had been recently moved to a different room that allowed for more physical therapy to be performed any time of day, the new bathroom had the feel of a public toilet on Broadway even though it was cleaned thoroughly before she was moved.

As much as she hated it, she was beginning to grow accustomed to the benefits having Halloway money behind her requests and though she refused to acknowledge it on principle, she enjoyed having the hospital staff treat her like she was plated in gold. The slightest little thing was hers upon request; from a larger television in the room to curtains that let in slightly more light. Jonathan ensured that her every wish was granted on her extended stay in the hospital.

Olivia had spent a total of eleven weeks in various hospitals and while there did appear to be light at the end of the tunnel, she was still irritated by having lost close to three months of her life in hospitals and her status in the current one.

Pulmonary problems still erupted at least once a day and the seizures, which had ironically stopped altogether while she was in the throws of depression, occurred at least once every 48-hours. Her newest primary physician, Dr. Weiss, insisted that the issues in her lungs stemmed from the severe pneumonia that nearly conquered her at one point, even through her positivism, and still threatened to wreak havoc on her body. Her femur bone was still not fully healed, needing another month of mending, and she had also suffered two bouts of infection from the gunshot wound that refused to heal. All of her ailments notwithstanding, Dr. Weiss promised that she would most likely be out of the hospital in another week.

With the knowledge that she would eventually be allowed to leave and also Mark Landon sitting in a prison cell, Olivia had put a new vigor into her therapy and had in the past few days, worked her body to the point where she could do tens of pull-ups without pause and could hand walk across a set of parallel bars as she attempted to pull her legs behind her.

The idea that Mark had been the one to attack her was still quite baffling. She had been certain that her attacker had been tall and blond, but through her fuliginous memory, she had remembered that there had been more than one party at some point. Elliot, through her tirade of unflappable nagging, had shown her the video Mark had taken and it was only after she saw Mark coming after her that she acknowledged that “little Mark” had actually attacked.

Olivia flipped herself onto her bed, leaving the blankets in a bunch at her feet and turned on the television as she noted the time. It was nearly time for her soap opera and that meant that Maya would be coming shortly.

The number of daily visitors had dwindled by a significant amount, but she was not upset by it as most of her time was spent with Maya, Elliot or both together. She enjoyed those times most. Together they would just talk like old friends and she and Maya would end up swapping old embarrassing stories just to make Elliot laugh.

“Hey! You can’t hold that against me,” Olivia had said. “Remember, *you* were the one who nearly burnt down the whole school!”

Elliot had turned to Maya with a bright smile. “You burnt down your school?”

“No,” Maya said slowly and rolled her eyes. “See, this is how the stupid rumors get started. We didn’t burn down the school. There was just a little fire-”

“Which *you* started!” Olivia laughed.

“I did not! It was that other girl... Tiffany or Megan or some crap. She’s the one who threw her cigarette in the trashcan instead of the toilet. *She’s* the one who started the fire.”

“But, it was still a fire,” Elliot said.

“Just a little fire and honestly it wasn’t even that bad. They had it out in like five minutes and we just got a slap on the wrist. ‘Course Livia here didn’t get anything because she was too goody-goody to participate.”

“I wasn’t getting suspended because you wanted to smoke,” Olivia said.

“But, you could’ve said something! Honestly, Elliot. She ran out of the damn bathroom and I know she had to’ve seen the vice principal coming, but did she yell for us to put out stuff or even run for cover? No way! She just kept running.”

“Damn straight, I kept running. By the time the fire alarms were going off, I was already out of the building. I remember because all the freshmen I had passed were just looking at me like I was some kind of psychic since I knew we’d have to evacuate. It was great. My finest hour and I never even got to take credit for it.”

Olivia’s cell phone chimed from the stand and she sighed when she saw that Jonathan had left her text message announcing that he would at the hospital later in the day.

Unlike her visits with Maya and Elliot, Jonathan’s were far more subdued. Many of her memories on the days before she had been attacked were fuzzy, except for the one where Jonathan had alluded to her being a whore. That, she remembered like it was just happening in front of her.

They had had several long discussions about “them” and what “they” were going to do, but she still had not made up her mind. She had been told what kind of terror Jonathan had been throughout her disappearance and while she more or less deemphasized the comments, the reality of the situation surfaced as he and Elliot argued in front of her.

Somewhere along the way, Jonathan had developed a sublime hatred for Elliot and she found it difficult to sympathize. They had had long talks about his jealousy and the fact that it was unnecessary, but he never seemed to accept her promises and she wondered whether or not she should end the relationship in its entirety.

She had not allowed Jonathan to kiss her on the lips throughout her stay in the hospital, whereas she had increasingly allowed Elliot to kiss her cheek goodbye and hold her hand for extended periods of time. Maya had teased her for years that she might be falling for her partner and she never paid the thought any mind, but in recent weeks, Elliot had been the one who refused to leave her side under any circumstance and she found herself pondering that upon many other thoughts that berated her consciousness.

His was the first face she saw when she first awakened from the horrific darkness and while most memories were a blur, she could remember calling out for just one person; not Maya, not Jonathan, not Jillian, just Elliot. He was her rock and after several conversations, she found herself longing to simply be near him.

“What do you really see in him?” Elliot had finally asked one day through frustrated eyes.

“What?” she had said.

“Halloway. What is it about him that keeps you with him?”

She shrugged. "We have a lot of fun together and...I don't know. I love him. Why do you ask?"

"I just...Don't take this the wrong way, Liv, but of all the guys I've seen you with, I like him the least."

"That's because of that little rich boy smugness he's got, but it really fades when we're alone."

"Yeah, that might be it," Elliot said, though he sounded as if he had not believed his own words. "But, I wouldn't want you being with this guy if he didn't really make you happy."

She let her eyes drop to the hospital blanket. "When did you decide to go into this older brother, protective mode?"

"I wouldn't bring it up, but...you've kept him around for a while."

"Which should be evidence that he's a stand up guy."

"I never said he wasn't, and it's probably not my place to say it, but I don't think he's the right person for you."

"Well, we never know until we put some effort into the relationship. And, no. It's not your place to say that."

"Olivia, I care about you. Who you're with and what you're going through eventually impacts me and from what I saw in Halloway these past couple weeks raises all kinds of red flags."

"Why? What's he done that's so bad?"

Elliot sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "I just wish that you and him had a long talk before you go any further."

"Elliot...I love Jonathan. We're just going through some things right now because of what's happened to me."

"Liv, there was a guy, Morse, who'd been taping your apartment. We watched those videos, Olivia and we've seen some things."

The concern into her eyes melted into an angry glare. "Things like what?"

"Do you really need me to elaborate?"

"Yes. I do. I can't really figure out what you're talking about when you say *things*. Like that's supposed to mean something to me."

"Olivia, almost three years ago, you were walking around with stars in your eyes over Matthew Williard...and I saw what he did to you. Not once. Not twice. Three different times and I remember you saying, as clear as day that you were in love with the guy. That he was so perfect he seemed too good to be true."

"And, he was. In the end, I got rid of him."

"But, not after he'd hurt you."

"You know, Elliot," she began, her voice cracking as she forced tears to remain at the brims of her eyes. "I don't need you telling me all the mistakes I've made in relationships over the years. I remember every single one. Matthew...was a mistake and he caught me at a weak moment when I was lonelier than usual and was more prone to forgive him. But, I realized what I was doing and I ended it. Jonathan is not Matthew."

"Fine, not now, but what about tomorrow or three years from now?"

"You can't say how any of us will be in three years. Hell, at New Year's I was planning on getting to know my cousin a little better and training for the marathon. Allison's stopped by a few times, but it doesn't look like I'll be making the latter. But,

I've been with Jonathan for two years. Yes, he has his problems, but who doesn't? I mean, look at us. You are insistent that you are always right, even to your detriment, you push people away the moment they try to help you and even if you were drowning, you wouldn't call for help. And, me...Honestly, where do I start? Jonathan is a good person and I know that he loves me."

"You can love someone Olivia without being in a relationship. Look at me and Kathy. Do you think I stopped loving her just because she threw me out? Jonathan Halloway is not the one. He's not good for you."

"Based on what?"

"Based on gut feeling."

"The same gut feeling that insisted Jeffrey Drover had murdered those kids?"

"No. The same gut feeling that *knew* Drover was a child molester and knew that Mark Landon had done something to you. I don't like Halloway. Something about him rubs me wrong."

"Why are you so against him? Why do you hate him so much?"

He refused to answer and left the hospital, but as he did, Olivia saw a glimmer of something in his eye that she had never seen previously. There was something in the way he had looked at her that said he would never be able to honestly answer her question. However, though Elliot would not answer her, Allison took a stab at the situation when she came with her son to visit and Olivia had blurted out the problem before she could stop herself.

Well," Allison had said as Olivia cradled PK in her arms. "I don't know how close you two are, but it sounds like he knows he's about to lose you."

"What do you mean lose me? I'm not going anywhere?"

"*Lose* you, Olivia. To the rich guy."

"What? No, not Elliot. We're not like that."

"Okay...If you say so."

"No, Allison. I'm telling you. Elliot doesn't really think of me like that."

Allison sighed and tipped her finger into PK's hand so that he grasped it firmly. "Olivia, I may be a bit younger, but I know men and I know how they act when they're jealous."

"Elliot's not jealous of Jonathan. He's never been jealous of any of my boyfriends, so why would he start now?"

"That just proves my point. None of the ones had ever been this good a match for you as this and he knows it. Now, all of sudden, he's starting to realize that he might have to give you up since Jonathan's around and you'll probably end up marrying him."

"Well, that's a nice little theory, but what's he giving up? He's my partner, not my ex."

"But, I'm sure there've been moments--"

"Up 'til the last two years he's been married. There haven't been any moments."

"So, you've been dating Jonathan for two years and he's been out of his marriage for two years?"

"Yes, but there's still a possibility his wife might take him back."

"Okay, so in all the time you've been partners, he's been married and you've been in sucky relationships. At the same time something happens that more or less frees him up, you get caught up with someone else. Someone who, unlike all the others, is perfect

for you and it's like, now that he's free to have you, you're with someone else. The reason it's probably coming out now most of all is because it's really, really easy to see when you and Jonathan together. You look like you've already been married for a year. Elliot has got to see this and he's angry about it, but he's a guy and doesn't know why he's angry, so he just vents his frustration any way he can. When he argues with Jonathan, it's probably on some subconscious level. He wants him out, but he just doesn't know why."

Olivia shook her head and held up PK. At three and a half months, his light brown hair was beginning to come in and his blue eyes could focus on her face. She broke into a wide smile and he exchanged a toothless grin in return.

"PK...", Olivia said in high, but soothing baby-voice. "You're mommy is messed in the head, d'you know that? She doesn't make any sense at all. S'ok though. Aunt Liv will be here for you when you want a voice of reason."

Allison laughed and Olivia changed the subject to PK's absent father, but her mind was welded to thoughts of Elliot even days later.

She had not been fully honest with her cousin in stating that there had not been any moments between her and Elliot. There was one incident when Elliot had kissed her neck while embracing her after coming to terms with his wife's departure and following the incident that ended quickly, Olivia suffered weeks of dreams that included she and Elliot in various positions in his bedroom. She had the fantasies all the time and was even caught voicing one of them while she was coming out of a slight concussion during her stint in Oregon.

As much as she hated to admit it, at some during her partnership with Elliot she was no longer accustomed to his company, but craved it. She enjoyed every moment they spent together, even when they were arguing, and rather guilty relished in the fact that he spent more time at the precinct following his separation. Her previous arguments with Jonathan would replay in her head after Allison's visit and she found herself staring at him with sad eyes each time he visited thinking, "Maybe he really *does* have something to worry about."

Taking up the knitting she had begun recently to regain function in her hands, Olivia shifted on the bed to make room for Maya's impending visit. She had nearly finished a piece of her lengthy creation when she heard a knock at her door. As if her thoughts had magically summoned him, Elliot stepped into her room a moment later.

"Hey, Liv," he said with a smile. His tie was undone signifying that he was ending his day early and he carried a bright green aloe plant in small pot. "I talked to your doctor and he says that flowers are still out, so I picked this up for you. I thought it might brighten the place a bit."

They hugged briefly as she took the pot from him and admired it.

"It's adorable," she said.

"I thought you'd like it. And, they're hard to kill so I figured it would be right up your alley."

She laughed and gave him a playful nudge. "How's your case going?"

"Done. Alexa and I collared the guy this morning. I'm just taking the rest of the day to play catch up on some paperwork."

"Has she been doing better lately?"

"I thought so for a while there, but this last girl...I mean she was about Lizzie age and after we talked to her, I found Alexa crying in the crib."

"She might get over it. We all had it rough those first few cases."

Elliot shook his head. "She's on the ropes. If the vics get any younger, she'll be done."

"I wish you'd let me help you out with something."

"It's out of my hands."

"Not if you really tried. I'm getting brain rot here Elliot. The only stimulation I'm getting is day-time TV."

"It's out of my hands," he repeated and she rolled her eyes.

"Any news on Kreider?"

"McCoy wanted you to testify about a week ago."

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Because you were running a hundred and six fever, Liv. Like it or not, you were in no shape to testify."

"Won't that hurt the case, though? I don't want to be the reason he walks."

"He's not going to walk. The trial at this point is really not much more than a formality. We've all testified, Drover testified, Lucas Roy testified and so did the Lewendales. Casey says that his lawyer may try to buy a little sympathy with a shrink or two, but he's done."

"How about Drover? What's he getting?"

"Serving twelve to twenty. It was twenty to life when he admitted to abusing several other boys including Everett Dyseki and about three others that Casey and McCoy were able to prove were also on Kreider's list, but his legal aid got it dropped down some since his testimony is arguably beneficial to Kreider's case."

Olivia nodded her head, deep in thought. "And Mark?"

"The jury let out this morning, but I don't suppose they'll have a hard time coming back with a guilty verdict against his affirmative defense. I mean it could have some effect on your case, but not for the boys."

"I still don't see why I couldn't testify."

"Casey said his lawyer had you quashed as a witness, but that it didn't matter anyway."

"Why? He attacked me."

"But, he's insisting he did it to protect you from yourself and there was no reason to put you on the stand so that his attorney could goad you into saying something that could sway the jury."

"I've testified before, Elliot. That wouldn't happen."

"I'm just passing the message. Besides...you were sick. But, you'll be nice and healthy by the time the sentencing comes around and I think you should be there for that if you're up to it."

"Of course I will. He stole a month...No, he stole *months* of my life away from me. I want him to see me just like this when he gets sentenced."

Elliot squeezed her hand. "We got him, Liv. It'll be all right."

"What about that guy he was talking about?"

"Well, Landon isn't being too forthcoming with the details anymore, but as far as we know there is no one else."

“Elliot, I remember somebody being there. He wasn’t Landon. He was strong.”

“And, if he surfaces we’ll get him. If there is somebody else, maybe Landon will be ready to talk once he’s staring down several life sentences. I don’t want you to worry about it for now.”

They were silent for a moment as he held her hand and Olivia searched his eyes for some window into his thoughts.

“You know,” she began, “I’m not sure if I ever said it, but I really appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

“No thanks necessary, Liv. I just wish I could’ve done more.”

She smiled at him and repressed a sigh. There was so much she wanted to say to him, yet apprehension held back her words. As the words “we’re not *really* partners anymore” stormed her thoughts, Olivia felt her chest tense and Elliot’s eyes bore into her own with concern.

It’s now or never, she thought.

“Elliot, I...”

As she took a breath, there was a knock at the door and Jonathan poked a smiling face into her room.

Must be fate...

“How you doing, Liv?” Jonathan glanced at Elliot. “Detective Stabler.”

“Halloway,” Elliot said with a nod.

“Can I visit for a moment,” Jonathan asked. “Or should I come back?”

“No, it’s fine,” Elliot said as he stood. “I was just about to leave.”

“You were?” Olivia said unable avoid a deflated tone to her voice.

“Yeah, I missed Sunday dinner yesterday, so maybe I can make it up to the kids and meet them when they get home. I’ll see you later.”

He was gone a moment later and Jonathan replaced him in the chair next to Olivia’s bed.

“How’ve you been feeling?” he asked

Like God sees my life as one long, unfunny tale of irony. “Good.”

“Good...good.”

She raised her eyebrows at him. “You’re here much earlier than usual. Maya hasn’t even come by for ‘Days’ yet.”

“I needed an emergency Olivia fix,” he said with a mild grin that did not reach his eyes.

“Okay...Well, I’m glad you needed it. I hope I do you justice.”

“You always do.”

“Are you going to stay and watch? ‘Shawn’ got shot on Friday and Maya screamed so loud that the nurses came running into here.”

“I may just need to stay for the aftermath of that,” Jonathan said.

“Did you come for something else?”

“Actually...I did.” He paused for a moment and sighed. “Olivia, I need to say something. Part of this is my father who calls me every night to tell me that I’m just being used, but I need to say it. We’ve never really talked about us since that last night. I said some things...some really bad things that I didn’t mean and I can understand if you don’t want to start a second round with me, but...I just feel like I’ve got to ask...”

“What?”

“You’re not just keeping me around to keep you in this hospital, are you?” Her eyes narrowed as her mouth opened, but he interrupted with a stammer before she could speak. “B-Because that wouldn’t matter to me. I feel that all this is partly my fault and I would take care of you even if you said you never wanted to see me again.”

It was her turn to sigh. “I’m not keeping you around because of the money, Jonathan. I don’t need you to take care of me.”

“I know, I know, I know.”

“Well, if you know, why even ask?”

“Because we’re not all as strong as you Olivia. Sometimes it’s just nice to hear things said every once in a while, for my own peace of mind.”

“Is that why you’ve made this emergency visit today? You squeezed me in to confirm what you already knew?”

“No. I didn’t squeeze you in for anything. In fact, I’ve cleared my whole calendar this week because I figured I would spend today through Wednesday worrying about it before I actually came in here and said this.”

“Said what?”

He tensed and stared her directly in the eye. “All this time has passed, but I don’t think we’ve gone anywhere. I still feel like the last conversation we’d had before all this happened is still hovering over us and I need to know if you’re ready to move forward with me.

“Jonathan...”

“Look, Olivia...I know I’ve been a tool and the only reason I know I’ve been a tool is because you’re the only one close to me who’ll say it. Everyone else I know would just let me run myself into the ground, but you’re the only person who would at least tell me I’m wrong. I need you Olivia. I need you in my life and I don’t think I can survive not having you as my rock. I want to be a better person and you’re the only person in this world who can help me get there.”

“Jonathan, I-”

“D-Don’t say anything yet. Just...digest what I say... I love you, Olivia. I’ve been an ass, a bastard, a jerk, a moron and any other name you can think to call me. I deserve them all. But, as trite as it sounds, every day has been brighter and every moment happier since I’ve met you and I want to make a fresh start with you.”

She smirked at him. “You’re right...that is trite.”

He laughed. “I’m pouring my heart out here and unfortunately that’s the best I can do. Which is why I need you so badly. Without you, I’m just lonely trite man lying on a sack of money.”

“That one was better.”

He leaned over the bed and kissed and hugged her as a wide smile spread across her thoughtful face. Elliot had been so ready to leave her; almost as if he was not even interested in what she had had to say.

With Maya’s entrance, Olivia tried to focus her thoughts on her boyfriend and best friend, but could only set forth benign façade. Perhaps she had lost her chance with Elliot. He had said himself that he was still in love with his wife and he still had his four children over whom to worry. Maybe she never even had one.

She glanced at Jonathan, who rolled his eyes as an actor bluffed his way through a gunshot wound, and broke into a wide grin.

He's no Elliot Stabler, but a close second isn't that bad.

Thursday May 10th
3:57PM

Jonathan sighed as Olivia ran her fingers through his soft hair. He lied with his head on her thigh, though the rest of his body was in a chair, and together, they watched the plot grow thicker in *Primal Fear* on the television mounted to the far wall.

He had only left her alone for brief periods in the past few days, removing himself to return to his apartment, shower and then get new clothes. He had called his extended visit the closest thing to a Caribbean getaway that either of them would get in the following months and in the past three days, after having the nurses bring in an inflatable palm tree, they had watched *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Muppet Treasure Island*, the first two *Pirates of the Caribbean* films and the third one on bootleg.

Olivia sighed as she leaned against her pillows and elicited a snort from Jonathan.

"You're not sighing about Richard Gere again, are you?"

"It was only that one time. You should've been here when Maya and I were watching *Pretty Woman*."

He snickered against her leg and she smiled, but repressed another sigh. Jonathan had also slept beside her in the bed over the past three nights. She was not sure it was going to work at first, as the bed was slightly narrow and they had to maneuver to ensure Olivia's IV lines did not get tangled, but Jonathan was determined and she was glad he was. She had forgotten what it felt like to sleep next to him and for the first time since their very first night together, she enjoyed the fact that he slept comfortably with his arms wrapped around her. Since the day she became aware of her surroundings, Olivia had not slept through an entire night without waking from either a loose nightmare or the feeling that someone was coming for her in the dark. Sleeping against Jonathan's chest made for the soundest sleep she had ever experienced and while she initially worried that her doctor would say something, it passed quickly when she remembered that she loved a member of the Halloway family.

In the past several days, she also found herself feeling a familiar itch that had not been even close to mind in the recent months, but had returned in full heat since Jonathan had been spending every moment with her.

On the screen, Edward Norton professed his innocence to Richard Gere, and a sly grin spread across Olivia's face.

"Jonathan..." she said in a sultry, sing-song voice.

He turned his head so that his chin rested on her thigh. "Yes?"

She reached for the remote control, turned up the volume on the television, but leaned very close to him to whisper.

"How would you like to do something incredibly naughty?"

Elliot strode down the bright corridor with a small smile on his face as he carried good news for Olivia. Owen Kreider had been convicted on all charges and Mark Landon was also convicted of two counts of first degree murder, two counts of sexual assault, one count each of kidnapping, stalking and assault and battery by a jury of his peers. It was already a good day.

Every cop associated with SVU had been in the courtroom to see him convicted. Elliot had expected that Jonathan would be amongst the throng vehemently glaring at Mark from across the aisle, but would not allow his absence to dissipate his mood. A sentencing date had been set for May 17th and he nearly skipped down the hall in a hurry to inform Olivia.

He approached the door toward the end of the corridor where a uniformed officer sat reading a newspaper and turned the door handle, but nearly bounced off the door as he tried to step inside the room.

“Why’s this door locked?” he asked quickly.

The officer glanced at him, but returned to his paper. “I would give them another ten minutes or so.”

“But why’s the door locked?”

“Elliot. *Halloway’s* in there with her. So, I’d give them another ten minutes to do what they have to do. You get my drift?”

“This door shouldn’t be locked.”

The officer rolls his eyes. “A nurse already walked in on a little something, so I told him to lock the door.” They could hear a woman’s voice sigh loudly and Elliot stepped away from the door.

“Like I said,” the officer laughed. “I’d give them another ten minutes or so.”

Elliot sat in the chair across from the door, staring at it was a frown now displayed on his face. “She’s still got that thing on her side, you know?”

The officer shook his head. “I’m sure they can be careful. Besides, she’s getting out of here on Monday anyway, right?”

Elliot suppressed a sigh and made small talk with the officer for several minutes before leaving to talk to Olivia’s doctor and the nurses on the floor. Twenty minutes later he approached the door again as Jonathan came out looking flush, but smiling.

“She might be asleep right now,” he said sheepishly. “But, she should be up a little later.”

Jonathan walked down the corridor with an arrogant bounce to his step and Elliot envisioned himself tackling him and pummeling him on the floor. He waited another five minutes and then knocked on Olivia’s door.

“Yes?” he heard Olivia call.

“It’s me,” he said. “Can I come in?”

“Of course. When have you ever asked?”

He stepped into the room, his previous smile greatly diminished and found Olivia upright in her bed with a glowing face.

“I have some good news for you,” he said trying to keep the disheartenment out of his voice. “Landon was convicted for today. His sentencing date is May 17th.”

Olivia closed her eyes and sighed deeply. “On all counts?”

“Every last one of them.”

“Good. With any luck he’ll never have another breath of free air.”

“With any luck he’ll be shanked in the shower on the first day and the taxpayers won’t have to pay to keep his ass alive.”

She laughed and beamed at him.

“I trust you and Halloway have made up,” Elliot said. He noticed her grow tense and continued after her cheeks went slightly pink. “I just noticed he’s here all the time now. He’s here when I come and he’s here when I go. In fact, today’s the first time I’ve seen him leave in at least a couple days.”

“Yes. He has been sleeping here and yes, we have made up. Jonathan’s asked me to live with him.”

“What’d you say?”

“I said yes. I can’t very well stay in that apartment, can I? Even with Mark in prison. Jonathan’s moving my things this Saturday.”

“You trust him to move all your stuff.”

“I should hope so since I trust him enough to live with.”

“Yeah...yeah, of course.”

“I’m glad you two have stopped...arguing. It’s bad for the soul.”

There’s no use in arguing with a bona fide bastard. “Yeah, no problem. You want me to at least take you down there when he’s moving the things out of your apartment? I mean I know you trust him, but it would be better to make sure the movers don’t leave something or take things he doesn’t notice.”

“Why don’t you go for me? You can be my liaison to the scene and if you have any questions, you can give me a ring. Besides my doctor doesn’t want any mishaps before my *scheduled* departure.”

Elliot nodded. “You’ve got a birthday coming up. Any plans yet?”

“Nope,” she shrugged.

“Is there anything you want?”

“A long, healthy life.”

“Anything that’s feasible for me to get you?”

“You ask me this question every year and how do I always answer.”

Elliot spoke in his best impression of her. ““Oh you don’t have to get me anything, Elliot.””

“That’s right,” she said slapping him playfully.

“Okay. I suppose as long as you and Halloway have a nice, quiet evening together, you’ll be all right.”

“I’ll be happy either way.”

They chatted for a while longer before Olivia yawned mid-sentence and Elliot announced that he had to leave. As he drove back to the precinct, he made a mental note.

Note to self: Don’t pick a fight with the bastard on Saturday.

Saturday May 12, 2007
10:05AM

Elliot parked his car down the street from Olivia’s apartment and was stunned to see Jonathan already barking orders to a myriad of hired movers. They seemed to be

working quickly, but not to Jonathan's satisfaction and Jonathan looked like he was ready to jump out of his skin as one of the movers set Olivia's cello and case on the ground hard enough to clink on the sidewalk.

"Easy!" he yelled. "If you expect to be paid, that thing had better not have the slightest scratch! Oh, hello, Detective."

"Halloway," Elliot said curtly as he approached. "How's this going?"

"Good, good. I'm trying to get this all done before two."

"I see. Need any help?"

"No, it looks like they've got it about covered."

"Mind if I supervise anyway?"

"Sounds fine to me. Maybe they'll get a move on if you flash a badge. I'm pretty sure a couple of them have done some time. Hey! Be careful with that! I bought that for her myself! Get two people on it! C'mon! I thought you were professionals!"

Elliot rolled his eyes and stepped aside while Jonathan continued his accost of the movers. As they day worn on, Elliot oversaw the movers, occasionally turning into Jonathan when he noticed one of them sitting on her hope chest or carrying a box that read "Music" too loosely.

At ten minutes to two o'clock, Elliot turned around to see Jonathan staring at him. It was far different from previous occasions; no burning hatred or rage. Jonathan headed towards Elliot and while he wanted to pretend to look into something else to avoid Jonathan, Elliot stood his ground.

"Look," Jonathan said as he approached. "I, uh...I want to apologize to you... about the gun thing..."

Elliot shook his head. "Don't worry about it."

"No," Jonathan said. "I need to say this. I...I know myself and I know that I'm at a point in my life where I'm not likely to make any big changes in my personality. I also know that I'm never going to like you. We're never going to be golfing partners or bowling buddies. I don't see myself ever inviting you over to watch a basketball game outside of Olivia's presence either. However...I think I am big enough to admit, that while I'll never feel comfortable with you, you're still, uh...a good person, and I need to apologize about pulling that...on you."

"Seriously," Elliot said. "*Don't* worry about it. I probably would've reacted the same way."

Jonathan nodded that he understood and they fell silent for a moment, allowing the grunts from the movers to replace their voices.

"It's just..." Jonathan began again and Elliot suppressed a roll of his eyes. "That's just the kind of thing I'm sure Liv doesn't need to hear about right now, so if you could just..."

Elliot held up his hand. "I won't say anything. It'll just be our secret."

"Okay." Jonathan turned toward the movers who appeared to be dawdling on the truck. "C'mon guys. I'd like to get this done, while I'm still *young*."

As the movers put the last of Olivia's belongings on the truck, Elliot stared at Jonathan for a while. Blue eyes, as intense as his own and made sharper by his jet-black hair, were inquisitive in every step the movers made, as everything they held was a part of Olivia. There was something else in his eyes. Something he saw mirrored in them when he saw Jonathan holding Olivia.

“Halloway,” he said a few minutes later as Jonathan was sarcastically applauding the movers for “finally” getting their job done. “I thought you might want this back.”

He tossed him the ring Jonathan had thrown across his coffee table nearly three months earlier. Jonathan looked at it for a moment as if trying to recollect its purpose.

“Yeah, well...” Jonathan said as he began to roll the ring in his hand. “I’ve been thinking about this whole thing...including the ring. So, I don’t think I’ll need it.”

Elliot nodded wondering briefly what it would be like to have something worth several thousands of dollars fall out of existence and not having to care about it.

“You wanna keep it?” Jonathan said. “A little reminder of everything.”

“I’d rather not. Maybe give it as a Christmas present or something, eh?”

Jonathan smirked at him, gave a little wave and walked down the street to his car to guide the moving truck to his residence.

Elliot sat in his car for a moment before he rubbed a hand over his face and started his engine.

“I still say he’s a bastard,” he muttered aloud as he began his trek across the river.

Woodside, New York

8:28PM

Elliot traced the base of his wine glass as Kathy took a sip from her own glass. They had been chatting lightly after dinner and a dark silence had fallen over the table.

Their children were each spending the evening with their respective friends and when he and Kathy had run out of things to say, Elliot prepared himself for the conversation they needed to have, but had tap danced around for two years.

“So, Katherine,” he began, catching her attention having not called her by her full name since they were in their twenties. “What’s it going to take to get you to tell me why I have to leave my family every night?”

Kathy pursed her lips and stared at the table.

“You never even gave me a reason, Kath,” he continued. “You just left. And we never talked about it.”

“We talked about it...”

“No, you said you were tired of me being angry all the time, but you never gave me a legitimate reason for leaving. You never even gave me the chance to change.”

“I-” Kathy began, but paused, wringing her hands on the table.

“Yes?”

“Elliot...I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? You don’t know why you walked out on twenty years of marriage? You don’t know why you took my children away from me? You don’t know why you served me with *divorce* papers?”

He was trying not to get angry, but her lack of a valid answer felt like impudence more than simple uncertainty.

“What did I do, Kathy? What could I have possibly done to drive you away like this?”

Kathy shook her head as her eyes grew wet. "I was alone, Elliot. I just felt so alone even though we were together."

"That doesn't make any sense to me."

"Elliot, I'm forty-two years old and I don't feel like I've lived a day. We got married so soon and then, everything was all about the kids. It's like I never even had time to think, let alone figure out who I am."

Elliot sighed and crossed his arms as she continued.

"And, then...when I took a second to look at my life...I saw that I was all alone."

"Kath-"

"The kids are growing up...Maureen's about to graduate from college, Kathleen's...well she's clearly left us and Lizzie and Dickie are following behind right the door. My whole life has been about the kids and now they're all about to leave and I'm alone."

"What do you mean you're alone? We had each other."

"Did we?" she asked, tears now welling on the brims of her eyes. "Elliot, I saw you for probably a total of two hours on any given day; when you kissed me goodbye, when you left for work and when you slipped back in the bed at three in the morning. My children were off living their own lives, my husband was at work all the time and I was all alone."

"And this is the resolution you came up with?" Elliot said, his voice rising slightly. "To cure your loneliness, you just up and leave?"

Kathy sighed and put her head in her hands, but Elliot shook his head.

"This is not a reason to take everything from me. You and the kids were the only reason I could do my job; to put food on the damn table and keep a roof over our heads!"

"Oh, don't give me that bullshit!" she yelled. "Nothing made you stay in that unit! You could've done anything with the NYPD, but no. You had to stay with the one unit that kept you up night every single night; that kept you away from your family for every holiday, every birthday, every special event in their lives. You made a decision long ago about what was more important to you and you chose the job. So, don't you dare tell me that you worked so hard for me and the kids! I don't need you to lie to me."

"Then why don't you tell me the truth! You're giving me all this garbage about being lonely, but *you* left *me*. You brought this loneliness on yourself!"

She ran her fingers through her hair as an errant tear ran down her face. "I left," she began softly, "because I needed time to think...away from you."

Elliot shook his head and stood from his chair. He had had enough for one night. As he began to walk out of the kitchen, Kathy called back to him.

"There was someone else!"

He stopped mid step and tried to breathe, yet it felt like someone had knocked the wind out of him. He closed his eyes as his heart wretched and he slowly turned around to face her. Tears were now streaming down her face, but impassiveness waved through him instead of attrition for his wife's pain.

"It was just once and I just kissed him, but I knew...I knew if I had gone so far to allow another man to kiss me, our marriage had deteriorated more than either of us really knew."

With his legs growing weak and bile gathering at the back of his throat, Elliot slumped back into the chair at the table.

“Elliot,” she continued. “Do you remember when we met?”

Despondent, Elliot shook his head slightly as he stared at the table.

“I remember like it was yesterday. You were walking across the park in that uniform, that dark blue uniform...and one of my girlfriends pointed you out as you were coming toward us. You looked so good. Everything about you, from the way every curve of your body moved under that uniform to the curves of your face. God, Elliot. You smiled at me and your eyes were just...it seemed like we were the only two people in the world.”

Elliot closed his eyes and rubbed his temples unable to see the moment of which Kathy spoke, his ears still deafened by the words “someone else.”

“When he...when he leaned over to kiss me and I didn’t back away, I was expecting that moment again. I wanted him to be you, looking at me the way you did that day. I wanted us to be back where we were, but when he kissed me, I knew that was never going to happen. What we had was just gone. Instead of the beautiful person who tipped his white hat to me as he passed, you had become this cold shell of human being who had seen too much in too short a time...and I couldn’t live with *him* anymore.”

Elliot ran a hand over his face, utterly astounded by what she had said. A full minute’s silence passed over them, though it felt like an eternity.

“So,” he finally said. “What do I do to fix this?”

“*I* need to work through this.”

“No, you said, *I*’ve turned into someone that you can’t live with. What can *I* do to fix this?”

She stared at him for a long time. “Come to dinner tomorrow night. Just like you’ve been doing. I want us to just get back to where we used to be.”

Elliot nodded his head and stood, his eyes fixed on hers. Their soft blue-green depths were blurred by her own tears and the image of how she appeared the day he first saw her floated to mind.

He sighed, grabbed his jacket from the couch and left.

“Elliot?” Kathy called, but he refused to stop.

Once in his car, his hand reached for the key in the ignition, but he paused not knowing where he could go. The first person who came to mind was Olivia, but he crossed her out of mind as he pictured her snuggled against Jonathan Halloway in her hospital room. He could not want to face his brother; Bryce suddenly seemed to be the least sympathetic person in the world and as he ran down a short list of co-workers and acquaintances and sighed.

She’s right. We really are alone.

He opted for spending the evening drowning his thoughts in scotch and headed home. When he approached his building, he spotted a familiar face waiting on the stoop.

“I thought you were done with me,” he said.

Diana shook her head. “I was...am...I don’t know. I’ve been hearing things on the news and a lot of times they mention you. I thought I’d be able to just shake you off, but I...as it turns out, I end up thinking about you more often than not. And lately, I can’t seem to figure out why the only person I want is chasing after two people who don’t seem to want him.”

She focused her gaze on the black sky and he could see that her eyes were wet like the last time he had seen her.

“How long have you been here?”

“A while,” she said nodding her head. “It only occurred to me in the last ten minutes that I didn’t know what the hell you did on your Saturdays since we’d never spent one together.”

He took a seat next to her on the stoop. “Well...I’m normally working a case. So, I couldn’t tell you what I do on Saturdays either.”

“What *have* you been doing?”

“Having dinner with my kids before they all went rushing out to live their own lives.”

“Don’t I know how that feels...”

“Also had a nice long talk with my ex.”

“And how did that go?”

“Could’ve gone better. A lot better.”

“Well, I’m sorry about that. I really am.”

He shrugged. “What do you have to be sorry for, Diana? It’s like you said. She doesn’t seem to want me.”

“What did she have to say?”

“Other than that she left me because she was about to start seeing someone else... she wants to basically take it slow.”

“How slow is slow?”

“That’s a good question. We’re already going so slow, we’re going backwards. Honestly, I don’t know what else she wants from me. At this rate, I’m gonna end up dying alone.”

Diana turned toward him putting her hand on his knee. “Elliot...don’t say things like that. You don’t...you know you don’t have to be alone.”

Elliot stared into her shining eyes for a moment and five minutes later, they were in his bedroom. He took hold of her and made love to her like he had wanted to make love to a woman for months, allowing his every frustration to melt away with every kiss, every touch and every sigh.

His eyes slowly opened several hours later at the feel of something moving in his bed and sudden cold.

“Hey,” he said sitting up in the bed. “Where are you going?”

Diana was dressed and was preparing to walk out the door.

“This way, *I* get to leave *you*.”

He played the events of the past week through his head and stifled the urge to reach out for her. “What if I don’t want you to go?”

She sighed. “You can’t have it both ways, Elliot. You can’t tell me that I was just something to ease the pain and then tell me that you want me. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Why not? People can have a change of heart.”

“Not you. As corny as it might sound, your heart belongs to someone else.”

“What about you?”

“Me? As for me...I just needed closure.”

She walked to the bedroom door, but paused. “I would’ve been good to you, Elliot. No drama. No bullshit. Just love. You remember that if things don’t work out.”

As she left, he laid back in his bed with his mind wiped of thought. A vision of Olivia floated to mind after several minutes of staring at his ceiling and he remembered

what she looked right after she had hugged him in the locker so many months earlier. For just a brief moment, she was his.

I'm the one who was there through it all and she's with Holloway.

He let out a long sigh as the vision changed and he saw Olivia the way she appeared the night he found out Kathleen's secret. She had looked so scared of him and Andrea's words, "I am not afraid of you," suddenly took on new meaning. Olivia's face melted into Kathleen's on the same night who then turned into Dickie. Kathleen and Dickie were so much alike and so much like him that it hurt. Both were headstrong and stubborn, but easily susceptible to let downs, just like their father. Dickie turned into Lizzie who, in turn, became Maureen who eventually became Kathy.

When she left him, he had no one and when he was ready to reach out to Olivia, she had someone else in her life. They had had four children together and he could remember no other life before he had her with him. The idea of becoming angry over the slightest brush of infidelity seemed laughable as he considered the number of times when he had been more or less prepared to rip off Olivia's clothes not four months earlier. One small jingle was all that kept him from stepping into the depths of an affair.

Elliot shifted as the moonlight poured through his blinds. He had Olivia had never had a conversation akin to the one he had had with Kathy regarding their relationship and with each minute that passed, it looked less likely it was going to happen. A choice needed to be made; one would make half a dozen people happy for years to come while the other left those same people in a state shock, hurt, anger and regret.

Reaching across the bed, he set his alarm clock early enough to take a morning run, but also have to time to make it to church with his family.

Well, he thought. Holloway's a good enough guy for her most...some...a part of the time...

Chapter Thirty

Monday May 14, 2007
East 72nd Street and 3rd Avenue

Huffing slightly as she pushed her hands against her wheels, Olivia slowly made her way up the ramp that led toward the doors that consisted of a lattice of glass and wood. Jonathan stepped patiently behind her in case her arms grew weak too quickly, though she had told him repeatedly that she was "fine." Even after the Americans with Disabilities Act had been passed, the co-op would not comply until of the "newer" tenants complained several years later. Olivia was glad the ramp had already been installed before she arrived. The last thing she wanted was to draw more attention to herself.

At first it was simply the points and stares of those who had either seen her picture in the paper or on the news that caught her off guard. One twenty-something girl actually came up to Olivia and asked for her autograph, calling Olivia her hero. Many of the passing tenants in Jonathan's co-op seemed very interested to at least see "the woman who saved herself from her kidnapper," also known as "that cop that the youngest of the Holloways is seeing."

Then came the reporters who wished to know how she was doing and constantly pressed for her to give a statement regarding Mark, and then on the boys, and then on Kreider and *then* on Morse, and *then* on Elliot in regards to Morse's videos. She had been open to the idea the previous day, but the longer the questions came, the more she realized what a toll the last four months had had on her body. Within a few hours, she was tired and irritable and pushed away the very mention of speaking to the press. Later that night, she ran a high fever and was delirious from the exertion. Dr. Weiss feared that she would have need to stay another few nights to ensure she would not grow sicker, but Olivia, intent on not spending any additional time in the hospital, faked her way through several tests saying parts did not hurt when they ached and that she did not feel cold when she was nearly shivering even though temperature in the room was causing the others to break into a sweat. Maya, feeling that chocolate was some magic panacea, had spent the better part of the evening handing Olivia piece after piece until she had regained some colour to her face.

She had planned on spending the day preparing herself to testify at Mark's sentencing trial, but between her health and the fact that Mark's lawyer won his motion to preclude her as a witness since she had not "seen" anything and could not be sworn as a verifiable witness, Olivia spent most of the day trying to keep her body from non-stop shivering.

Her hand pressed against the wheel of her chair, but she lacked the strength to push the chair forward on the elevated ramp. Her body's vigor had been spent trying to keep from coughing up her lungs throughout the morning and with a final sigh, Olivia resigned to allow Jonathan to push her for the rest of the journey into the building.

Several minutes and ten floors later, the elevator doors opened on the eleventh floor and, as her arms had regained some vivacity during her short rest, Olivia pushed herself down the hall toward the last of the four apartments on the floor. Her nerves prickled at the thought of not only being in the building, but the aspect of living within it. She had visited Jonathan's apartment sparingly throughout their relationship, and as he unlocked the door, she wondered if she had rushed into living with him.

"Okay," he said standing in the doorway. "I wanted to really wait until tomorrow, but I suppose one day won't hurt."

She narrowed her eyes at him, but with a curious smirk on her face. "What have you done now?"

"Just got you a little something."

She wheeled into the apartment and down the foyer, and then grabbed her wheels to come to sliding halt. The sitting room had a large Oriental rug that stretched from the fireplace to the opening of the room and touched every piece of furniture except for something large that stood in the corner.

When Olivia had first noticed it, the object appeared to be nothing more than an expanse of black, but her skin tingled as her eyes focused on the baby grand piano and she rolled toward it with her mouth gaping. The rich ebony of the forty-thousand-dollar instrument glinted across the room as sunlight spread through the large windows on the far wall of the sitting room and she gasped as she ran a hand across it; the cool polished wood of the Bösendorfer feeling akin to soft skin beneath her fingertips.

"I'd searched through some of my grandfather's houses," Jonathan said, "looking through all his instruments hoping to find something that would be perfect for you, but

nothing seemed right. Then a friend of a friend of a friend told me about this one and... well, I just imagined the look on your face when you saw and I knew this was it.”

Olivia clapped a hand to her mouth as a single tear made a daring escape from her eye and she smiled at him trying to keep its brothers at bay. It was the single most exquisite gift she had ever received in her life.

“Happy Birthday, Olivia,” he said and was forced to bend down as Olivia had thrown both of her arms around his neck.

A moment later, she had shifted out of her chair and onto the piano bench and took a deep breath as she lifted the key cover to take in the odor of the wood. It felt like it had a life of its own.

“You’ll have to learn to play now,” she said as Jonathan sat beside her.

He rubbed a hand over her back as she brushed her fingers over the pristine ivory keys. “Well, I’ve already got such a good teacher, I suppose I’ll get the hang of it by the time I’m sixty.”

They laughed together and Olivia threw her arms around him as they shared a long kiss.

The next day, Jonathan showed that he had pulled out all stops for her birthday. At first she protested, but Maya, having come to join the festivities early on in the morning, insisted that they needed to throw her a party since they had worried if she would even live to see her next birthday. Maya helped Olivia into the beautiful black dress she had bought for her, proclaiming that it was “simply fabulous” the entire time.

Jonathan had arranged a grandiose birthday dinner for her at a classy restaurant in Midtown and almost every person she knew in the city was in attendance. She nearly burst into tears as Jonathan made a toast for her and she could see the many faces of all the people who cared about her, smiling and toasting her health in unison.

When she and Jonathan returned home, Olivia changed clothes and they prepared to settle into the rest of a quiet evening.

“Okay, Liv,” Jonathan said, handing her a wine glass. “Which are we going to have? I think 1989 was a good year for the Sauternes, but I’ve been kind of slacking in my wine connoisseur-ship, so I’m not entirely sure.”

“How about something lighter?” Olivia said. “Actually, I’d really just enjoy a glass of some sparkling white grape juice if you had any.”

Jonathan gave an exaggerated roll of his eyes in false exasperation. “The *one* thing I haven’t got a drop of in the whole apartment.”

“It’s okay,” she said laughing.

“Nay, I say! You sit tight and comfortable, it’s your birthday after all, and I’ll run out and to grab some.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“Nope. For your birthday, you get every single thing you want.” He bent and kissed her hand, erupting a fit of giggles from her. “I’ll be back in a bit. Get the movie started and we’ll plunge right in.”

Olivia turned on the television once he had gone, fumbling with the remote control for a bit as it was so different from her own that now lived in their bedroom. She turned on *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and had coursed through some of the extra items on the DVD, when the telephone near her rang.

“Benson,” she said automatically.

“Yes. Hello Miss Benson,” a high-strung woman’s voice echoed through the phone. “There is a Detective Elliot Stabler here demanding that he be let up.”

“Oh, absolutely,” she said. “Can I add him to a list or something?”

“That won’t be a problem, Ma’am. Thank you.”

She hoisted herself onto her arms and into her chair and greeted Elliot at the door minutes later.

“You just can’t get enough of me, can you?” she said as she hugged him.

“You’re right. I can’t, but I needed to bring you something.”

“No...I’m too old for gifts.”

“Yeah, whatever,” he said and pulled a long, thin package wrapped in “Happy Birthday” wrapping paper from out in the corridor to hand to her.

“What’s this?”

“Well, why don’t you open it and see.”

She flashed him a suspicious smirk and tore the wrappings of the package to reveal a plain brown box. Opening one end, she allowed the inside package to slide into her lap and gasped.

The Alfred Knoll case caught the light of the hallway and shined as she slowly picked it up to admire it.

“Are you even going to take it out of its case?” Elliot said.

“I will, I just...It’s a new bow...I haven’t played in months.”

“I know and I remembered that your last one kind of snapped in two because of me and I figured you had this coming.”

She opened the case and smiled. The bow had a twinkle to it and she felt a spark in the room as her heart longed to play the instrument that stood on the other side of the sitting room.

“I just hope Halloway hadn’t bought you one yet.”

“No, he hasn’t. I don’t think he might’ve known it was broken, but even if he did he wouldn’t have...known exactly which one to get. How did you know?”

He shrugged and grinned. “I went to a music store, told the owner what you were like and we sifted through them for a bit before I found something we thought would suit you.”

“Oh, Elliot...” She opened her arms, beckoning him and he bent to hug her again.

“What did Halloway get you because I know he had to’ve gotten you something big.”

“Yeah, that is his style, isn’t it? Follow me a second.”

He did as told, passed the living room with her and stopped short at the opening to living room as he gazed at the massive piano that gleamed in the far corner.

Elliot let out a breath. “Wow...Ten grand?”

“He won’t tell me, but I know it’s a least forty.”

“Wow, Liv.” He broke into a smile. “You’re a Halloway now.”

She gave him a playful nudge and moved onto the bench. “Sit down. How long has it been since you last played?”

“I played a week ago actually.”

“Well, good. So, you can play with me. What are we playing?”

“I’ve got nothing,” he said as he sat on the bench next to her. “Besides, you’re the musician here. You pick something.”

“All right then. How much do you remember Chopin?”

“Who? Chop-in?”

She nudged him again and smiled. “The...tenth opus, ‘kay? Number one. That’s in C.”

“No, that’s in A.”

“Number twenty-five is in A. We’re doing ten.”

“Ah, gotcha, but I can’t play that. Never could.”

“Well, you just play the low parts and I’ll play the rest and we’ll make a duet out of it.”

He nodded and set his left hand on the piano keys. Olivia winked at him and they both began to play. It seemed slightly ridiculous at first as Olivia’s fingers flew over the keys in the song, while Elliot played the lower tones that were held for two or four counts at a time and eventually he broke the tune into one of Chopin’s first nocturnes in the seventy-second opus, causing Olivia to smile at the new minor key in E.

“You’re gonna bring me down, Elliot and it’s my birthday,” she said as she slowed her hands and played the soprano notes of the song.

“All right. Well, I’ll switch up. How’s Debussy?”

“No, only Chopin.”

“Debussy, it is.”

Elliot moved closer to her to play the beginning notes to Clare de Lune and moved closer as she joined the piece. At one point, he had to reach an arm around her to play the harmony, but never retreated to regain the distance once the part had finished. As the song fell from its climax and reached its harmonious end, Elliot and Olivia were nearly sitting on top of one another.

She turned toward him in the silence and they simply stared; each staring into the other’s eyes as if searching for the slightest glimmer or hint of what the other was thinking. For a moment, Olivia imagined her hands moving toward him and though neither knew it, Elliot thought the same. Olivia parted her lips to speak to him, but Elliot broke the contact and rose from the bench.

“It’s getting late,” he said. “I should probably go. Besides, I’m sure if Halloway catches me playing on your new birthday present, he’ll shit a brick.”

“Jonathan,” she corrected.

“Yes, of course. Jonathan.” He smiled at her for a moment, before bending down to hug her. “Goodnight, Liv.”

“G’night.”

As he left the apartment, he heard Olivia begin the nocturne in E minor again and had half a mind to step back into the apartment and finished what he had started when the elevator doors opened to present Jonathan staring intently at the label of a large glass bottle.

“Halloway,” Elliot said quickly, shutting the door behind him. “I was just leaving.”

Hey,” Jonathan said not at all surprised to see him. “She said she wanted white grape juice instead of champagne or wine, but I didn’t know which one to get. Which one of these do you think she’ll like?”

He held up three bottles and Elliot picked the one in the middle.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said. “Here. You want these other two? I’m going have a time pretending I nonchalantly chose the right one if I’ve got two others stuffed in my pockets.”

“Yeah, I’ll take them off your hands.”

Elliot stepped onto the elevator a moment later and as the doors began to close he heard Jonathan yell out a sardonic, but witty “Honey, I’m home!” causing him to shake his head as he mumbled to himself.

“Still a bastard...”

Thursday May 17, 2007
McGhenty’s Bar and Grill
West 49th Street and 11th Avenue

“Hey! What do we have to do to get another round over here!”

Alexa had stood on her bar stool at the table and shouted toward the scattering servers in the bar. The atmosphere in the bar was nothing, but light-hearted and the brio was steadily growing as the drinks kept pouring into the night.

Mark Aaron Landon had that morning been sentenced to three life sentences and also one hundred and twelve years, yet the majority of the crowd would not have minded if it was only one life sentence. Imprisonment for the rest of his life, toward many of the officers in the bar, seemed more than what Mark Landon deserved, but as the death penalty had been recently deemed “cruel and unusual punishment” it was the best sentence possible.

A tall server approached the long table carrying several pitchers on a tray and struggled to set the pitchers on the table without dropping the whole lot. As soon as the pitchers hit the table, they were dispersed by a tangle of hands.

“Drink up, everybody!” Jonathan said as he stood next to Olivia’s chair. “I’m buying for everybody. Anybody who’s wearing a badge!”

“That’s the least you could do,” Fin said shaking his head, but smirking. “After the way you were to us.”

Jonathan grinned wildly. “Hey! I’m an ass. I know it. Let me fill up your mug.”

Olivia rolled her eyes as Jonathan reached to re-fill Fin and Munch’s beers and caught sight of Elliot sitting at the other end of the table talking to Andrea. She had wanted to say something to the jury at Mark’s sentencing, but that morning she had awakened feeling less than healthy and by the time they arrived at the courthouse, she could barely sit upright in her chair without Jonathan’s help. Thankfully, Elliot had been able to speak to the jury before they left to deliberate on Mark’s sentence and he nearly brought her to tears with his speech.

“I work in Manhattan’s Special Victims Unit,” he said staring at each of the twelve, stoic jury members. “And, in all my time with the unit, I’ve seen some horrifying things. Children hurt, men and woman raped, people attacked to the point that they’ll

never lead normal lives again. Mark Landon is probably the most depraved, amoral person in this room, but it's a fact that he's not the worst of the lot and there's probably more where he came from. So, I'm not going to stand here in front of you all and tell you that he's the worst criminal who's committed the worst crimes I've ever seen. He's not. That's just the way the city is. But, I *am* here to paint a picture of his crimes to you so that when you think about how long he should spend behind bars, you'll know exactly what kind of monster is sitting in that chair across the room."

He paused and pointed toward Olivia.

"The woman in the wheelchair over there is my partner. She hasn't been back to work in months and you all know why. Years ago, her mother lived in an apartment in the village across from Mark Landon and he became obsessed with her because, as he says, he didn't have a mother and he naturally latched onto her. When my partner, Detective Olivia Benson, moved into that same apartment, Landon just shifted his focus onto her instead. He watched on her video cameras he installed after breaking into her apartment and then he stalked her. He obsessed over her and when the obsession grew too great, he kidnapped her, an officer, tried to assault her and when she fought back, he *sold* her to someone who then hurt her for days and days. Because of Mark Landon, my partner, my *friend*, Olivia Benson gets around the city in a wheelchair while she's re-learning how to walk and that's when she's not too sick to do so.

"She takes medications daily just to get her body back to a tenth of where she used to be. Eight different pills just to keep the infections at bay, not to mention the ones she takes for seizures now. She didn't have them before Landon burst through her apartment door and took her down with some concoction he brewed in his sink for the sole purpose of attacking someone he knew could kick his ass if she was healthy. Together Olivia and I have chased down murderers, rapists and child molesters and look at her now. Look at her. Today, she's too sick to push her own wheelchair."

Elliot picked up the three glossy images that he had set on the railing that encased the entranced jury and them up for all to see.

"See these three boys? Ryan Daly, Andrew Shaw and Zachary Calbrach. Ryan Daly was walking home one night, minding his business, when Mark Landon attacked him. Landon beat him, raped him, strangled him and then left him in a box for some curious runner to find. The same thing happened to Andrew Shaw, but as I'm sure you've seen throughout the trial, Landon is nothing short of a bigot and he took out the rage he has against blacks and Jews and anyone else he thinks has corrupted his world in some way and he attacked Andrew Shaw to the point that he was nearly unrecognizable to his family. Andrew Shaw, like Ryan Daly, was just going home one night and Landon took it upon himself to attack. Same thing happened to Zachary Calbrach as well, but he survived. Landon was a little too hasty to finish what he was doing and Zachary lived to point out exactly who had snatched him off the street, poisoned him with the same substance used on Olivia Benson, raped him repeatedly and tried to strangle him to death.

"Now, you've listened to hours of testimony and you came back with a guilty verdict for Landon and for that I'm thankful, but I know what's going through your minds right now as you consider an appropriate sentence for him. Each of you is probably wondering "why." Why would someone do something like this? Why are there two boys dead and two people scarred for life because of Mark Landon? I know what you're

thinking because I stood in my precinct and asked the same question and was...horrified when I learned the truth.”

He sighed and let silence fall over the room as every eye in the courtroom remained fixed on him.

“Mark Aaron Landon kidnapped a cop and when he couldn’t handle her, he *sold* her to somebody he expected to kill her. He cleaned up most of the evidence and wiped away any trace that he had been focused on her, but what he didn’t count on is how much cops look after their own. Detective Benson is a seasoned officer of the NYPD and myself, along with every other cop available, pulled out all stops to find her. And, when he realized this... When he saw that we were bearing down on him, about to find out what he had done, he took note of one of the cases Detective Benson was working on and murdered a young boy just to take the heat off of himself. And, you have to admit, it worked. For weeks, we thought that we were dealing with a copycat of a killer that Olivia had helped put away and just like he wanted, most of the focus shifted off of her and onto Ryan Daly and then Andrew Shaw. But, he screwed up. Olivia Benson saved herself from the guy he sold her to and he knew it was only a matter of time before we all knew what he had done. He sat in our interrogation room and spilled his whole story because he knew. He knew exactly what he had done and he knew exactly where he was going.

“Today, we all know just what kind of sociopath Mark Landon is. He attacked a cop, beat a twelve-year-old boy to within an inch of his life and murdered two others all because his neighbor across the way didn’t like him the way he thought she should.

“I don’t want any of you to feel sorry for Landon when you go back to deliberate. I know he’s fed all of you a bunch of bull about his upbringings and how he was trying to save people from themselves. Don’t buy into it. Mark Aaron Landon willfully and purposefully murdered two young boys. Twelve-year-olds! Just babies...He killed them and destroyed the lives of two other people. If there was ever someone who deserved to spend every minute of his life in a cell, Landon is it and I trust all of you to make the right decision.”

“You ready for a re-fill?” Jillian asked brightly.

Olivia broke out of her reverie and smiled at her friend. “Sure, why not? It’s not like you’ll have to worry about trying to carry me home tonight.”

“Well,” Jillian said. “At this rate, we might all be piling onto the chair just to get into a cab.”

Olivia laughed and allowed the refreshing liquid to splash down her throat. The celebration went on for hours and the owner even kept the bar open for another hour as mumbled sayings of “Get home safe” and “You better not call out sick tomorrow!” wafted through the air near three o’clock in the morning.

As Jonathan paid the hefty tab with his platinum American Express card, Olivia laughed in a half drunken, half sober state of consciousness while Maya tried to find a cab for her and Amit. The festivities had been long and kept an effervescent beat throughout the night that made Olivia glow when she thought about how far she had come through the entire ordeal with Mark. He was convicted and would never spend another moment outside of a jail.

In comparison with jury deliberations that went on for hours or sometimes days, the jury in Mark Landon's case came back with their sentence in just forty-seven minutes.

Friday June 1, 2007
6:38PM

Elliot stepped down the hall in a light-hearted mood that seemed odd considering the new case he had caught the previous night. In the past month, he had watched his eldest child walk across the stage with her Hudson University diploma in hand, had spent nearly every evening having dinner with his family, though he and Kathy had not reprised their former dialogue, and was very surprised to hear that he had gotten his wish in regards to Mark Landon.

"It went down on the bus to Sing Sing," Fin had said.

"Really? What happened?" he had asked.

"They're still piecing it together, but apparently people were messing with Landon because of his size, some words were exchanged and a racial slur was said and the next thing anybody knew, Landon was dead and nobody knew how it happened.

"More rats in the woodpile," he said and the thought of it seemed to bolster his steps more as he approached the large door at the end of the corridor.

When Maya answered the door of Jonathan, and now Olivia's apartment, both he and Maya seemed caught off guard to see one another.

"Hey there," she said.

"Hi. Is Liv in?"

"Course she is. Do you think I'd just be hanging out with Jonathan if she wasn't?"

"No, I guess not," Elliot said as he stepped through the doorway.

He and Maya stared at one another for a moment, somewhat awkward, though Elliot could not understand why. Her eyes darted toward the large envelope he carried in his left hand and she appeared inquisitive, yet she did not question it.

"Son of bitch!" Olivia's voice rang, floating into the hallway and causing them both to break into smiles.

"Maya, this is crap," she called again. "Who's at the door?"

Maya walked down the hall and stared at Olivia, who sat in the living room, with her hand on her hip. "What am I, your doorman?"

"Yep," Olivia said, "and you're the maid too since she's gone for the day. Could you make me a tea? Please?"

Maya rolled her eyes, but left in the direction of the kitchen. Elliot quietly walked into the large living room to see Olivia playing a fishing game on a Wii. She flung the controller outward and moved it about for a moment before coming up empty handed.

"Just crap," she mumbled.

Elliot snickered. "Hard at work, I see."

She whipped her head around and smiled at him. "Well, I start back with Computer Crimes on the twenty-fifth and I'm just resting up before then. It's hard being a lady of leisure."

"Why don't you get your own tea then?"

"Meh. She hasn't done anything all day anyway."

"I heard that!" Maya called from the kitchen and they both laughed.

"What brings you this way?" Olivia asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing specific. Just wanting to see how you were doing."

"I'm fine," she said as she turned off the game. "What have you got with you?"

"Case file for my most recent case."

"Just *my* case? What happened to Alexa?"

"She's gone."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, Andrea won the pot. It was up to almost a grand."

"What happened? Was it a case or did she just push back from her desk and leave?"

"The little girl we found on Monday, I suppose. She looked just like Alexa. Same red hair, brown eyes, freckles and everything. She took one look at the girl and she was done. I found her crying in the crib again and by the end of the day Wednesday, Cragen said she was gone."

"Wow. Well, we all knew it was going to happen."

"I just wish I'd've gotten in on that pot. Andrea's been gloating non-stop for the past two days."

Olivia smirked at the thought, but then stared at him. "When's Cragen going to approve my coming back?"

"He says his hands are tied by the deputy inspector."

"I'm not asking to go out on assignment in the damn chair."

"Liv, he says his hands are tied."

"I could just answer phones. Do some grunt work."

"You're preaching to the choir, Olivia. I'd like you back. I'd *love* you back. First thing I'd have you do is write up some of this stuff up for me, but the Cap says his hands are tied and it's all up to Felton."

"Well, it's crap. My mind is turning into mush as we speak."

"Probably because you're playing video games all day."

"Hey! I'm playing video games *now*. Maya and I just had a harrowing game of Scrabble a little while ago, didn't we Maya?"

"Sure did!" she called from the kitchen. "Livia cheats!"

"I do not!"

"Whatever," Maya said popping her head out from around the corner. "Since when do people spell out 'consanguineous' and land on the damn Triple Word Score?"

"She's just mad 'cause she can't spell."

"I heard that too," Maya called, having stepped back into the kitchen.

Elliot laughed as he shook his head. "How's the therapy been coming?"

"Good!"

She shifted on the couch and set both feet on the floor. Over the course of a minute, Olivia pushed herself upward using the back of the couch and her chair that sat

next to the sofa. Elliot could barely hold back the genial laughter that was brewing in his throat as Olivia pushed and pulled herself into a standing position and then allowed herself to flop back onto the couch.

“That’s not good, Liv,” he said. “That’s amazing.”

Olivia grinned on the sofa, proud of her accomplishment. “Finally got myself up yesterday. Dr. Weiss is very confident. He thinks I’ll be shuffling along on braces by the end of the month.”

“God, Liv... That is so great. I couldn’t be happier.”

“Me either. ‘Cept I wish I had something else to do right now aside from think about it. Let me see the case you’re working on and don’t feed me that ‘hands are tried’ bull.”

He sat beside her and pulled several items out of the large envelope.

“There was a woman found by the East River not too far from where Andrew Shaw was found. She showed signs of severe sexual trauma and we’re thinking she might be a struggling model or on the pipe because she’s extremely thin.”

“Any word on a name yet?” Olivia asked she looked at the photos.

“No. Melinda’s running her prints to see if she can come up with something and-”

Elliot stopped as he noticed the immediate change in Olivia’s demeanor. She had clapped a hand to her mouth, her body was shaking and tears were suddenly streaming down her face.

“Liv...?”

“Oh my God,” she whispered and the tears fell harder.

“Olivia, what’s wrong?”

The images of the crime scene that lay in her lap vibrated as her whole body shook and she put her other hand to her forehead. Tears were coming out of her eyes so quickly they looked like rushing water.

Elliot pulled her into a hug and rubbed her back.

“It’s too soon, Liv. I know. I’m sorry.”

“No,” she said sniffing and pushing away from him. “It’s her...it’s her...I can’t believe...Oh God, it’s her...”

Maya came running into the room and knelt in front of Olivia who quickly collapsed onto her shoulders. Maya glared at him with a look that read “What did you do to her?”

“I can’t believe it’s her,” Olivia repeated as tears fell from her eyes and onto Maya’s shirt.

“Who, Livia? Who did you see?”

Olivia let go of Maya and stared at Elliot with large wet eyes. “I need to see her. I need to see her right now.”

Within thirty minutes, Elliot stood just behind Olivia as she slowly rolled closer to the window beyond which was Melinda who, standing with a grim expression on her face, was prepared to pull away the sheet that lay across a long thin body. Olivia tried twice to come to a stand, but when she struggled, Elliot stepped around the chair and held her upright.

She pressed a hand to the glass to steady herself and nodded. Melinda nodded in return and quickly pulled the sheet away from the victim’s face.

Olivia turned and crumpled into her chair as Elliot wrapped his arms around her and Melinda covered the woman's face again.

"It's okay, Liv," Elliot said. Olivia cried into his chest and Melinda came around the corner several minutes later, shaking her head.

"Do you know her, Liv?" he asked softly and Olivia nodded as she untangled herself from him.

"Amy..." she gasped. "Her name is Amy. Amy Kettering."

"How do you know her?"

"She was...there. She was in the place with the other three...and him. Oh my God! I can't believe she's dead." She fell back into Elliot's arms again. "I couldn't save her, Elliot. I tried so hard, but I couldn't save her. She wouldn't come with me! I tried so hard...It's like Evelyn all over again."

Elliot allowed her to weep openly for the next twenty minutes and then pushed her into Melinda's office where she was able to recount every detail of her immuration.

She could clearly remember the darkness that overwhelmed every room, the other women "he" had been using and how they reacted to her, the room with all the dead faces and how Amy looked when she showed Olivia that she had broken through her chains. She could also remember him in great detail; a man, tall and pale with floppy blond hair. Elliot's thoughts made an immediate jump to the DVDs that had been handed to him months earlier and the woman's face melted into the old image of a healthy Amy Kettering.

Memories flooded back to Olivia as she cried and she spoke more about how "he" had come at her with a cheap gun, how she was able to later defend herself with it and continuously reiterated that there were three others that she could not help.

Elliot eventually brought Olivia home where she cried on his shoulder for the rest of the night as Jonathan hovered in the hallway, peeking his head into the room every once in a while. By the time he left the East Side, it was nearly morning and Elliot stopped at the precinct to tell Cragen what Olivia remembered.

"I'm sure we could get her talk to a sketch artist a little later," Elliot said. "We should have a face for him by the end of the day."

"Yeah," Cragen said. "Now, it's just a matter of figuring out who he is."

"Well, between the DVDs and Liv's description..."

"But, if what she's saying is true, this guy has been murdering women for years and he could be anywhere."

"With a face though-"

"We had most of his face with just the DVDs." Cragen shook his head and sighed. "A face isn't going to help us find him."

"But, he's got to be in the city."

"Where, though?"

"Liv was found on East 90th."

"But we searched the area. Two of the surrounding buildings have been locked and boarded up from the outside and the rest of them were completely empty."

"She had to've fallen out of a window somewhere. You know how badly she was hurt."

“But, we still have a problem with where, Elliot. I agree that she fell, but we can’t say she fell on 90th. We can even say she fell in the city. From what it sounds like, she was kept in some kind of warehouse, fell and was *put* in that dumpster.”

“CSU found glass all around there.”

“But, they didn’t find any other evidence, did they?”

Elliot ran a hand over his head and sighed.

“Look,” Cragen said. “I want to find the guy, too. How’s Olivia doing? Do you think she’ll be ready to give an actual statement later today?”

“Maybe, but she was still in bad shape when I left.”

“Well, we need to question her. As bad as it sounds, we need to treat her like a vic and get as much out of her possible.”

“You know she’s not gonna like being treated like a victim, Cap.”

“It doesn’t matter, Elliot. She’ll get over it. She’ll understand, just like you need to. There’s a killer on the loose. Now, Liv got out. She escaped, but this girl, Amy Kettering, didn’t and from what I’m hearing, there are three others out there somewhere that are in the same amount of danger. We just need to find out who this guy is. We need to find him.”

Unknown Time and Place

It was all falling apart; every single thing.

She had started it. Of that he was sure. None of these problems had ever happened previously and it still stunned him that she had gotten away from him. It was like some kind of bad dream.

He had not done any work in weeks because of the constant disruptions. The others, instead of lying still and allowing him to do what was needed, had taken to assaulting him when he approached. The first had gone and the second had to be disposed of, but the remaining three were becoming far more trouble to keep than they were worth.

Pacing in front of the door, he stopped for a moment, listening to whispers coming from within the room where he kept them. Never before had there been whispers; only the sounds of crying and screams.

It was the redhead this time. He knew it. Ever since his old favorite had been scrapped, the red-haired one had taken up her place and had been enticing the other two into more rambunctious antics.

The last time he had approached the room, they had tried to jump on him at the same time, but he quelled the rebellion with re-emergence of his silver gun that glowed even through the darkness. Everything fell back onto the primordial escapee. If he could just have her back, the rest would stop pestering him so.

The whispers stopped and he heard a series of shifting behind the door. Fearing the worst, he unlocked the door and stepped into the black room, his eyes searching for the three.

“Now!”

The sound came from the redhead and at once, all three ran to him from separate directions. They scratched and bit at him, each trying to pull him toward the ground, but

he had learned one thing from his lesson with the officer. He grabbed the black one by the hair and twisted and turned until he gained enough centrifugal force to propel her into the wall. The white one immediately withdrew to the far corner of the room and rolled herself into a tearful ball.

“C’mon!” the redhead yelled. “We can do it just like she did!”

He shook his head and clenched one hand around her throat as he dragged her to the middle of darkened room. Cars honked and tires rolled across the pavement outside the building and the redhead’s eyes widened in terror as he pulled out his weapon of choice and aimed it directly at her head.

Her mouth formed the beginning of the word “no” as he pulled the trigger repeatedly into her face. The bullets formed a gaping hole in what used to be her face and the body fell into a quivering mass on the floor with a ray of dark blood stretching out from where she had once stood.

He glanced toward the other two that sat crying with one another in the far corner and even pointed the Smith and Wesson at the pair, yet did not pull the trigger. Perhaps the smell of gun powder commingled with coagulating blood and various innards would keep them in line until he acquired others. Then, he would get rid of them as well.

There was still the matter of the cop. The one who was much more a woman than a young girl who could be shaped and manipulated. Therein lay his original problem. Instead of taking a moment to consider what was proposed in getting her, he simply took her. His eyes were, proverbially, larger than his stomach.

Everything fell upon that first one however; and he had to find her. It was imperative.

Once he found her, everything would fall into place once more.

Chapter Thirty-One

Tuesday June 26, 2007

1:17PM

Everything about the inside of Rikers Island was abhorrent to Olivia. The colour of the walls and floors, the sounds of clanking metal bars or hooting inmates who yelled obscenities to her as she passed and especially the sound of “Woman on the block” that was shouted by each new officer that escorted her down the dim corridors.

She had not expected to visit a jail so quickly after beginning with the force again and had weighed the idea of even going, but the message had sounded so dire and there was a part of her that needed real closure on the situation. She also knew that a side of her brain wanted to aid at least one person throughout the messes created in the past six months.

It had taken several days for her stop mourning for Amy and also for Evelyn again as it seemed that no matter how hard she tried, victims kept slipping through her fingers. Elliot and Maya had been supportive of her, allowing her to cry when she needed, but Jonathan had a sort of melancholy about him that she could not comprehend nor did she try. Instead of spending every waking moment with her, Jonathan, still troubled by some unknown problem, returned to his own work, leaving Olivia to battle

with her thoughts. Eventually, she was able to push the thoughts of Evelyn, Amy and the darkened room where dozens of faces had stared out at her, into the depths of her subconscious as she prepared for returning to the force.

The past several weeks had gone by in a blur of special moments and miles of paperwork. Computer Crimes had been just like she remembered it and she learned a lot even though she was permitted only the easiest desk work at first. When she grew tired of sending faxes and creating spreadsheet after spreadsheet of IP addresses, she latched onto a Detective Donnie Nelson and nudged him until he opened up several new cases for her. By the end of the Monday, she had forwarded three cases to Elliot that had the appearance of the special victims unit and an arrest was made Monday night on a fourth case she had traced to an original source who had been working with individuals with credit card companies to obtain account numbers of unsuspecting civilians.

Maya had finally closed her case with Luis Cordoval, obtaining four years incarceration for his crimes instead of nine with the help of exchanging the location of his other weapons and also testifying in two other drug-related cases. Olivia was torn at first by the idea that a criminal was getting such a light sentence, but brushed off the incident, knowing that there would come a time when Maya defended a client who would test the strength of their friendship.

With her apartment laying empty and the rent control on it about to expire with no other tenant, Olivia had considered giving the apartment to her cousin, but later thought better of it when Allison went into the details of her sordid relationship with PK's father. She decided instead to give Allison a thousand dollars of her own money to help get her back on her feet and continued to pay for the apartment, still hoping that she could keep the lease in her grandmother's name.

The greatest of all the events in June was when she was able to surprise Elliot with a new "trick" she had learned a week earlier.

"Just stand there," she had said.

"Liv...what are you doing?"

"Just stay there and I'll show you."

"Olivia," Elliot had said, an irritated notch to his voice. "You called me all the way over here. What did you need?"

"I need to show you something."

"Well, can I at least come inside the apartment?"

"Fine, step into the living room."

Elliot did as commanded and stood in the middle of the room feeling very foolish.

"All right. What have you got to show me?"

Olivia grinned at the annoyed expression on his face and lifted herself from her chair. She had become quite good at bringing herself into a stand, though she could only stand for minutes at a time, and proceeded to stand, unaided, several feet away from Elliot.

"Neat trick," Elliot said sardonically. "Was that it?"

"Hold on a second."

Olivia concentrated all thought onto her legs and hips to ensure that they would not buckle as she attempted to move. She shifted her left hip toward Elliot and her leg came with the move. She then threw her weight toward the opposite direction and shuffled her right leg as she stepped forward. Over the course of two minutes, she slowly closed the gap between them and fell into Elliot's arms as her legs finally gave way at the other end of the room.

Elliot held back tears as she wrapped her hands around him to keep herself from falling to the floor, steadied her with his own hands and smiled so wide his face hurt from pure happiness. He held onto her for a moment longer than he supposed he should have because after a minute, he felt her pull away slightly, but he held fast. As he embraced her, he opened his eyes to view some of her effects hinted throughout Jonathan's apartment. There was a very real possibility that he would never again get the chance to just hold her and relished in the moment with each second that passed. His reverie, however, was quickly broken when Jonathan stepped into the living room wearing a hapless scorn on his face.

He helped Olivia back into her chair and paused at the door as Jonathan ushered him out of the apartment.

"I didn't really mean anything by that back there," Elliot said. "She was just showing me that she could walk and then her legs gave out."

"I know," Jonathan said, though the reassurance did not reach his eyes. "Just remember, you don't have to worry about her so much now. She's in good hands."

Olivia rolled back into the living room as Jonathan shut the door and sighed. Though they seemed to be on the same accord, it was clear that Jonathan and Elliot still despised one another and only the memory of the look on Elliot's face when he watched her take her first "step" kept Jonathan's attitude from bringing down her spirits for the night.

"Woman on the block!" the guard bellowed as Olivia rolled her along side him. She had half a mind to snatch him by the uniform collar and tell him that she did not need that promulgation drawing further attention to her, but renounced the idea knowing that he was simply doing his job.

As they came down the final corridor, she suddenly felt exposed and frail in her chair and wished that she had brought her braces with her. She could only hobble about on them for short periods of time, but she was uncertain of his state and worried that he might try to intimidate her if she could not directly stare him in the eye and scold him.

The heavy, olive green door swung open a minute later and revealed a disconsolate Jeffrey Drover pacing the far side of the room.

"I'll be just out here if you need anything," the officer said just before closing the door and leaving them as alone as anyone could be in a prison.

"So," she said. "You sounded pathetic on the phone. What did you want?"

Drover stepped toward her side of the room and she rolled backward a half-step causing him to pause where he stood.

"You're in a wheelchair?"

"Good eye. Yes. Yes, I am."

"Is this what that guy did to you?"

"I suppose I could ask which guy, but I'm sure it wouldn't make any difference. Yes. I'm in the chair because of what he did to me. But, I'm in here because you summoned me. What did you want?"

Drover took another step toward her. "I need to talk to you."

"Yes...I figured that. Get on with it."

"You don't have to be so bitter."

"I'm sitting a prison on a day when I could be in therapy for my legs. I have every right to be bitter."

"You don't know what my life's been like. I didn't mean to be like this."

"I guess that's what every brutal criminal says."

Drover ran hand through his hair. "I'm not like every other criminal. My dad... my father...did things to me when I was Connor and Ricky's age."

"And that gives you the right to turn around and do that to other boys?"

"No, but look, I've come to terms with it."

"And I'm sure that's a real comfort to those boys' families."

"Olivia, I stayed friends with those kids because I knew it was wrong and I didn't want them to turn out like me."

Olivia shifted in her chair. "Okay, just so that I've got it right: you abused all those boys and stayed *friends* with them so that they'd forgive you and not report you."

"That's not how it happened."

"Yeah, sure. And Daniel? You abused all those kids and then turned right around and started abusing him."

"I fell off-"

"I don't wanna hear about this, Drover. My partner got me the court transcripts to Kreider's trial, so I've already listened to this bull. Now, I know that's not the only reason you dragged me all the out here. Get. On. With. It."

Drover sighed and leaned against the wall for a moment before shaking his head and tearing slightly at the eye. "You have to help me."

Olivia laughed and shook her head. "You know...I've met some really bold and arrogant pedophiles in my time, but you...you've managed to top them all."

"No, you don't understand. I-"

"Actually, I *do* understand. Let me guess. You want me to talk to Judge So-and-So to help you get some kind of lighter sentence because you think you can get some kind of sympathy through a cop in a wheelchair."

"That's not why I need you."

"Oh!" she said with false surprise. "Well, then enlighten me, Jeffrey."

"There are people...*real* criminals in here. Guys who've murdered people just because they didn't like they way they walked."

"Welcome to prison. It's a bitch, isn't it?"

"No, you don't understand! The...the correction officers or something have told all the people in here that I'm a child molester." His breath caught. "I'm...I'm getting it everyday. Every *single* day. And it's always somebody new. You've got to help me."

She rolled her chair closer and spoke in a clear voice. "Jeff. I don't know how to break to this to you, but you *are* a child molester and you are getting nothing more than your just rewards in here."

“Please!” he said kneeling in front of her. “I’m willing to pay for my mistakes, but no one deserves to be-”

“To be what?” she hissed. “To be raped? Like you did to eight, *eight*, kids. They were *children* for Chrissake. You ripped apart their childhood *and* you lied about, it to my face, multiple times!”

Drover put his head in his hands and cried in front of her, but she felt sickened by the sight and scowled at him.

“My partner tells me that you confessed to raping Daniel Richardson as recently as the Friday before he was murdered... Kreider picked out these boys because of what *you* had done to them and what you were *still* doing to them. As far as I’m concerned, you’re just as guilty for murdering them as he is.”

“I didn’t...” Drover pulled his hands away from his face and large grey eyes were so wet they showed Olivia’s reflection like two mirrors. “I didn’t kill them. And I was starting to get help. I swear to God I was.”

“‘Swear to God?’ Are we swearing to the same god on whom you *swore* you were not touching any boy inappropriately? That one?”

Drover shook on the floor. “I know you have no reason to believe me, but I was. I let Daniel go that night and I’d made up my mind to get help that Monday. But...but, none of that even matters now. I can’t go on like this. I can’t eat or sleep because I know the second I turn around, I’m going to be somebody’s bitch.”

“And, what’s worse for you is that I really don’t care.”

“*Please!* Just...just talk to the DA. I don’t want to be let out. I know what I did was wrong and I deserve to be in here, but I can’t be in the general population like this anymore. You’re the only one who can do something.”

She scoffed. “You’re a real piece of work, Drover. I’ll give you that much.”

“I’m *asking* you because you’re the only who-”

“You’re asking me? Like that night you were *asking* me to just *talk* to you and you jumped me and tried to rape me in an alley!”

“I was just so angry that night and I took it out on you and that other kid and I’m sorry-”

“You don’t know anything about anger,” she said. “You’re lucky I was still too sick to testify at your trial or you’d be doing twenty to life after I got through with you.”

Tears spilled from Drover’s eyes and splashed onto the cement floor. “Please... please. I need help. I can’t go on living like this.”

“Well, I would say that life’s a bitch, but I guess you already know that.”

She rolled backwards and called for the guard.

“They’re gonna kill me in here!” Drover yelled from the floor. “You can save my life, Olivia! Just talk to the DA!”

“Even if I was handed a notarized letter stating that you were about to shanked right in front me, I still wouldn’t talk to anyone. You deserve everything you get in here. So, I suggest you just bend over and take it like a man. *Don’t* call for me ever again.”

Without turning around again, she rolled herself out of the room and left Drover crying face down on the floor.

Thursday July 12, 2007
Northbound on Madison Avenue at East 81st Street

Olivia's sigh echoed throughout the sedan as Elliot gassed the car through another green traffic light. They had been driving up and down the island for several hours in an attempt to jog Olivia's memory. She had remembered seeing the outside world as she plummeted to the earth and was certain that she had been in Manhattan and not a borough or in New Jersey. Elliot had his reservations about Olivia's memory, but he volunteered to drive her, hoping that something would come of it.

A part of him wanted to use the time away from his other cases to simply think for a few moments without a barrage of other people or problems coming in his direction. He had spent the majority of the evenings in the past weeks with his family and trying to strike up conversation with Kathy, but the previous day had hit him to the point that he was ready to scrap the whole idea of trying to save his marriage.

He had come "home" for dinner like normal and afterward engaged her in as light a conversation as he could manage. Halfway through, he laughed at something she said while they stood washing and drying the dishes together and nudged her arm, but she stared at him as if he had tried to swoop in and kiss her.

"I don't want to take that kind of step, Elliot," she had said and proceeded to take a step away from him.

"We're just talking, Kathy," he said. "I thought that's all we were doing."

"It's too fast."

"Too fast?" He threw down the dishtowel. "You know, this is getting ridiculous. You're making me jump through all these damn hoops just to get us back to what we used to have and I'm getting sick of it."

"I just said we're moving too fast."

"Kathy, this is nonsense! What fast? How can we be moving too fast if I just touched your arm? For Chrissake, I can nudge Olivia's arm without it turning into some kind of affair."

"I'm sure it didn't."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Are you...Are you trying to tell me that I'm working my ass off to save this marriage just because you think I did something with Olivia?"

"Did you?"

"You've gotta be kidding me. I can't be having this conversation."

"It's just a simple question, Elliot."

"Screw that! *I'm* not the one who had an affair and then threw out her husband because of it!"

Kathy slammed the plate in her hand onto the countertop and it cracked into two pieces in her hands. When she turned toward him, her eyes were ablaze with the kind of anger, he had not seen in a long time.

"You know...when you first told me that your new partner was going to be a woman, I didn't worry about it because I pictured some butch woman with crow's feet. Then, I saw Olivia and I nearly freaked, but I didn't because I trusted you."

"And, I *trusted* you, but you betrayed me."

She shook her head and crossed her arms. "You want to talk about betrayal? Fine, then let's talk about a video on the Internet that Lizzie showed me months ago. Let's first discuss that and then we can go into who betrayed who."

"Kathy-" he began, but she held up her hand to quiet him.

"Let me finish...Now, you weren't here when Lizzie was calling from her bedroom with Kathleen when they first saw a homemade video that showed their father rolling on the floor with his partner. You weren't here to try to make up something to tell them on the spot when they both looked at me and said 'What does this mean for you and Dad?' I have thought about it and prayed about it and thought about it some more, but I honestly thought that the night I told you what I had done or *almost* done that you would come clean to me about you and Olivia."

"There's nothing to come clean about."

"Elliot, why are standing there lying to my face?" Her eyes were wet, but he knew she would not shed one tear. "I admit that I made a mistake. I saw what I was doing and the path I was going down and I turned away. You on the other hand...There's a video circulating the Internet for the whole world to see that shows that you were ready to make more than a simple mistake with your partner in the middle of her floor and yet...you still refuse to admit you did anything wrong. You insist on standing right in front of me to lie directly in my face. Why Elliot? I can admit when I'm wrong. Why can't you? Why do you always have to be the victim here? Why is it that I'm the bad guy?"

"Because you're the one who threw me out," he mumbled.

"Because I needed time away from you to think and now I'm thinking I made the right decision!"

"I have nothing to apologize for."

"You know what Elliot? Fine. Just go. I don't need you to apologize to me because there's no reason for you to. If you don't care or respect me enough to tell me the truth, then we are just delaying the inevitable."

"I care-"

"Well, then why won't you just tell me the truth! For God's sake, Elliot. Put yourself in my shoes for a second. If you came home and the girls were watching some video that showed me and some man you thought I'd been having an affair with for years rolling around on the floor and looking like that they were about a half second away from screwing in the middle of a room, you would be just as angry with me right now as I am with you."

"The difference is I never did anything."

"And where do we start drawing the lines, Elliot? Because what I saw on the screen looked like *something* to me. It looked like my husband had been lying to my face for years. Like it was confirmation of what I always knew was going on in the background."

"How many times do I have to say it? There's was never anything going on between me and Olivia." Elliot sighed. "What is it that you want from me?"

"I just want a simple apology. That's it."

“Fine. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I almost kissed Olivia in a moment of stress so severe I could barely think. I’m sorry that we’re even having this conversation when I know I didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry that even after I’ve told you, *repeatedly* why I could open up to Olivia about things on the job and not you, you still have some kind of inferiority complex. I’m sorry that you need to make it seem like I did something too in order to justify your own infidelity. I’m sorry that my daughter had to spend her last years in her house without her father at home. And, I’m becoming sorry that I let up custody of the twins so easily. So, yes. Okay? I’m sorry Kathy. I’m sorry for a lot of things. ”

She glared at him for a full minute before storming out of the kitchen and up the stairs. He had gone too far and though he had tried to make amends the next day with a genuine apology for what he had been too stubborn to admit, she was not receptive of him and he left the house quickly to drive Olivia around the city.

“Anything yet?” he asked as she stared out the window.

“No. If I see something I’ll let you know.”

He nodded and they continued up Madison. When he turned on East 90th, Olivia sighed again.

Though the progress in her legs had taken great stride recently, as she was now able to hobble along with long braces that attached to her arm and kept her upright, Olivia knew she was at the precipice of a depression.

Jonathan had begun working well into the night and conversation was at a minimum. Much of her time was spent wondering what she had done to push him away and whether or not he was just waiting until she was well before he ended the relationship. The previous night, for the first time since they had first spent the night together, Jonathan slept on the other side of the bed instead nearly on top of her and she felt cold when she awakened the next day.

In sharp contrast, Maya announced to her that her boyfriend, Amit, had proposed to her and Olivia did her best to display a sense of happiness to her friend, but once Jonathan had slept nearly crouched away from her, she was unable to keep up her own spirits, especially after learning that Jeffrey Drover had indeed been raped and killed while in general population the previous week. She had been so angry that Drover had even called her for help, but her conscience weighed heavily upon her as she remembered how pitiful he looked when he was pleading for his life. A part of her wanted to pay her respects at his funeral, but in the end decided to wipe him from memory as best she could. Her attacker still walked the streets free, and as the weeks pressed on without any evidence as to what happened to the man who had held her, it was all she could do to keep herself from allowing a forlorn gloom from covering every part of her life.

“We never going to find him, are we?” she said as she stared out the window.

“We’ll find him, Liv.”

“I’m starting to lose faith. It’s been sixth months. If we were going to find anything, we probably should have found it by now.”

"If you only knew how many times I've had this same conversation... You were gone for weeks Olivia and everywhere I turned people were starting to lose faith and look what happened."

"It was just dumb luck."

"Dumb luck that you survived? C'mon Liv. Even the toughest cop will adm-"

"STOP THE CAR!"

The car tires screeched to a halt causing a noxious cloud of burning rubber to float from beneath the car and hang in the air.

"What?"

"Holy shit. That's it."

By the time Elliot had put the car in the "park" and taken off his seatbelt, Olivia already had out her braces and was hobbling as best she could to the sidewalk.

"Liv, what is it?" he asked as she stared through the alley between two buildings.

"That billboard...that's the one I saw."

"From when though Liv? That Absolut ad has been up for months."

"No! There was a second...just before I started falling. There was a second and I saw it, clear as day." She pointed toward the building to her left. "This has to be it."

"How do you know? You were found in the alley back there."

"But, this one is positioned exactly where it needs to be...This is the building. I swear on my life, this is the one."

"Liv, you were found three buildings away from here. Half a block in the other direction."

She shook her head as she stared up at the billboard. "This is it," she whispered.

He nodded at her and approached the building that had been locked with a large chain interweaved in the door handles. Grabbing a set of lock cutters from his trunk, he handed his phone to Olivia.

"Call Casey," he said as the first of the chain links snapped open. "Tell her we need a warrant for this place and we need it now."

"Right. I'll get back-up too."

Within five minutes, Elliot had pried open the doors and pulled out a flashlight as his eyes tried to search for some semblance of life within the darkness. Against his wishes, Olivia shuffled through the door behind him and panted as he peered about the first floor.

"Try to find some stairs," Olivia said. "I'm thinking it was about the third or fourth floor."

"I'm on it. And, Melinda and I talked about it. I think you might've been on the fifth floor."

"Just be careful."

Elliot stepped through the darkened building, occasionally flashing his gun toward rats that flitted from one corner to the other and found a set of stairs that looked like they were intended as an emergency exit.

Five floors later, he attempted to control his panting as a mephitic odor hit his mouth and he pulled the safety off his gun as he pointed it down the corridor at the sound of scattering somewhere in the dark.

He could hear the faded sounds of the city through the expanse of black and tried to pique his ears toward any other signs of movement, but his other senses were blocked by the stench that grew more powerful with each step he took down the hall.

As he came to the end of the corridor, Elliot noticed what looked like a wooden door lying on its back through the haze of dark grey light. He stepped toward the opening of the room, his gun drawn and prepared to shoot.

At first he saw nothing as the smell had become so great that his skin burned, but when he walked on top of the broken door and into the room, his eyes finally focused to show a spread of several blank faces stacked on top of one another at the room's other end. He clapped a hand to his face to block the odor as he took another step in the room, but stopped short as his mind finally processed what lay before him.

Decay had set in at different rates, but each of the faces belonged to a body that lay molted and nude as they were stacked on top of one another. They wriggled slightly from the massive infestation of maggots that squirmed through each of them as if they were a uniformed mass and could see the swarm of flies batting at each vacant body part.

"Jesus," he whispered and fell against the doorway.

"Elliot?" Olivia's voice echoed through the two-way at his belt. "How's it coming?"

He pulled himself out of the room and hung onto a pole that ran from ceiling to floor to keep himself from collapsing to the ground.

"Liv...call Hazmat..."

The scene spread before the building previously labeled as "Vacant" was nothing short of grotesque and officers had to increase the perimeter of the police blockade that surrounded the building as more and more onlookers vomited sporadically from the sight and the smell.

A city Hazmat team had descended on the building shortly after Olivia had called them and two screaming women were removed from a single room on the fifth floor once the bodies had been removed.

The women held onto one another crying out of grief, fear or relief; no one could discern which, and refused to separate even after they were moved to a hospital where doctors determined that they had been repeatedly raped and starved for the entirety of their capture. Detectives attempted to withdraw some kind of statement from them, but they could only cry out and seemed physically incapable for piecing together words.

Months of therapy lay in wait for both of them and, Elliot, who had to endure several additional sessions with George to discuss what he had seen, was completely moved by the sight of the women several weeks later, hanging onto Olivia as if for dear life when she had come to see them. Together, all three cried and Amanda Hill and Taynesha Grant continually blubbered "thank you, thank you" to Olivia, their minds unable to conceive of any other words.

The bodies of eighteen women all in varying stages of decay had been found throughout the fifth floor, including remains of a woman who had been shot in the face weeks earlier, but left to lay on the floor of the room where the two surviving women had been found. She was later identified by fingerprinting as Kimberley Nelson and the

commissioner himself came down on any officer who had touched the case before Elliot and Olivia found the building. Someone had dropped the ball by not investigating the area by procedure and that action had led to the death of not only Amy Kettering, but also Kimberley who were both killed after Olivia had flown from the building.

Fingers were pointing in all directions; from inspectors who had not bothered to go through every floor of the building when determining that the original owner had abandoned his project to officers who had clearly not taken every effort to search the area. Blame was eventually placed on the shoulders of two young cops who had not been with the force long and the commissioner and the mayor were able to appease the voluminous public outrage that had stirred once the media caught hold of times of death for the two most recent victims.

Though Olivia, and eventually Taynesha and Amanda, all gave descriptions describing the same pale, blond man, no trace of him was found in the building. There were some indications that someone ate and slept on some of the lower floors, but outside of sandwich wrappers that carried no prints and varied filming equipment, they were not able to find anything. Investigators were able to find his collection of pornographic videos, some of which showed Mark Landon violating Zachary Calbrach and murdering Andrew Shaw, yet no further evidence could be found. Mailing addresses were sorted through and searched in hopes of finding him, yet the video stores to which his films were sent all carried the same fake name, "Roman Landanorak," and return addresses that would have put him in the middle of the East River. As a last resort, they had attempted to trace the wire transfer Mark Landon had received months earlier, but it only led to a Swiss bank that refused to divulge any information.

They determined that he had been in "business" for years using the women for various amounts of time before he simply murdered them and tucked them away in a single room instead of disposing of the body. Detectives were still stumped as to why he had gone to the trouble of dumping Amy Kettering, but Olivia suggested that he hated the rebellion she probably represented.

Olivia had stayed out of the public limelight as much as possible, having no desire to answer questions about what had happened except to those who stood the possibility of finding the perpetrator.

Before she was allowed to come back to work with Computer Crimes, the deputy inspector and her commanding sergeant insisted that she speak to a psychologist to ensure that she was mentally prepared to continue working. Olivia was more than annoyed with the suggestion and kept her answers short and light as she spoke to George.

"Have the nightmares stopped?" he asked softly in her office.

"Yes. About three days before we found them."

"Have they returned at all?"

"Nope."

"How are you doing otherwise? Are you eating well?"

"Yep."

He pursed his lips. "Olivia, I *am* trying to help."

"I know, but if I thought I needed help, I would've asked for it."

"You've been through a lot. We just want to make sure you're doing okay before cases come piling on the pressure."

"I can handle it. I've handled difficult situations before and I'll handle this one. I just need everyone to stop treating me like some kind of porcelain doll."

George wrote a few notes on the legal pad in front of him. "How is everything else going?"

"What everything? Work is everything."

"You've only been back to work for the past month. Life still went on as you were recovering."

"Things are..." she sighed and shook her head. "I don't know. Jonathan and I have been living together for about two months and he's drawing away from me. I'm not sure what to do because this is probably the longest I've ever been in a relationship and I've never lived with someone before."

"What do you think happened?"

"I wish I knew, but I can't even put anything to it. You know he...he normally sleeps right beside me. Practically on top of me and every morning, I have to disengage myself from this tangle of arms."

"Has he stopped?"

"Last night. He slept on the other side of the bed. I can't remember him ever doing that."

"Well, it sounds like he clings to you at night because he might fear losing something or losing you. Did something happen last night specifically that might've given him reason to think that he could be losing you?"

She shook her head. "No. Last night, when he got home, I was just in the sitting room and I was playing my cello because...fuck..."

"What happened?"

"I got a new bow for my birthday and I'd gone on and on about it, but last night was the first I'd played in months..."

She did not want to elaborate, but George guessed it.

"It's Elliot, isn't it? Jonathan is jealous."

"We keep having this same argument over and over and over again. He tells me that he's worried about how close Elliot and I are and I tell him over and over and *over* again that he doesn't have anything to worry about, but he never hears me and now, here we are. I mean, what am I supposed to do? How many times do I have to repeat myself before he believes me?"

"Well, have you-"

"You know what? Forget it." She pushed herself away from his desk and rolled in her chair toward the door.

"We can talk about this, Olivia."

"No, we're supposed to be talking about how all that's happened is affecting my ability to do my job. It's not. It won't. I'm fine and I think we're done."

"You know where to find me when you're ready to talk about it," George said as Olivia pushed herself out of his office.

She rolled into a bathroom on the floor and pulled herself into a ball in her chair as she began to cry.

In truth, she was not fine. From distant memories of Amy being too frightened to move to how it felt to wake up cold with Jonathan at the other side of the bed, she could feel every aspect of her life crashing down around her. What made it worse, the only

thing she wanted to do was call Elliot and cry on his shoulder, but she knew it was not possible. Wanting him when he was attempting to pull his marriage back together seemed like something greater than sin and she did not want to break down in front of George. She could not give any credence to the idea that she was anything but strong.

After several minutes, Olivia emerged from the stall and dried her face, thankful for the power of waterproof eye makeup. She would deal with Jonathan, eventually. It was just a matter of sitting him down and reiterating that nothing had changed since the last time they had their “Elliot” talk.

As she pushed the elevator button, she made a note to call Maya and use the excuse of “wedding planning” to clear her mind of everything else that seemed to be bearing down upon her.

She glanced down the corridor as she rolled her chair onto the elevator and sighed.

I really should've just got it off my chest...

Unknown Time and Place

All his work. His years of work taken. *Stolen* from him.

The homeless around the alley huddled away from him as if he had a bad aura about him. The mat he had found to lay upon was cold and wet from combined garbage and condensed humidity and the feel of it upon his skin only gave rise to more anger.

It all came back onto her. He was sure of that. He shook his head in the darkness that surrounded him.

He had seen her peering through the first floor darkness and the sight of her vulnerability caused his heart to skip a beat. She was so close as she stared up the stairs upheld by metallic braces. He could have easily snatched her again in that moment, but stirrings from the above floors deterred him. The stirring was different from that of the others that remained in the room and he knew had been found. And, it all came back to her. There was no uncertainty that she had brought the stranger and she was the one who had ruined it all.

The surrounding crowds that milled around his home gave him the occasional awkward glance as he brushed through the people wearing a jacket with the hood pulled over his head despite the summer heat, but he could not chance being seen.

She would know him instantly and he could not have that.

He never should have made the deal with that bastard Landon. It was a good thing he refused to exchange his real name or else *all* would be lost. But, he had to focus, regroup, inspire himself to begin again.

First thing was first, however. Revenge was a necessity.

All his treasures were stolen away and it was time make reprisal on the thief. Payback was necessary before he flew away to start over everything.

The gun was gone, but his blade pressed against his leg, comforting him. It would come in use at the end. Now, he just needed to find her and wreak the same havoc on her that she had him. It was simply a matter of using the name.

What was the name?

What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other word would smell as sweet.

He had read that somewhere too, but the name was important.

There had been so many and most had tried to shout their names in hopes of gaining some sympathy.

Eleanor, Elizabeth, Emilia...Something short, but longer at the same time.

The name was all he needed. With just the name he could seek his rancorous vengeance. He combed his memory of his precious little time with her and sat straight up as her voice echoed through his head.

"My name is Olivia Benson and I'm a cop. You have to let me go..."

Friday August 3, 2007

11:37 AM

The large orderly in the white uniformed glanced down at Olivia's wheelchair-bound form for fourth time and a part of her wanted to simply stand and slap him as she asked "You've never seen someone in wheelchair before?" but she thought better of it. There was a possibility that he was simply concerned that someone in a wheelchair wished to see one of the long-term residents of the hospital.

Once the elevator doors opened, the orderly stepped in stride with Olivia's powerful pushes on the chair's wheels and stopped in front of a large, locked door outside of which was a nameplate that read "Morse, Harry Stewart."

"I'll be right here," the orderly said as he opened the door. "If you need anything at all..."

She rolled onto the padded floor, suddenly wishing she had simply struggled with her braces instead of spending the day in her chair to rest her legs on doctor's orders.

"I'll be fine," she said and her voice carried across the room eliciting an immediate response from the small figure that leaned against the window.

Morse turned and stared at her, small eyes wide and curious and she took another roll into the room.

She had never seen Morse previously and in contrast to what Elliot had been telling her, he seemed to have re-grown some of his blond hair and was not as fantastically thin as Elliot made him out to be. His skin, while very pale, also had the slightest vestiges of pink attributed with someone who was growing healthier. In the corner of the room, lied a crumpled newspaper and Olivia could see that the main article concerning herself and the two women had been read ad nauseum.

Morse's mouth gaped as he continued to stare and he drew himself slightly taller as his eyes took in every part of her.

"So," she began softly. "You're Harry Morse."

"Yes...yes, I am."

They stared at one another silently for a moment and Olivia wondered if she had indeed made a mistake in coming. Elliot and Jonathan *and* Maya *and* Jillian *and* Munch *and* Fin *and* Cragen *and* George had each insisted that there was no use in seeing Morse

as he had no further information about her case and was likely to hurt her upon sight, but Olivia had a drawing need to see the man who had watched her for so many years.

Once the aftermath of 90th Street had passed slightly, she took it upon herself to see what had been gathered about her case while she had been gone. While she had been told of Morse's videos, she had not really understood what had been said until she was able to view them for herself. Andrea had set them up for her, also adding that watching was most likely going to do nothing but give her nightmares about who else might be watching, but Olivia was persistent.

As she saw images of herself close to seven years younger, she was just as unnerved as Andrea suggested she would be, but she also held a special fascination for the videos. Somewhere in her day-to-day tasks she deemed as ordinary and completely uninteresting, Morse had found something to cherish; something simply captivating. She was further intrigued when she saw the paintings and drawings he had made. Never in her life had someone put so much effort into something as simple as capturing an expression on her face and while she was troubled, the need to meet said person was planted and grew stronger and stronger until she could no longer hold it at bay.

"How old are you Harry?" she asked in attempt to break his adamant gaze.

"Thirty."

"Really? You have such a young face. I wouldn't have guessed that you were even legal."

Morse smiled. "I get that a lot."

"Now that I see you up close, I realize I remember you"

Morse's eyes grew wide. "From how?"

"I ran into you at the store down the street. The only reason I remember is because you looked so freaked out when you dropped your camera and you ran away from me. It just seemed really weird, that's all."

Morse nodded and she pursed her lips. She rolled closer to him and his eyes grew wide again.

"I..." she began, but was not sure what to say to him. "I don't know whether I should slap you or hug you."

"I hope it's the latter," Morse said sitting on the floor in front of her as Olivia rolled her eyes. "He's right. You have lost a lot weight. You're too thin."

She opened her mouth to inquire about whom he spoke, but Elliot's name to her quickly. "Well, I've been through a lot."

"I know. I only wish I could've done something to stop it."

"Well, the reason we were able to track down the guy who took me in the first place was because of...you. I mean, if you hadn't been... We may never have figured out that my neighbor was involved."

Morse nodded. "I never liked him. But, he seemed so weak and simple. Besides there were so many others I had to keep track of, he didn't even register on the radar."

"You were the boy...the man who came to my rescue the night Drover attacked me too."

"Yeah. It took me a minute to see what he was doing and I couldn't let that happen to you. You're too important."

Olivia sighed and shifted in her chair.

"I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable," Morse said. "It's just so...sublime having you here in front of me. Talking to me, saying my name, looking at me...intentionally."

"You know," Olivia said, "you could've come and talked to me at anytime. I didn't realize I was that unapproachable."

"Oh, you're not. You're a light that shines on this dark city. It's just that not enough people realize it, or they would hold you in the same regard as I do. I suppose that Halloway might, but I can tell from your eyes that you're not ready to give into him...For some reason, you don't want to let yourself be happy with him."

She wanted to protest, but an old argument floated to mind and she shifted again in an attempt to keep back the tears that were threatening from the idea that someone, a complete stranger, could know her so unconditionally.

"You're right...It's very strange, but you're right. We've had that conversation before actually. How did you know?"

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable again, but I've watched you for a long time and I know why you do the things you do."

"But, how can you just proclaim that? I don't even know why I do or say the things I do."

"You don't have the benefit of watching yourself and taking notes. I do. I've heard you say things in your apartment that you promised yourself you'd never say and I've seen you accept help when you seem so adamant against it at times. Like, there was an instance a little more than a year ago. Before you disappeared on me the first time. You had come home with that cut on your neck and you and your friend Maya stood in your bathroom as she tried to put some kind of ointment on it. I remember because she kept saying that the ointment would keep it from scarring, but it burned and you pulled it out of her hands and threw it into the sink. But, after a few minutes, you started crying and she cried with you and you let her help you. You never ask for help and you only take it after you take a step away from yourself to realize what's happened in your life that makes you need help in the first place. You're odd like that, but that's part of the reason why I needed to watch you. So much intrigue wrapped up in just one person. I must say you've kept me entranced for years."

Olivia stared at Morse for a long time, again unsure what to do or say.

"I have to go," she said finally.

"It's okay. I said too much and now you don't feel right even being near me. I understand."

She nodded and swung her chair toward the door.

"Olivia," Morse called, now standing.

"Yes?"

"You will come see me again, won't you? I don't expect that even my grandfather will be able get me out of here anytime soon."

She pursed her lips as she stared at Morse's expectant face.

No use even trying to lie to him, she thought.

"I'll see what I can do."

"Okay," he said and sat down again on the cushioned floor as he grinned. "That's the answer I was hoping for. That's almost as good as a yes."

She smirked at him and quickly left the padded room, her mind ablaze with tumultuous thought.

Wednesday August 15, 2007
East 72nd Street and 3rd Avenue

Olivia paused her fingers on the ivory keys of her piano and glanced at the antique clock her mother had left her that now hung from the far wall of the apartment's sitting room. It was nearing ten o'clock at night and Jonathan had still not come home. He had promised her he would start coming home earlier after they had had a lengthy discussion about their relationship and she found it more than ironic that she was the one who now waited for him each night.

In the past month, Jonathan had been trying to close the largest deal of his career and with the extra effort came longer hours spent away from one another. Though, she found the solitude peaceful and acquiescent to her music, there were many times she felt the need to look over her shoulder or make sure her gun was still within reaching distance when she was alone in the apartment and eventually took wearing her holster in the apartment.

There were multiple doormen at the building's entrances and she was eleven stories in the air, but the knowledge that her captor was still loose had distressed her more than Morse's videos. While he still existed as nothing short of a hazy memory locked in a building far away, Olivia was able to continue with her daily affairs without a second thought, but upon seeing the magnitude of his actions when she was squeezed Amanda Hill and Taynesha Grant, her nerves were shot and she turned to music as much as possible to keep herself calm.

She had returned to Computer Crimes shortly afterward, but took another sabbatical, desiring to work with her special victims, yet unable to do so. A part of her considered leaving the force altogether and perhaps start a new path of her life, but the more rational side of her psyche told her it was simply the idea that the killer was still free that kept her unable to focus on the misdeeds of fraudulent scammers.

Her fingers twitched for a song and Debussy's elegant canticle resounded at her touch. For a moment the song brought a smile to her face, that is, until she remembered how well Elliot had said things had been recently with his wife. Kathy had accepted his apology, though he never told Olivia why he was apologizing, but he had still not made the final leap into moving back home.

Olivia's ears piqued at the sound of the floorboards shifting behind her and she called out as she continued playing.

"It's about time you got home. I was getting lonely here all by myself."

When she did not receive a response, she stopped and listened, but heard nothing outside of the sounds of her own breathing.

"Jonathan?" she called. "Jonathan, is that you? Maya?"

The floorboards shifted again and Olivia grabbed her braces and fastened them to her arms. She had stepped not several feet into the corridor when she looked up and found a pale face gleaming at her from the open door.

Her breath caught as his menacing, sharp blue eyes glimmered in the hall light and he took a step toward her.

She reached for the gun in her holster and pointed it directly at his chest, but her body froze, too terrified to pull the trigger. He blinked at her for a second, but then bolted out of the apartment and down the hall.

By the time, she had reached the corridor, all she could hear was the sound of the door to the emergency stairs clicking closed.

Olivia found the phone and called for the front desk, screaming into the phone a moment later.

“There’s a man in my apartment! He just ran out of here and he’s going down the stairs!”

“We’re calling the police. Which stairs Miss Benson?”

“He’s coming! He’s coming right now! Down the South stairs! Meet him at the bottom!”

She dropped the phone and snatched her braces as she hobbled in a near run toward the elevators. When she had reached the bottom, her gun was ready to shoot at anything that moved too quickly and she stepped out of the elevator to see five uniformed officers with their gun weapons trained on the doors to stairs.

For several minutes, she stood with them, her trigger finger set, but the tension waned and two sets of cops went shooting up the stairs at either end of the building.

Within the hour, the building had been evacuated and Jonathan kept one arm around her waist to help her stay upright as her legs were ready to give way on her braces. The officers canvassed the entire building, yet by the time Elliot and Cragen appeared at the complex, there was no news on his whereabouts.

Inside the apartment later, a heated argument erupted as Cragen wanted to have a protective detail imposed on Olivia until he was found.

“Difany you can stay for the first shift, right?” Cragen asked the officer nearest to him.

“No,” Olivia said. “I don’t need protective detail.”

“Come on, Liv!” Elliot said nearly yelling. “This guy managed to get in here and get right back out again. You were lucky he didn’t just come up behind you and take you out.”

“He didn’t and he’s not going to. I’m aware of the situation and now we can take appropriate action.”

“Yeah, like leaving,” Jonathan said. “We’re not staying here another second. I don’t care how many cops you put in here.”

“We’re not leaving,” Olivia said. “If he’s found me here, he’ll find me at a hotel or your brother’s or somewhere else across the city or wherever.”

“So, you just want to sit here and be bait for him!” Jonathan yelled.

“I want him found and running isn’t going to do that! If he’s going to come for me, let him come. I’m ready. This is not going to get the best of me!”

“At least take the detail,” Cragen said. “Two eyes can watch out for him better than just one.”

“No,” she said. “I don’t need one. Before, I had the feeling that something was up and even then I had my gun on me, but I was still lax. Now, I’m prepared.”

“How prepared can you be, Olivia?” Elliot said. “You can barely walk, let alone defend yourself.”

“I’ve already *defended* myself against him. I don’t need the goddamn detail!”

Cragen ran a hand over his head. “I’m through reasoning with you. You’re getting the detail whether you like or not. I’m not having a cop under my command go down like this after what we’ve all been just trying to find you.”

“No,” she repeated. “I don’t need it. I can-”

“Olivia,” Jonathan said in a low voice. “For the love of God...just take the damn detail. We don’t need you trying to prove you’re a hero. You’ve already made it out of a fifth floor window to get away from him already. No one doubts that you can handle him. If you’re intent on staying here, we need to make sure that if he does come at you again, we can take him down for the last time. I don’t want any more slip-ups and neither do your fellow officers. Please...stop being stubborn and allow us to help you.”

Olivia wanted to protest again, but as she opened her mouth, Morse’s words echoed in her ears and she sighed instead. “Fine...do it.”

Monday August 27, 2007

8:24PM

The series of black and red cards stared back at Olivia as she frowned at her hand. Dave Difany smirked as he held his own thin array of cards, small flowers of cards spread in packs of three and four laid in front of him on his side of the coffee table.

“This is crap,” she said after staring at her cards for a full minute. “Can’t we play something else?”

“You only don’t like it because you’re losing so badly,” Difany said.

“Of course that’s it! If I was winning, I wouldn’t be complaining.”

He laughed and set down his cards as she let out a sigh and threw her twenty cards into the air letting them flutter down like leaves. She and Difany had played a card game every single night he had spent in the apartment as a part of her night police detail. For the first week, she glared at him every time he crossed her path, but Jonathan stressed that Difany and the other three cops who followed her every movement, were simply doing their jobs and everything was done to keep her safe. Afterward, she let down her guard slightly, but still craved a resolution.

After the misfortune of not finding him or his method in and out of the building, even after hours of searching, the other tenants on the floor had checked into a nearby hotel hoping not to be caught in the fray. Olivia heard the murmurs as she checked in from time to time at the front desk and as the neighbors across the hall were leaving for the Hilton, she could have sworn she heard Mrs. McNeely say to her husband, “I told you she’d be trouble. Jonathan has his pick of any woman in the world and he picks the one who’s got maniacs after her.”

I wish he would just come for me already, Olivia found herself thinking from all the stress that surrounded her. Everyone was so busy trying to protect her that she was left alone with her police escort for much of the day and was very lonely because of it.

Part of the reason she had so vehemently resisted the protective detail was because she was ashamed of how she had reacted when confronted with her attacker. Maya, being the only person in whom she confided such thoughts, insisted that what she did was natural and she acted like anyone would have in the same situation, but Olivia still refused to commit to the idea. Admitting that meant admitting she was just like any other victim, and if there was one thing she was not...

"Think up something else you want to play," Difany said. "I'm gonna take a leak. You know the drill...Don't answer the door, call for help if-"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I got it."

She glanced at the clock as he left and willed Jonathan to come home. He had begun sleeping on top of her again and instead of wishing for space, she relished in the comfort his open arms brought. His "big deal" had not yet closed and he still spent a fair amount of time in his office, but it was not by his own choice. Though, Olivia did not want to be alone with the police detail, she also did not want to be the cause of some regret in his career later down the line and she pushed him out of the bed each morning, imploring him to do what he loved.

When five minutes passed and she was still sitting on the sofa alone, Olivia called out for Detective Difany.

"Dave?"

Hearing no response, she rose from the couch, but froze when she heard the sound of something heavy falling to the floor several yards away from her in the apartment.

Elliot hummed along with the radio in the kind of cheerful mood he had not seen in months as he drove up 3rd Avenue. He had not had a moment to go see Olivia in close to a week and when he looked at his calendar and realized how long it had been, was intent on stopping by, even if he did have to deal with Jonathan.

He and Kathy were making the final preparations to get everything Kathleen needed to start at City College in the upcoming weeks and the twins, his babies, were preparing for their first day of high school. The stop he had made to buy Olivia a bouquet of yellow roses and a box of chocolate did not dampen his spirits as a surly Irish man argued that he received two dollars less than he should have in change with the Arab clerk and spewed obscenities at the Arab, who sent them right back in his own language. As he continued his trek toward the East Side, he hoped Olivia would be in a good mood regardless of the protective detail all the men in her life had imposed upon her.

One of the night doormen at Olivia's building had recently been hired and did not want to let Elliot into the building until the elder tapped him on the shoulder and informed him that Elliot was "a friend of Mr. Hallows and Miss Benson." While the elevator doors closed, a smirk spread across Elliot's face at the thought of the expression on Olivia's face when she saw that he had not only surprised her with a visit, but also came bearing gifts.

"Dave?" Olivia called again, but received no answer.

Her breath began coming in jagged gasps as she reached for one brace and hobbled toward the bathroom. She immediately thought of her gun, which she had left on the couch, but wanted to be certain before she overreacted.

“Dave, are you okay?”

Olivia took another step toward the bathroom, but froze when she felt something brush against her back. She wanted to turn around in the corridor, but the movement was stymied as she heard the sound of metal scraping together like a sword coming unsheathed and felt something cool and flat sliding against her face.

“I’ve missed you,” he breathed onto her neck.

His wide, eight-inch knife caught one of the tears that fell from her eyes and as he pressed a hand to her shoulder, he held up the tear to stare at the droplet in the hall light. The teardrop moved in jagged spurts over an expanse of something dark and viscous as he tilted the knife in several directions.

“Tears? That’s so beneath you. Isn’t it...Olivia?”

She tried to take a breath, but her diaphragm had stopped functioning and only vibrated against her attempts. From down the hall, she could see into the bathroom and saw Difany lying face down in a pool of his own blood with a large gash across his throat.

“There aren’t going to be any problems this time,” he said. “You will obey me for the last moments of your life and then I’ll have my vengeance. No one takes anything away from me.”

“Y-you’re...”

“I’m...? What? Crazy? Angry? All the above? Probably, but I won’t rest until I can lick your blood clean from this knife. *That’s* when I’ll be satisfied.”

Olivia’s hand began to shake and he wrapped his arms around her, flashing the blade before her eyes.

“It’s okay,” he whispered into her neck. “It’s okay. I’m here now. And, I promise, everything will be fine.”

The elevator doors chimed open and Elliot stepped into the corridor with an extra bounce in his step. He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he should call first since Olivia was no longer a single woman living on her own, but waved away the thought as he approached the door.

He knocked twice and waited, but did not hear the slightest movement from the other side of the door. Knocking again, he held his breath as he tried to hear or feel the slightest tread of footsteps, but heard and felt none.

Elliot sighed, immediately dejected that he would not get to see Olivia that night and headed back toward the elevators.

Olivia gasped when she heard the knock at the door and wanted to cry out for help, but, as if reading her thoughts, he clenched his arms tighter around her and pressed the knife directly against her throat.

“Don’t say a word or I promise the last you’ll see is your blood spraying across the walls.”

Her body shook from combined fear and exhaustion in her legs. She wanted to collapse, but knew any wayward movement might plunge his blade into her throat.

A single tear ran down her face, and as his breath came in soft hums against her ear, Olivia prayed for the first time since she was eight years old.

Jesus...please...I can’t die like this...Please...

Elliot paused as he pushed the button for the elevator.

Well, she’s gotta be there, he thought. *Or else they wouldn’t have let me up.*

He fished a set of keys out of his pocket, found the new key that was marked with an “O” and turned it in the lock.

“Liv?” he said as opened the door a crack. “Liv, it’s me. Hope, I’m not interrupting anything.”

Elliot stepped into the hallway and dropped everything his hands as he pulled his gun from his holster and pointed it at the pair that stood before him.

In contrast to Olivia, he appeared so white he nearly glowed against her skin and hair and his fingers clenched tighter around the knife he held directly against Olivia’s throat. She stood without her braces though he could see her legs shaking under the stress and Elliot took a step forward, never taking his eyes off the ones that seemed to burn his face as he stared.

“Let...her...go.”

He smiled against Olivia’s face. “Well, isn’t this fun? And, I thought we would do this all alone, but now we’ve got a third player.”

Elliot took a step forward, his gun trained on the pale figure behind Olivia, who managed to choke two words from her throat. “Elliot...shoot.”

Elliot shook his head once. “Let her go.”

He shook his head behind Olivia. “Are you willing to risk it... Detective? Are willing to risk taking a shot at me while I’ve got her in front of me like this?”

“You’re a coward, now let her go.”

“Coward? I’d say I’m brilliant if anything. If I wasn’t, then you would’ve already shot at the both of us, but I know you won’t. I can see it in your eyes. You can’t risk hurting her when she’s already so fragile.” He brushed his lips against her neck. “And, she *is* fragile, Detective. So, very fragile. Her legs are beginning to shake under her own weight. She’s still so unaccustomed to standing on her own for so long. If she falters, the blade will sink into her skin, but she remains standing. She shakes because she is fragile, but she still stands. And you...If your hand was just a slight bit off...You might miss and I might simply slit her throat before you could take a second shot. Your errant shot could do it. *You* might be the one to kill her and I know you couldn’t have that.”

“Then, why don’t you just save us both a lot of time and let her go.”

“She’s mine,” he said into Olivia’s hair. “I’m just here to take what belongs to me.”

“Let her go,” Elliot repeated and took another small step. “No one belongs to you.”

“She’s *mine*. I *paid* for her. Albeit, at a much lower rate than the others, but what a deal.”

“Let...me go,” Olivia said her voice catching in her throat.

He took a deep breath. “Oh, I’ve missed that phrase these past few months. You would say it to me almost non-stop, wouldn’t you? Even now. With a knife to your throat. You’re still telling me to let you go. But, that’s what I like about you. Your simple spirit. You don’t ask me to let you go. You *tell* me to. Like you’re commanding from on high.”

“Look,” Elliot said, having taken another step forward. “You put down your knife and I’ll put down my gun and you can walk out of here.”

“You don’t understand. She’s mine and I’m leaving here with what is mine.”

Elliot tried to take another step, but stopped as he watched him push the glistening blade further into her skin emitting a gasp from Olivia’s mouth.

His face was expressionless, mostly hidden behind her hair, and Elliot wanted nothing more than to take a shot at his forehead.

Elliot locked eyes with Olivia, but he saw no sense of panic or fear. The moment he stared directly at her, the connection between them that had been severed when she had left him the previous year linked and Elliot saw a window into her thoughts.

Within an instant, Olivia had shifted and thrown her arm into his stomach before he could move his blade and Elliot came at him, tossing his gun to the floor.

A tangle of arms and cotton hit the wooden floor and Olivia saw his knife moving through the air with malicious intent. Elliot’s hand moved towards his neck, but he did not see the knife inching toward his chest.

Elliot’s discarded gun lied closest to her and with a hand still wrapped around her waist she reached for it, hearing the sickening squish of sharp metal coming in contact with flesh.

Forgetting the gun momentarily and saw his eyes ablaze as his blade pulled toward Elliot’s ribcage, the sound of ripping fabric and shredding skin flowing in its wake.

Olivia’s heart was ready to pound out of her chest at the sight and she exerted every force in her body away from him and toward the gun. The gun sticking to her hand with near magnetic force, she twisted within his grasp and pulled the trigger with a single hand.

The force of the gun pushed her backward and she could see his eyes sear at her one last time before the black bullet made contact with the bridge of his nose. It pushed through thin skin and bone quickly and a spray of red splashed across her face as his head went backward with the force of the traveling bullet.

Within a second, the bullet had exited his skull, its tail taking a pink expanse of skin and brain with it as it ricocheted off of a lone nail in the floor and dug itself into the doorframe. The trail of shining blood and entrails made a path toward the bullet and his body, now free its moving metallic menace, slowly fell backward to pool near-black blood across the floor.

Olivia rolled away from him and used her arms to drag herself across the floor to Elliot who lied on his back the knife still embedded in his abdomen. His eyes were glazed and stared unblinking at the ceiling.

“Elliot...” she called as finally pulled close to him. His damask blood had puddled over the floor and soaked into her pajamas, causing her to slide against the floor as she tried to reach for the knife.

Covered in the same viscous red fluid, the knife slipped out of her hands twice before she could pull it out, extracting curdled gasp from Elliot. She shifted on the floor and attempted to put pressure on his stomach, but the wound had slit vertically up his middle and was too large for her hands to cover.

Shaking, she reached into Elliot’s jacket feeling for something plastic and small. Olivia grabbed his phone and quickly dialed 9-1-1, her fingers sliding across the claret-covered buttons.

With an ambulance on the way, Olivia shifted once more and cradled Elliot’s head in her lap. His chest was trying to expand to fill his lungs, but whether from pain of the wound or from lack of the strength needed to do so, his breathing came in short, but slowing gasps. Blood poured from the corner of his mouth and Olivia, not knowing what else to do, continually wiped it away, realizing with each wave of her hand, Elliot stood less and less a chance recovering from the loss of so much blood.

Her tears splashed onto his face and her own breathing grew ragged as his eyes began to grow dull as she stared into them.

She bent over to place her tear and bloodstained face next to his.

“Just keep breathing,” she whispered. “Elliot...just keep breathing...”

Chapter Thirty-Two

Unknown Time and Place

The lights from the ambulance were blinding as they flashed into her eyes and her entire body ached from the waist downward, but Olivia did not care. Only Elliot mattered.

He had taken hold of her hand as she lied with him on the blood-covered floor and she refused to let go; not when they strapped him to a gurney, not as they wheeled him on the carriage out of the apartment.

Her legs lengthened beneath her and she ran with the EMTs telling, pleading, with Elliot just hang on and stay with her.

They lifted him onto the bus and a pair of hands from behind her lifted her into it as well. Her hand only loosened from his for a bare moment, but even that felt like an eternity.

Though she knew that time had passed, only the feel of his fading heartbeat through his hands gave her any semblance of it. The hospital was in view after what seemed like moments later and the EMTs struggled to help her off the bus as she refused to let go of him.

She nearly fell as her legs gave out, but her resolve to hold onto him had never been stronger and she found vigor from deep within to stand and stretch her legs to run beside the gurney, Elliot’s hand clasped inside her own.

The EMTs shouted stats to the emergency room surgeons, but it simply came as static to Olivia’s ears. Her focus remained solely on him.

They reached the doors to surgical bay and someone, a nurse or a doctor, she did not know which, tried to pry her away from him. She refused to yield at first, but a voice calling, "Detective Benson, *please*," allowed her to release her grip.

The shorter of the surrounding nurses called to her, saying something about how she was covered in blood and they could get her cleaned up, but she could not quite make out the words as they buzzed and echoed in her head.

The world spun in front of her eyes and the remaining strength in her legs gave out at last as she felt her body falling toward the floor. Her head rolled and faced the ceiling and she could feel the beginnings of an old convulsion starting at the base of her neck when all before her turned to darkness.

Tuesday August 29, 2007
Mount Carmel Hospital East
4:53AM

Jonathan passed through an expanse of people carrying flowers and resisted the urge to begin shoving them out of his way. He had rushed to the hospital after seeing the scene at his apartment and his hands still shook from the thought that Olivia might be dead.

Flattening himself against the wall to slide through the crowd, he finally managed to get to the room he sought. He knocked once, but did not wait for an answer before he stepped into the room. Inside, he found Elliot asleep, heavily bandaged about the middle, and a woman sitting beside him with a tear stained face.

"Yes?" she said, blue eyes large and concerned.

He crossed the room toward her. "I'm, uh...I'm Jonathan."

She put out her hand for him to shake, but withdrew it quickly realizing she still had a wad of wet tissues in it. "I'm Kathy Stabler. You're Jonathan Halloway. You're dating Olivia."

"Yeah," he said slightly taken aback from how much a stranger seemed to know about him. "She, uh...She's been admitted again...Had another seizure after they brought him in...Is he...H-how is he?"

Kathy nodded her head. "Good. He'll be okay. The doctors said there was a lot of damage, but that none of his...insides were badly cut. They expect him to make a full recovery, but...he'll just be in here for a while."

Jonathan nodded absent-mindedly and reached for the chair next to her. "May I?"

"Please." She moved her things out of the chair. "How's Olivia? I know she came in with him and the nurses said she was hysterical."

"She'll be fine. They did an MRI just to make sure. Her doctor thinks it was just the stress combined with walking, well, running with his cart last night was just too much at one time."

"She was walking? Running? All by herself?"

"Yeah," he said with a smile. "It's good news, right? I mean, at least we know she'll be okay eventually."

Kathy returned the smile and sighed as she stared back at Elliot's resting form.

"I'm just glad they're both okay. If something had happened to Olivia...I know he'd never be able to forgive himself. And, I don't know what I would've done if he didn't...if he didn't make it. I just...I'm just..."

"Kind of numb?" Jonathan finished and she nodded.

"Yeah. I don't know what to do."

"I guess the best we can do is just be there for them so that the first person they see when they wake is someone who loves them."

She nodded again and quickly wiped away the tear that was threatening to roll down her face. They took turns staring at Elliot's slumbering form and then at one another, having nothing else about which to talk. Every few minutes, Kathy would dab her eyes and Jonathan shifted uncomfortably in his chair as he threw her occasional glances.

"You know," Jonathan began, incapable of keeping his thoughts to himself any longer, "throughout all the time I've known Olivia, she's been telling me about Elliot, and also about you. I know it's probably not any of my business, but since you're here and I'm not sure when I'll get to talk to you again, I think it's best that I just say this."

"Say what?"

"Well, I think...everyone probably thinks...you should go back to your husband."

Kathy turned her head from him quickly and gasped, feeling like she had been slapped in the face by his words.

"I don't mean to be preachy," Jonathan added, "and I don't want to pry, but it's like...you leaving him has had this cascading effect over the lives of half the people in this city. I mean, just looking at it from my own end...he's upset and talks to Liv about it, your kids talk to Liv about it and then she spends half the night telling me everything. Then, I need someone to talk to, so I end up telling my brothers, my father, my secretaries...and before I know it, I'm having a corporate lunch and the subject randomly comes up from strangers who'd heard it through the grapevine.

"It's just...given all that's happened...I don't know. Before this guy took Olivia, I was ready to just give up on her altogether. And, when I got her back, I realized how much she'd already affected me and how much I really loved her and we've only known each other for less than three years. You and Elliot...I mean, you've got kids together."

"I know," Kathy said. "And, we *have* been talking, but..."

"Look, I know what you've probably been thinking because I've been thinking the same thing since the first time I saw them together...affair, but that's not it. Olivia and Elliot have this special...bond that neither you nor me nor anyone else in this world is ever going to understand, but that doesn't mean they don't love us. And, like I said, I don't want to preach, but after everything that's happened or whatever he did, I think you owe him a second chance."

Jonathan stood and handed a business card to her. "Just think about it and if you ever needed someone to commiserate with..."

"Thanks," she said softly while taking the card.

"And, let me know when he wakes up because I know Liv is going to want to see him."

Kathy nodded as he left. She had made up her mind about her marriage long before Jonathan had appeared, but she was intrigued to hear the words come an outsider as well.

Olivia opened her eyes to see Jonathan's tall form staring out the window of her room. At first her heart skipped a beat as she wondered if she had dreamed that she had left the hospital and wiggled her toes to convince herself that time had indeed elapsed, though she was in the hospital again.

"Hey," Jonathan said hearing the commotion from Olivia's bed and he crossed the room in a single stride to sit next to her. "How are you feeling?"

She thought about it for a moment as she continued to move her feet, but a new thought popped into her head.

"Where's Elliot?"

"He's fine," Jonathan said. "He pulled through surgery and I talked to his wife and his doctors a little later and everyone says he's going to be okay. He was in real bad shape for a while, but you had called the ambulance so quickly that he didn't lose as much blood as they thought he had."

"I was going to tell the nurse to take some of my blood if he needed it."

"They couldn't have taken it anyways, Liv. Not with the shape you were in last night."

Olivia closed her eyes for a moment. "The guy..."

"He's dead."

"He was going to kill me."

Jonathan shivered. "And you did the right thing. You kept him from killing you and your partner. I don't think I would've survived if you had died. To get you back and have you taken away from me all over again. Liv...I'll be honest, when I came home last night and saw all the blood...I passed out. I thought...I thought he'd got you. Even being here on the East Side and with doormen and with a cop in there, I thought he'd come through everything just to kill you. It wasn't until I came to a little later that the cops there told me what happened. They said you were okay, but they told me about Elliot and I actually went to check on him first so that when you were conscious again, I'd have answers for you."

"Thank you...for everything."

"It was the least I could do, Liv. I...I should've been there."

"For what, Jonathan? Did you see the knife? He took out Difany and he would've killed you too. He wanted me and he would've killed...*did* kill as many people as it took to get at me."

Jonathan put his head in hands and a moment later he was weeping openly.

"I just...You could've died, while I sat in my office trying to get one more useless thing done. There's so much blood across the apartment. God, Olivia. When I saw it..."

"You thought it was all me."

He nodded and sighed.

"I brought you some fresh clothes. The guys from your precinct told me they'd be in after a little while. They need to get your statement."

"Do they even know who he is?"

"They said they got his fingerprints, but his face...I'm sure you or Elliot would be able to pick him out of a lineup...when you're ready."

She tried to sit up but felt her head spin.

"Just lie down," Jonathan said. "You've been through so much."

"I want to see Elliot."

"Maybe a little later. His wife's down there with him right now and he's still unconscious."

"I'm still not sure what happened. I don't know how he got in there...I don't know what made Elliot decide to come by...I don't even know what happened from the time they wheeled him into surgery and now."

"Well, they said you were running with the cart, and that, with the stress of what happened wore you out too much and you had another seizure. That's why they kept you. As for Elliot coming by...I don't know. Fate, luck...Jesus. I haven't the slightest idea, but what I do know is that I'm probably the most grateful man on this earth right now."

He slipped his hand around hers and she sighed sleepily.

It's over, she thought. It's finally over.

Olivia huffed as she pushed on the wheels of the chair and rolled forward onto the floor where Elliot was recovering. She had been against going back to her wheelchair after having made so much progress in the previous months, but when she collapsed twice after trying to use her braces, she flopped into the chair thankful that she could at least move about independently. Jonathan had helped her get dressed that morning, but she told him she would meet him at the entrance in an hour. She knew that Elliot and Jonathan seemed to upset one another so much and she needed to see Elliot, without Jonathan hovering over her shoulder.

When she got to the room, Kathy stared at her with an odd expression Olivia had never seen on Kathy's face. For the first time since she had known her, Kathy looked at her without the slightest air of suspicion or intrigue.

"Hi," Olivia said, still by the door.

"Hey," Kathy said. "Come in. You need some help?"

"No, I've got it," Olivia said wheeling herself through the doorway. "How is he?"

Kathy smiled. "He's fine. He's got the colour back in his face again and the doctors say he should make a full recovery in a few months. He actually woke up a little while ago asking for the kids. Maureen first, then he drilled me about Lizzie, Dickie and Kathleen. And, then he asked for you, of course."

Olivia smiled at her. "Well, I'm about to leave in a bit and I just wanted to see him before I left."

"Come," she said beckoning Olivia closer and eventually trading positions with her. "I was about to go myself. I've been in these clothes all day and all of last night and I'm in need of a shower. Stay with him for a little. He might wake up again if you nudge him just right."

She smiled and closed the door behind her, leaving Olivia to stare at Elliot. Olivia sighed as she rolled closer, her chair squeaking across the floor tiles.

As she watched him sleep, she wondered if this was what it was like for him. Did he silently will her to wake up when she dozed for hours at a time?

After twenty minutes of allowing her mind to race, she pulled the brake off her chair and prepared to leave, when she heard Elliot sigh on the bed.

"Liv?"

"Hey!" she said brightly. "Yeah, it's me. How you feeling?"

"Like someone tried to dissect me."

She shook her head. "He tried. That I remember clearly."

He blinked at her. "What? No flowers? No balloons?"

"Not today," she said laughing. "Maya asked about you."

"How's she doing?"

"Well, she was in near hysterics earlier, but Jonathan managed to calm her down. We're having lunch a little later today, and I'm sure there'll be a mimosa or two involved."

He smiled, but it faded quickly as she shifted in her chair.

"You're back in your chair again."

"Yeah," she said sighing. "I tried to get back on the crutches, but I, uh..."

"But, what?"

"I just can't. Not right now. I don't really remember the other night all that well, but apparently, I was running beside you when they brought you in and the exertion just wore me out. Jonathan had one of his specialists come in to see me and they think it was just too much stress too soon, but they think I'll be fine. But, enough about me. What about you?"

He smiled. "Already told you. I feel like crap, but I'll be okay." He paused, his smile fading slightly. "Did we get him?"

"Yeah. I shot him. With your gun. The one you just tossed when you came at him."

"I figured we both had him down."

"God, Elliot," she said shaking her head. "That was so stupid. I was so scared when I saw his knife flying. And, then...then there was so much blood."

"I know," he said softly.

"You should've just shot him."

"Not with you in the way."

"But, he'd all but let go of me. You would've had a clear shot at him."

"Not with you in the way, Olivia."

"Elliot," she said tears forming in her eyes. "You...you risked your life when you could've just shot him. He was holding a knife the size of my arm and you came at him anyway. That was just so stupid..."

"I know," he said. "But, I couldn't think logically at that point, Liv. I wasn't going to be able to shoot and if I didn't move, he would've done the same thing to you that he did to me, only it would've been worse. A lot worse."

"But, you shouldn't have-"

"Shouldn't have what? Risk my life for you? C'mon Liv. You know that's the least I'm willing to do for you."

Tears were steadily streaming down her cheeks, but she did nothing to arrest the flow.

"You could've died," she said. "I thought you were dead for a second. And, the whole time...with all that blood, I just kept thinking about your kids, and Kathy and..."

how was I supposed to live with myself knowing you died for me. It's almost like Gitano all over again."

Elliot tried to shift on the bed, but the pain across his midsection would not allow it.

"Don't try to move," she said, sniffing. "You might tear the stitches."

"Liv," he said ignoring the comment. "That guy was about murder you in front of me and I couldn't let that happen. We're all going to die eventually, and if that was my time, then I was willing to go out trying to save you rather than as an old man warm in my bed having watched you slaughtered before my eyes."

"But, you could've died. It was just so stupid."

He smiled at her. "Sometimes we do stupid things for the people we care most about."

She only shook her head and smiled in return.

Silence fell upon them and they stared at one another, each searching the other's eyes one again. Elliot took out his hand and embraced Olivia's for a moment until she shifted in her chair.

"I told Jonathan I'd meet him at the entrance," she said.

He let go of her slightly. "Okay. Where are you staying?"

"The Hilton for now."

He laughed. "Champagne wishes and caviar dreams, eh?"

"Oh, stop it," she said smiling. "Or I'll hit you in the stomach."

She began to roll away from, but he reached out for her once again.

"Liv?"

"Yeah?"

"C'mere," he said motioning her toward him.

She moved closer, but he beckoned her further and managed to shift until he was almost sitting upright on the bed.

"Don't tear the stitches," she said.

"Just come here."

"Yes?" she said half in her chair and half leaning on his bed, only several inches away from him.

"I need to say this," he said softly. "And I don't want you to respond. I just need to say it."

"Okay...?"

He reached out and pulled her even closer to him. Before she could react, their lips met and she closed her eyes allowing him to simply hold her.

He let go of her after a full minute, his eyes bright. "I love you, Olivia. And, I want you to know that I'd gladly lay my life down for you. Any day, any time, anywhere."

She smiled, speechless and repressed the tear that lied at the brim of her eyes.

"That's all," he said. "Just don't forget my flowers tomorrow."

Olivia laughed and fell back in her chair. She managed to close the door to his room a few moments later, and on the elevator, as her lips still tingled, she thought that once she got Jonathan settled at the hotel, there was someone she needed to see.

Bellevue Hospital
3:16PM

"I see you've been painting. Quite a bit actually."

Olivia stared at the numerous canvasses that hung at varied states of completion on the walls of Morse's cell. Some were still sketches and others looked very similar, as if he began one and started a second as another, greater, idea came to mind.

Light from the window poured into the room and gave the watercolours with which he worked a vibrant hue.

"Well, it's easy," Morse said, "when you have such a wonderful muse."

She sighed and shook her head as a smirk tugged at her mouth. "We found him. The guy who Mark Landon had apparently sold me to in February. I just thought you might want to know."

"Thank you. I did want to know. I've exchanged my canvasses for my newspaper privileges and my father says he won't do anything about it until I start talking to the shrink again, which I won't do. So, thank you, but... Looking at you now, I don't think that's why you came all this way to see me."

"No," she said. "It's not. The guy... my attacker. I've... I killed him. He's not the first, but this time... I don't feel anything from it. I'm not craving a cigarette. I don't feel like I should go to church to find absolution. I don't feel anything. And, the more I think about it, I realize that I could spend hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars trying to go over this with a shrink, or... I could just come to you. You seem to know me so well already."

Morse sat straighter on the floor, his eyes penetrating.

"So, tell me," she continued. "Why don't I feel anything for killing him?"

"You didn't kill him," Morse said quickly.

"I assure you, I did."

Morse shook his head. "No, you didn't. He was a monster. He was probably already half-dead anyway, but you didn't *kill* him. With the others, you took their lives away and their chances at redemption, but him... this was simply *payback*."

"Payback? That's the best answer you've got for me?"

"He took your life away from you. Mark Landon started it, but he's the one who broke you and hurt you. He's the reason why you're in a wheelchair months afterward and will spend the next several months re-learning to walk without any help and even after that, you'll never be the same. You'll wake up at night and wonder if he's there. You'll remember him anytime you're all alone. For the rest of your life, he'll always be there. He took your life away and this was just *payback*."

"Payback," she whispered.

"Yep. Payback. It's as simple as that." Morse stood and she rolled backward slightly.

"I'm so... glad to know that you got him. I think... I think everything in the world seems right again now that I know you're fine."

Olivia nodded. "Does this mean if they let you out, you're going to stop following me?"

"I promise," Morse said smiling. "I won't be following you anymore, Olivia."

She gave him a small smile and rolled closer to him. "Well, then...I guess you can have that hug now."

Her eyes nearly began tearing at the pure glee on Morse's face as she allowed him to come close and bend down to hug her from her chair. As she left the clinic, she rolled down the window of the town car Jonathan had ordered for her, complete with driver, wondering if Morse was right.

The summer air breezed against her face until the car stopped at a stoplight. In the car next to her, a skinny, dark black woman sang loudly with the music that flowed from her stereo and the lyrics to gospel song, floated in Olivia's car minutes after the town car had turned down another street.

For every mountain...

You've brought me over...

For every trial...

You've seen me through...

For every blessing...

Hallelujah...

For this, I give you praise.

Morse might have been right. She might have gotten payback for having to take flight from her life. Nonetheless, she knew she would be attending church with Jonathan the following Sunday.

Mount Carmel Hospital East
5:09PM

"How you feeling?" Kathy asked with a bright smile as Elliot turned off his television.

He was happy to see her, having grown bored with day-time television and wondered how Olivia withstood months of her hospital stay.

"Feeling good, glad and generally happy."

"That's good. It's so good, Elliot. You had me scared for a moment there."

He nodded and motioned for her to move closer to him.

No time like the present, he thought.

"I've missed you, Kathy."

"I didn't think I was gone all that long."

"I've missed having you in my life like you should be. I miss waking up beside you on Saturday mornings and I miss everything about the home you and I made together. I miss you so much at burns, and I know it's not just the stitches talking." Kathy sighed and he continued. "After the way this year has gone, I don't want to continue living like this. With this things happening the way that they are."

"I doubt Olivia's going to get attacked again," Kathy said, but he shook his head.

"This doesn't have anything to do with Olivia." He took her hand within his own.

"I want to make a fresh start with you, Kath. I want us to go back to the happy days we used to have together."

Tears dropped from Kathy's eyes and she pulled her hands from his to take a large envelope out of her bag.

"You're papers," she said. "They've expired...because I never submitted them."

Elliot stared at his blanket. "You want me to resubmit?"

"No," she said softly. "I just want you to get better...and I want you to come home to me."

He wrapped his arms around her and ignored the pain in his midsection as she leaned forward to kiss him. She did not feel like Olivia, but she still felt like home.

Thursday August 30, 2007
4:01AM

The cell phone on the nightstand nearest to Olivia chirped in the dark quiet, eliciting a loud groan from Jonathan. It had not interrupted their sleep in several months and the ringing had yielded to the phone's voicemail by the time Olivia was alert enough to reach out for it.

She dislodged herself from his arms to look at the display and frowned.

"What is it?" Jonathan said. "You're not even back at work yet. Who the hell could be calling?"

"I don't know," she said and quickly played the message.

An hour later, she pushed her chair off the hospital elevator to find an array of police officers and hospital personnel mulling around Morse's padded cell. A tall man, whose small blue eyes held a vague familiarity spotted her as she approached and stepped toward her.

"I assume you're Detective Olivia Benson?"

She nodded, but her eyes kept darting toward the open door. Up close, she could see the man's eyes were soft, betraying his hardened expression and were also red and puffed as if he had been recently crying.

"What's happened?" she asked.

"We've never met. My name is Richard Morse the Second. My youngest son, Harry, I believe you're familiar with." Olivia nodded and he continued. "Well, I'm not sure how to say it, so I'll just do it...Harry's...hung himself. Apparently, he'd been somehow collecting things to do it for the past several days and the orderly found him a couple hours ago."

Morse the second handed Olivia a small white envelope. "Harry wrote a letter other than his note. It's addressed to you. His suicide note just says he wanted you to have the paintings, but that only you were to open the letter."

He blinked rapidly as if drawing back tears for his youngest son.

"Mr. Morse," she said rolling nearer. "I'm so sorry."

"What for? Harry...Harry's been lost for a long time. I'm just sorry for what he put *you* through." He paused. "If you have any other questions my assistant, Mr. James over there, can answer them. Good night, Miss Benson."

The following Monday, Olivia sniffed against her hay fever allergies as the wind blew the grass that covered the vast cemetery. Both Jonathan and Elliot stood beside her

as she sat in her chair dressed in black, though both had suggested she not attend the funeral in the first place. She wanted, however, to do something to say a last goodbye to someone who was very much a stranger, but appeared to care about her more than anyone else she had ever encountered.

“Still can’t believe how many of these people I know,” Jonathan mumbled.

“I still can’t believe how many of these people I busted way back when for petty crimes,” Elliot whispered. “That guy over there definitely peed against the Guggenheim about fifteen years ago.”

They both snickered softly and Olivia rolled her eyes, ignoring them and choosing instead to remember the letter Morse had written to her:

For the most honorable, beautiful woman this world will ever know, I write to you, to let you know that I have seen that you are in good hands and thus do not need me to be your self-appointed, physical guardian angel. I don’t like your partner and I never will, but I see that he is a good man and with him by your side, I know no harm will befall you. I’ve not been too sure about Halloway because I know how that family can be, as they’re far too akin to my own (we might even be distantly related, now that I think of it), but I have seen that he too is good man. If ever I thought there was another man in this world who could worship you the way I do, Halloway would be the one to do it and I wish you all the best and many happy years together.

I am writing to tell you one last thing: Don’t become depressed because of what I have done. Don’t reach for the cancer sticks and don’t go see some head shrinker because you think there was something you might have said or done to stop me. I knew long ago that one day I would have stop watching you and that my life would be no longer necessary, but don’t think that you should have told me my life was valuable. I would have flown from this world long ago if I had not seen a reason to live in you so many years ago.

And so, my dear Olivia, I bid you farewell. I love you from within the depths of my very soul and I know I’ll someday see you again.

~ Harry

Monday September 17, 2007
Carl Schurz Park
4:48PM

“Don’t you just love New York in the fall?”

Olivia sighed as she watched Jonathan lean against the fence that separated the park from the river. Her legs had grown much stronger in the past weeks and to help her progress, Jonathan had taken time away from work, his major close finally completed, and each day they took a walk to the park with several breaks in between as she still needed her right brace to walk; both were needed for extended periods of walking.

The bench on which she sat faced the river and she watched the water ripple as the grey of night was beginning to creep on the horizon. Jonathan had been especially buoyant on their walk and she could only smile as he bounced his hands along the railing, so seemingly happy to be alive.

"It's always been one of my favorite things about the city," Olivia said. "Of course, fall always leads into the bleak winter and then I'm ready to pull up stakes and move to LA, but fall *is* nice."

Jonathan laughed as he stepped toward her. "Always the pessimist."

"Realist. We're called Realists. Pessimist...honestly. Who's pessimistic now?"

He shook his head and knelt on the ground. "There's a rock under here."

"Yeah, I'm sure there's rocks everywhere. We *are* outside."

Jonathan picked up the rock, rolled it over in his hand as he examined it and then held it out to Olivia.

"You want to skip it?"

"Do I look like I skip rocks?"

"Stones, Olivia. Skipping stones."

"Ah. *Stones*."

"It's a cool one though."

"Yeah, I guess."

"It's all smooth, kinda like the water was earlier today."

He handed the rock to her and picked up another. Olivia laughed at the sight and shook her head.

"You're just like a little kid, you know? Playing in the dirt all day."

"Ooh," he said as he held up his new rock. "I think I like this one better."

"What's special about it?"

"Everything. It's got these smooth patches and these rough edges too. It's like both the smooth parts and rough parts give the rock its character. You know, there's a part of you that kinda wants to change it. Maybe shape it so that it's all smooth, but the better part of you knows the reason it's so beautiful...the reason it's special is because of both the rough and the smooth. The good and the bad."

Olivia rolled the smooth stone in her hand for a moment with a contented smile on her face. She then attempted to skip the stone across the water, but it just plunked to the bottom and she shook her head.

"When did you become so fascinated with rocks...wait, sorry. *Stones*."

"I had to do a little research on them. Turns out, I learned a lot."

"I bet. You're turning out to be this fountain of knowledge. Too bad it isn't about something useful."

"Oh, but I *did* learn something useful," he said with a sardonic tone and a smile.

"I learned lots of stuff. Like for instance, did you know that different stones can tell stories? Even have little secrets?"

"Secrets? You're putting me on. What kind of secrets can a rock...a *stone* have?"

"Plenty! Take this one for example." He holds up the rock so it's directly in front of her. "Like you could give it a little shake...and who knows what might pop out."

He shook the rock in front of her as he spoke and as Olivia sighed at his boyish grin, she felt something fall into her lap. She looked straight down to find a small circular object glistening in the setting sunlight.

“Oh my god...” she whispered.

In her lap sat a single ring; two Princess cut stones flanking a large, two-carat diamond, all set in platinum. Jonathan picked up the ring with a bemused, slightly uninterested expression on his face and examined it.

“You see? It’s like I said. You never know what kind of secrets a stone can hold.”

Olivia clapped a hand to her mouth, breathing “Oh my God.” again.

He held her left hand in his right, this time grinning widely and slowly brought the ring closer to her fourth finger.

“Olivia,” he began. “I could be here all day spouting sonnets about chocolate brown eyes that melt my heart, radiant smiles that light my day, or how just being with you makes me feel like a whole person, but I’m not. You know how I tend to run on and turn a good speech trite. So, I figure all I need to say at this point is...Olivia, I love you. Will you marry me?”

Olivia pulled her free hand from her mouth as Jonathan slipped the cool metal enclosure onto her finger. Tears blurred her vision as she wondered why she had not considered that he was going to do this earlier. She gasped and her mouth pulled into a wide smile as bent forward to throw her arms around him and spoke softly into his ear.

“Yes.”

He held her for what felt like an eternity and then cupped her face as he kissed her, still down on his knees.

“So, tell me,” she said once the streetlights began to spring to life from the impending twilight. “What were you going to do if I actually threw *that* rock into the river?”

He laughed. “Well, after I regained consciousness...I would have tried to laugh it off and would’ve planned again for another day.”

She squeezed his hand, relishing the feel of the engagement ring that fit her hand perfectly. He helped her off the bench and aided her with his arm as she walked using him for a crutch so they could walk hand in hand slowly. As they made their way back to the apartment, Jonathan nodded at every person he saw and pointed at Olivia saying, “See her? She’s just agreed to marry me!”

The next morning, Olivia sat patiently waiting for Maya to arrive at the restaurant at which they had agreed to meet since neither had had a spare moment to see the other. When she flagged Maya to her table, she deliberately kept her hand hidden beneath her menu.

“So, anyway,” Maya said as she sipped her morning coffee, chattering away happily. “Amit’s mother is losing her damn mind. She wants her son to have a traditional Indian wedding and I’m really not feeling it. I want my damn Vera Wang and the cake with the little people dressed on it and all that other nonsense. We’ll just do our own thing too.”

“She’ll come around.”

“Fat chance of that. Anyway...I heard you and Jonathan are regular church goers now.”

“You heard right.”

Maya rolled her eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh. “After all these years, my favorite little atheist has finally chosen a religion. And, we had such high hopes of making a Hindu out of you yet.”

“Yeah, right,” Olivia laughed keeping her menu on top of her hand. “That had about as much as chance of happening as your soon to be mother-in-law accepting a white Vera Wang at her son’s wedding.”

“Har...har.”

Olivia laughed again, and having not moved her menu since Maya had sat in the booth, drew a suspicious stare from her friend.

“What the hell are you hiding under there?” she said. “A chipped nail or something?”

Olivia looked at the menu with an uninterested look on her face before removing the menu to reveal her glowing ring. “Oh, this?”

The scream that flowed out of Maya’s mouth as she grabbed Olivia’s hand emanated across the restaurant and Olivia could feel her face growing red at the number of faces that had turned toward the commotion.

“Oh my God!” she said laughing. “Shut up! People are starting to stare!”

Friday September 21, 2007

Central Park

“My God!” Elliot said as he held up Olivia’s hand so that her ring could glimmer in the light. “I was temporarily blinded there for a second! I mean wow...good God...it’s so...Jesus Christ, Olivia! How are you even able to lift your hand?”

They sat shoulder to shoulder on a bench that faced the reservoir after they had met at the park and made it halfway around the water before both needed a break and Elliot took a good look at Olivia’s ring. He was surprised at first, thinking it would have been the solitaire Jonathan had thrown at him in a fit of fury months earlier, but the new ring was just a beautiful against her skin.

“Yeah...it’s big,” Olivia said sheepishly. “Oh, well.”

“You’re going to have watch it if smack someone once you get back to SVU, Liv. Otherwise you’re gonna start taking out people with that rock.”

She nudged him. “Oh, would you stop it. It’s not that big. Anyways, how’s it feel to be free of the hospital?”

“Just fantastic, though I do think I’ll miss the nurse who gave me my sponge bath.”

Olivia shook her head. “And speaking of nurses...are you all set for this weekend?”

“More than set. More than ready. I’ve been waiting for this for two years.” He bumped her shoulder. “I suppose you’re not going to be any help this time around, are you?”

“With moving?” She shrugged. “I could supervise. Give you and your brothers some moral support.”

“Dickie’ll...I’m sorry *Rick* will be helping out too. After all, he’s a high school man now.”

“Rick...that’s just adorable. I can’t wait to hear what happens after you call him ‘Dickie’ before something like a school dance.”

"I'm sure it'll be just the thing to cement our father-son relationship."

She grinned at him and they sat staring across the water for a few moments before Elliot broke the silence.

"You sure your *driver's* going to be all right? It's been a while."

"Are you going to be like this about the damn driver forever? Just tell me now, so I know if I need to get used to it."

"I'm kidding...kind of."

"Look, Jonathan insists and I'm engaged now. I think I read somewhere about wives being submissive to their husbands or some crap like that. Besides, it's easier than trying to flag down a cab."

Elliot shook his head. "All that time on the East Side, Liv...Soon, you'll be ordering people around worse than Hal-...Jonathan."

"Stop it. I will never order anyone around."

"Unless they work for you."

"No one's working for *me*. That's *Jonathan's* housekeeper."

"Ah, but you said it yourself. You're engaged now. What's his is yours and vice versa."

"Whatever... But, yeah...I mean marriage. *Marriage*. It's just so surreal."

"You'll love it," he said nudging her again. "Is he making you sign a pre-nup?"

"Of course. I had Jillian and Maya look it over. There's a special section regarding infidelity. Originally, it read that if I cheated, he even got to take *my* pension, but we're still hashing out that detail."

"Well...He's a Halloway. I guess that's to be expected."

"Yeah, I guess."

"So, does this mean you and Maya are going to have joint wedding?" he laughed. "Something out of a Brady Bunch special?"

"No. Come on!"

He shrugged. "I don't know. The two of you being so close as you are..."

"Yeah. I suppose we have been close forever haven't we? The thing is though, I never thought we'd make it past high school."

"No?"

"No. She was off being *Maya*, the exotic, popular one and I was just Little Liv who was taller than half the boys. I kept expecting her to just leave me and spend all her time with the popular kids, but she didn't."

"And here you are. You've told her right?"

"Course I have. Do you think she'd let me live if I waited a week to tell her?"

Elliot shook his head and laughed the conversation changed to Olivia's old apartment. He had had major qualms about allowing Maureen and her boyfriend, Justin living together in Olivia's old apartment, but he eventually caved once he realized the rent would still remain the same for the Village apartment.

"My landlord's not happy about it," Olivia said, "but he'll be fine. He's still got Sam, Mrs. Fitzgivens and about seven others in the building to get rid of first before he has anything to complain about. Besides, it's the least he could do considering Morse."

"How are you feeling about that?"

"I think I'm okay. Yeah, I'll be okay."

He nodded at her and they watched the water together in silence for another twenty minutes before they helped one another back to the street. Before they parted ways, they clasped hands and for just a moment, Elliot's wedding ring and Olivia's engagement ring clinked together in unison. Each squeezed the hand of the other and they stared at one another. Olivia nodded first and they broke contact to get into their respective rides home.

As their vehicles parted ways, Elliot's going down Park Drive South and Olivia's across 65th Street, each held the same thought.

It must be fate.

Wednesday September 26, 2007
Woodside, New York

Elliot hummed in the mirror as he put the finishing touches to his shave to clear the five o'clock shadow from his face. He was celebrating his forty-fourth birthday and as he stared in the mirror he could not suppress a smile at image that stared back at him.

For his last birthday, his wife and children were gone and his partner had left him. He had been stuck with a new partner who was not nearly adequate as Olivia and he had spent the day alone.

Downstairs, Maureen, Kathleen, Lizzie were now gawking over Olivia's engagement ring while Dickie was been wrestled into a ball by Nolan and Bryce and Kathy laughed about old Christmases. He would begin working again starting the next week and everything was as it should have been. He had his family back and he had his partner. Even when he woke up in the morning, he knew it was going to be a good day.

He had been sick for the first few days of the week and a slight infection had landed him back in the hospital Sunday night, but he was released the next day. From lifting and shifting his things from his apartment to his home with his brothers and son, he had torn a few of the stitches and they healed again badly. Overall, however, he was in near perfect health.

Elliot could see the staples, sutures and padding that held his midsection together easily though his shirt, but he did not care. His only birthday wish was push away the memory of the men who had harmed his partner and move on with his life.

The building where Olivia had been kept had been torn down and all of her attacker's possessions destroyed lest someone desire to take up his "work" in reverence. The unit was able to put a name to the face and closed twenty-six open cases in the process. Cragen had Olivia deliver the general statement to the press and Elliot laughed when he noticed that Dickie had "favorited" every part of the speech on his YouTube account.

"Come on, Dad," he heard Lizzie call as he wiped his face. "Kathleen is getting a little antsy with the lighter thingy for your cake."

"I'll be down in a sec, Baby."

She turned and ran back down the stairs and Elliot stared at himself in the mirror. He had lost a little weight in the past year, lost a little more hair and gained a couple lines in his face, but he was happy nonetheless.

He heard the voices of his family erupt into laughter downstairs and he smiled himself.

Just the way it should be.

Monday October 1, 2007
SVU Squad Room
8:03AM

Olivia rocked on her braces as the elevator stopped on the third floor causing Elliot to glance at her. He was worried at first when he came to pick her up that morning as she had not one, but both braces keeping her upright, but she reassured him that it was just a precaution upon which Jonathan insisted since she had told him that the town car would no longer be necessary.

“You ready?” Elliot asked.

“Are you?”

“Always.”

“Same here.”

They both knew they would be more or less chained to a desk for the next few months as the both continued to recuperate from their respective ailments, but there was a slight buzz of excitement in the elevator as they prepared to start working again.

When they stepped off the elevator, the sound of clapping and cheering reverberated throughout the squad room and they both laughed as they approached their highly decorated desks. A myriad of cards and “Welcome Back” flyers flowed over the desk pair and twenty joyful minutes were spent simply trying to find a clear space in their desks.

Within the hour, Cragen had given them each a set of light assignments that could be performed while still within the confines of the precinct and Munch stood in front of their desks shaking his head.

“I suppose you two get to ride desks for a while, eh?”

Elliot shrugged and Olivia smirked at him.

“Those are some lame-ass excuses if you ask me. ‘Someone attacked me and I’m re-learning to walk’... ‘Someone attacked me and nearly cut my heart out’...you know when I was first starting out, I could’ve had a gash across my stomach and braces to keep *me* up and I still would’ve been walking a beat.” He shook his head sardonically. “They’re just not making cops like they used to.”

He dodged a balled up wad of paper, Olivia threw at him and left the squad room with Fin.

Olivia turned her smile toward Elliot who returned hers in stride. They nodded at one another across their desks and poured over the case files set before them.

Fine