

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 breath.

“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 eczematous 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-blonde 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 overpriced 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 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 divorcée 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 they 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 one 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-"

"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'mon 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 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. He 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 figure 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 Holloway? 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 Halloway 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 Halloway, 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 whirred 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. Halloway 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 she 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. Holloway, 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 Holloway 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 ills."

"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 Halloway. 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 Halloween 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 Halloween’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, your 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.”

“Livia…”

“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 Halloway 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. Hallway 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?

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 Holloway 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 Halloway... Aileen Halloway, 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 Halloway?”

“*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 a talk 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 be 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 whirred 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 Halloway, 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 through 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. Holloway...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 throes 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 be 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...

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 Hallowsays 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 his 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 courses 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 lead 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 some indications that someone ate

and slept on some of 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, inspirit 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 lain 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? Crazed? 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 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 shrinks 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 Hallway 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, Hallway 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 at 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