Within Me, Without You

by EchoInTheSilence

Summary

The case was painful once. But when a rapist who walked takes drastic measures, this time around will be devastating for the most important person in her life.

Notes

Disclaimer: If you recognize it, it's not mine.

Timeline Note: For the purpose of this story, pretty much everything up to Cragen's retirement is in line with canon, with the exception of Olivia's relationship with Cassidy, as readers will see in later chapters. After Cragen leaves, the canon elements are applicable or not at my discretion, though my rule of thumb is to assume canon applies unless it directly contradicts the story.
The unusual quiet in the squad room was shattered by the ring of a phone. On instinct, and eager for something to do besides paperwork, they all reached for their desk phones at once.

Amaro got to his first, lifting the receiver to his ear. "Special Victims, Detective Amaro. Okay, hold on." He pressed a button on the phone and set it down, walking over to the only separate office and tapping on the door. "Captain, line one for you."

He walked back to his desk, but had barely started again on the tedious paperwork before Cragen stepped out of the office, his face grim. "Benson, my office."

She got up and followed him. "Captain? What did I do?" It wasn't like she was entirely unfamiliar with being reprimanded for putting a toe over the line - with Elliot Stabler as her partner for twelve years, _that_ would have been a feat - but she honestly couldn't think of what she'd done this time.

"Remember Rick Purcell?"

"That scumbag who raped a woman, got her pregnant, and sued for custody?" It was a case Olivia would be hard-pressed to forget anytime soon. As an officer of the law, she couldn't agree with the woman's decision to flee jurisdiction; as a private citizen, she couldn't fault her either. "What's that got to do with me?"

Cragen let out a slow breath. "Well, turns out he's been looking for Avery and the baby himself, not just trusting the government agencies to do it for him. He snapped, Olivia."

The weight behind those words scared her. "What happened?"

"He barged into a library with a gun, he's holding hostages. Negotiator's there but he says he'll only talk to you."


Olivia was out of the car almost before it stopped moving, even though she was dizzy from the car tearing through the street at maximum speed. It had been awhile since she'd done that.

Several dozen civilians were piled up as close to the building as the police barricade would allow. Olivia held up her badge, and the officers let her and Cragen through.

"You Benson?" the hostage negotiator called out.

"What's the situation?"

"We've got what we think is about twenty to thirty hostages inside. Maybe a half dozen employees, the rest are mostly young children and their caregivers - this is a popular time for parents to bring kids, most schools just let out for the day."

"Oh, God." Olivia felt like she'd been hit. Situations like this were always rough, but little kids added a whole new level of heartache, not to mention a lot more people who wouldn't be able to understand the situation, making everything that much more unpredictable.

The negotiator was dialing again and he handed the phone to Olivia. She forced herself to draw a
breath as she heard it ring, and then a voice. "What now?"

"Mr. Purcell?" She forced her voice to remain calm and even. "Mr. Purcell, it's Detective Benson."

"Detective Benson." The shortness and impatience in his voice was gone now, replaced by a smugness. "I didn't expect you to get here so fast."

"Why are you doing this?" she pressed. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want, Detective," he replied smoothly. "I want my son. And I want that bitch punished for taking him away from me."

Olivia bit back every instinctive response, everything she would have said had this conversation taken place under any other circumstances. The man was disgusting, but he was also the man holding lives in his hands. She couldn't get him angry.

"We can talk about that," she replied instead, even more forced calm in her voice. "But first I need to know more about the situation inside. How many people are there?"

"Twenty-four," he replied smoothly. Olivia waved at the negotiator for a pad of paper and scribbled 24 hostages even as she assessed the exactness of the number. He had counted so he'd know if anyone tried to leave, and she would bet the hostages knew it.

"How many children?"

"Nine."

9 children, she scribbled below the first message, and was gratified as she heard someone relay it over the radio. "Mr. Purcell, I know you miss your son." She almost choked on the words, but she had to say it if her idea was going to work. "You love him very much, don't you?"

"Yes." Still the smugness, but sentimentality underneath it. She remembered, feeling sick as she did, how her own rapist father had kept pictures of her around.

"He was innocent." That she could say sincerely, although in most cases it would be the true victim - the child's mother - she would be trying to convince, rather than the man in the library.

"Yes," Purcell replied. "He was innocent."

"You have nine children in there," she said evenly. "Young children, right?"

"Yes."

"They're innocent too," she said softly. If this fails... "They're too young to know anything about the things adults do to each other. Innocent. Let them go. Let the innocent go free. Let the children go."

The few seconds of silence were the longest few seconds of her life. Finally, he spoke. "All right. But only the children."

She breathed out deeply, muting the audio input to the phone. "He's agreed to release the children," she told the officers standing by. "Be warned, they're very young and likely to be scared. Some may even try to reenter the building because their parents are in there. Officers should be present and ready to take the children to safety as soon as they're out. If those officers have some experience with children, so much the better."

"Understood, Detective. Come on."
The children came out of the library, all holding hands. Some couldn't be more than two or three years old. The officers were there at once, and Olivia was pleased to see that clearly, her suggestions had been taken seriously. The officers were surrounding the kids, picking up a few of the smaller ones, urging the others to keep running until they were in the safe zone, but there was a gentleness that most of them wouldn't have bothered with for adults, even adult victims.

Then something hit Olivia in the legs, and a voice cried out "Livvie!" She looked down and instantly felt her heart break. The child clinging to her legs was familiar. Too familiar.

"Eli?" she gasped.

"Livvie!" he said again.

She reached down and picked him up, holding him to her chest. Elliot's son was in that building. And if that fact alone weren't bad enough, it meant that either Elliot or Kathy was in that building right now.

She picked the phone up again, shifting Eli into one arm. "Mr. Purcell?"

"I let them go," he said sharply. "I kept my word. I let them go!"

"I know. You did a good thing." She squeezed Eli a little tighter as if to remind herself of the truth in that statement. At least the kids were safe. "Now, why don't you tell me what it might take for you to release the others?"

"You know what I want. You took them away from me. Tell me where they are!"

"I don't know," she replied honestly. "I tried to talk her out of it, Mr. Purcell. And even if I had helped her, she would have gone somewhere I couldn't find her, just in case I changed my mind." Olivia wasn't positive that last was true, but if she could make him believe it, she might be able to make him realize that what he was asking was impossible.

"Are you so sure? I've looked into you, Detective Benson. I know who you are. I know about your mother - and your father. Tell me, Detective, how do you know your mother didn't do to your father what that bitch Avery did to me?"

You mean, how do I know that he did to her what you did to Avery? But she had enough self-control not to say it aloud, and not just because it would probably set him off. However much she bristled at his question, there had been a time she wasn't sure, where she had chased down a dead-end lead just to see if her mother couldn't possibly have lied all those years.

"I suppose I don't," she replied, hating the words, hating herself for saying them, "but that's not relevant right now. They've both been dead for over ten years, whatever happened between them died with them. What's relevant right now is you and the people in there with you. None of them are Avery. None of them hurt you. But as long as you're holding those innocent people against their will, the police will only see you as an enemy. Let them go, and when they all come out unharmed, you'll give the police a reason to see you as a good guy."

There was a silence on the other end. He was apparently considering it.

That was when all hell broke loose.

She heard through the phone a crash of breaking glass, and then Purcell cried out. She turned to the police behind her, who were all talking at once. "What's going on?"
"One of our sharpshooters fired. Hit him in the shoulder."

"I was just starting to get through to him!" She cried in dismay. "Now..."

"You tricked me!" Purcell was back on the phone.

"Mr. Purcell..." she protested, but he wasn't listening anymore. Then she heard three bangs in quick succession.

She muted the phone again, turning to report this development, but from the sudden scrambling, she knew it was unnecessary. The SWAT team rushed the doors of the library, and Olivia listened anxiously to the radio, trying to figure out what was happening, trying to figure out what if anything she could do.

"Purcell is down," she heard someone say. "Probable DOA. We have thirteen hostages coming out, two inside who will need EMT immediate assistance."

Olivia watched the doors anxiously as the hostages emerged, some running from the building, others being assisted towards the waiting ambulances. Parents ran to their children, holding them. But there was no sign of anyone she knew.

She felt her heart clench, and only the fact that Eli was in her arms kept her on her feet. She felt a hand take her arm in a supportive grasp. "Liv? Are you okay?"

"Nick," she gasped. "I need to go in there."

He raised an eyebrow but to his credit didn't argue. "You want me to take him?"

She nodded. "Eli, this is my friend Nick, okay? Can you stay with him?"

Eli looked understandably confused, but he didn't protest as Nick lifted him out of Olivia's arms. She remembered that Nick's daughter was almost the same age, and he was clearly more than able to handle the situation. Olivia barely remembered to pull out her badge and make it clearly visible as she sprinted into the building.

Purcell lay on the floor in a pool of blood, and even at a distance Olivia could see he wasn't moving or breathing. Two other people lay on the floor as well, surrounded by police and EMTs.

The first she reached was a woman wearing a librarian's badge, visibly gasping for breath and bleeding from several wounds as the EMTs stabilized her. But Olivia's eyes were drawn to the second cluster of EMTs. The first thing she saw was long blonde hair. The second was blood. Lots of it.

Her heart almost stopped. Please, no. But then a voice spoke, and she knew it was true. "Have...to call..."

She pushed her way into the crowd and knelt beside the woman. "Kathy?"

Her head turned weakly. "O...livia?"

"I'm here," she said gently.

"E-eli?"

"He's safe. Your son is safe." God, there's so much blood... "Just hold on. I know he wants to be back with you."
"Elliot... I have to...call Elliot..."

"We tried," one of the EMTs said to Olivia in an undertone, "but she's panicked and between that and blood loss, she can't remember the number."

"You have a phone?"

He held it out and she took it, punching in Elliot's number. The EMT reached out for it, and though Olivia wanted nothing more than to let him make the notification, she shook her head anyway, keeping hold of the phone. Then his voice came through. "Hello?"

"Elliot?"

"Liv? Is everything okay?"

"El, it's Kathy. She's hurt."

"What? How bad?"

"I don't know." She hoped he didn't hear what she didn't say.

"What happened?"

Olivia swallowed, but she couldn't lie to him. "Someone took hostages in the library. She was shot."

"Oh, my God." The complete disbelief in his voice broke Olivia's heart. "Eli?"

"He's fine. He got out before the shooting started."

"Thank God for that." His audible relief was tempered by concern. "And Kathy?"

"She wants to talk to you. Here."

Kathy's hands were too weak to hold the phone, so Olivia held it to her face, careful not to get in the EMTs' way.

"El?" she gasped out.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, in the forced calm tone Olivia recognized from her years as his partner. "How you holding up?"

"They're taking good care of me," she replied, her voice cracking. "El, I love you. I love you so much."

Olivia had to turn away to blink back the tears in her eyes as her old partner replied. "Don't talk like that, baby. I'll see you at the hospital, okay?"

"I love you," she repeated, weaker and yet more forcefully. "El, please..."

"Love you too, Kath." God, his voice was so shaky, as though it could break at any second. He clearly understood what could happen.

"All right, we need to move her now." The EMTs moved Olivia out of the way, and with her the phone in her hand. She put it back up to her ear. "Elliot, they're just putting her in the ambulance, that's all."
"What hospital?"

"Mercy's closest. I'll bring Eli to meet you there."

"Thank you."

Olivia hurried out just ahead of the EMTs and ran to where her partner was standing, making sure to stand between Eli and the doors his mother was being carried out of. He attached himself to her again, and she buried his head in her shoulder. Nick looked from the stretcher, to Eli, and then to Olivia, who read the question in his eyes and nodded. He looked back at the boy, his face filled with sympathy and regret.

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"Mr. Stabler?"

Elliot stood to approach the doctor, and Olivia reached her arms out for the child he'd been holding since he arrived in the hospital. He placed Eli in her arms; the six-year-old stirred a little but didn't wake up.

Olivia couldn't hear what the doctor was saying, but she didn't need to. She knew him well enough, and in any case, his reaction wasn't hard to read. She saw his skin pale, his shoulders slump, and she knew.

She set Eli down on the waiting room couch and slowly walked up behind her best friend. She knew he knew she was there, but he didn't turn to look at her, didn't acknowledge her.

She placed a hand on his shoulder, at a complete loss for words. He turned suddenly, bringing his arms up around her, burying his face in her neck. "She's gone, Liv," he gasped out. "My wife -"

"Shh." She brought her hand up to rub his back. "I know."

"What do I do now?"

He sounded so lost she wanted to cry. I don't know. She couldn't say it aloud, and she didn't know what else to say.
"How am I going to tell the kids?"

It had been almost twenty minutes since he'd been hit with the news, and except for his desperate plea to his former partner, those were the first words he'd spoken.

"I'll be here to help you with Eli," she said gently. "And if you can tell us where the others are, we can have officers handle the notifications and bring them here."

He nodded and straightened a little; apparently, being given even such a simple task helped him a little. "Lizzie's at Julliard, but you know that. Kathleen's still in the city too, she's working on a Master's at NYU. Dickie's in Boston, UMass, living on campus. Maureen moved to Pennsylvania after she finished school; I have the exact addresses on my phone."

Olivia took his phone in silence and wrote down the information. She called her partner and quietly read off the information and explained what it was for. She knew he'd make the connection to the previous year's case on his own and was grateful he didn't ask.

"Liv?"

She put her phone back in her pocket. "Yeah?"

"What's going to happen to the guy who did this?"

She sat next to him again, putting her arm around his shoulder. "He's dead. Our guys took him out."

He let out a long breath. "At least it's over that way. We won't have to go through a trial." He dropped his head into his hands. "God, first Lizzie and now this? What did my family do to deserve this?"

A shudder ran through his shoulders, and she knew that he was quickly losing whatever battle he was fighting not to cry. She put her hand on his back. "It's okay, El," she whispered. "No one's going to think less of you for crying. Especially not after something like this."

He swallowed hard. "It's not that simple."

"I know." It hadn't been until close to the end of their partnership that he'd finally trusted her enough to admit he'd been abused as a boy, but she knew now, knew why he would fight so hard not to cry, ever, even when his doing so would have been more than understandable. "Come here," She pulled him gently into her arms; he didn't resist. Another shudder wracked his body and then a sob tore free and he was crying into her shoulder.

He cried, saying nothing, clinging to her, until movement next to him made him lift his head from her shoulder. He turned just in time to see Eli sit up.

"Daddy, why you crying?" he asked softly, seriously. "Where's Mommy?"

He swallowed hard, reaching for his youngest child. "Why don't you come sit on my lap?"

Eli complied without question, and Elliot drew a long breath, visibly willing himself to get through
Even just looking at Elliot's back, Olivia could tell that Eli's innocent question had sent a wave of agony through him. "It's - it's not like that, sweetheart. When a person goes to heaven - they can't come back. Even if they want to, even if they want to more than anything."

Now tears were welling in Eli's eyes. "But why would she go away to somewhere she can't come back?"

Elliot hugged the boy close. "I - I'm sure she didn't want to go. But she was hurt very badly, and she couldn't stay here any more, so she had to go to heaven." He swallowed. "But you know what's special about heaven?"

"What?"

"She can still see us," he replied in a choked voice. "She's not here with us, but she's watching us anyway, because she loves us very much, and she misses us as much as we miss her. And you can talk to her, and she'll hear you."

"But I want to see her!" Then Eli burst into tears in his father's arms.

Elliot was glad he was sitting, because he didn't feel like his legs would have supported him. He began to sob again, cradling his little boy close. Olivia slowly leaned into his back to provide him support, resting her hands on his shoulders.

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Even though a cloud of shock and grief, Kathleen Stabler recognized the figure of the young woman getting out of the police car just like the one that she had just climbed out of. "Lizzie!"

The girl's head snapped up, and Kathleen saw her tear-streaked face as the younger woman ran to her. Wordlessly, she threw herself into her sister's arms, and they held each other and cried. At some point, they fell to their knees on the sidewalk together, still clinging to each other. It was as if there was a bubble around them, as if nothing existed but the grief they were feeling and the comfort they were trying to give each other.

It was Lizzie who stood up first, half-helping, half-dragging her sister up with her. "Come on. Dad's waiting for us."

The officers walked up with them but kept a respectful distance. One pointed them into the waiting room. They briefly squeezed each other's hands for support as they stepped in.

They saw the three people huddled together, but it was the tiny blonde boy who saw them first and suddenly squirmed to be out of his father's arms. "Lissie! Katie!"

Their father's head turned then and they read the grief in his face, grief they were sure was mirrored in each of theirs. He opened his arms to them and they both ran to him, embracing him, encircling Eli between the three of them. Both the girls had begun to cry again, and Eli did the same, clearly able to sense the emotions in his sisters. With three of his children crying in his arms, Elliot lost any control he had left and for the third time in two hours began to sob.

Olivia suddenly felt as if she was intruding into a place she didn't belong. She patted Elliot's shoulder and stood. "I should get back. They're probably going to want my statement." She started to leave,
but then turned back suddenly, feeling she hadn't done enough yet. "You have my number. Call me. Anytime."

Most of the SVU team looked up at Olivia as she walked into the squad room, compassion in all their faces. Nick grabbed her hand and whispered, "You did the best you could. It's not your fault what happened."

Fin stepped up behind her and squeezed her shoulder. "Listen to the man, baby girl. How's Stabler?"
"Not good," she said quietly. "You know how much he loved her."

"Olivia?" The captain was standing in his doorway. She walked over slowly; he beckoned her in and shut the door. "Sit down."
She did. "Captain, do you know what happened?"

"They planted sharpshooters on the roof, like they always do in a hostage situation. Since you were talking to Purcell, they were under orders not to fire unless he did first, but someone did anyway. And unfortunately, Purcell moved out of the direct line of fire so he took one in the shoulder instead of a fatal shot. Don't worry, the guy will be lucky if he's not thrown off the force. For once, IAB and the commissioner's office are in complete agreement with most officers' position on the subject. Certainly mine."

"Mine too," she replied. "But honestly, what's that going to solve? It won't undo what already happened. A six-year-old boy is going to grow up without a mother."

There was impossible sadness in his face. "I know, Liv."

Then, to his surprise, she began to cry. He walked around the desk and put a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, Liv. You did everything you possibly could have."

"It's not that," she whispered. "It's - it's what happened when I first got into the library."

"What was that?" he asked gently.

"I saw her lying there, and the first thing - oh, God - the first thing I thought was 'Thank God it's not Elliot'."

Cragen squeezed her shoulder gently. "Liv, that's normal. It's nothing to feel guilty over."

She looked up, puzzled. "It is?"

"Absolutely. Most every husband or wife of a cop feels that way at some point. My wife...she used to say it sometimes, if there was a well-publicized incident where a cop was hurt or it was someone in my precinct, she'd hold me and tell me how thankful she was that it wasn't me."

"But the victim's not a cop. She's Elliot's wife. And I'm not Elliot's wife, or related to him in any way, I'm just another cop. It's not the same."

"Marriage is just another kind of partnership, Liv," he soothed. "You care about Elliot, you and he have a connection that's so far beyond any friendship you may have had with Kathy that it's incomparable. No one's saying it's a saintlike thought, but it's human and it's understandable. And I'd be willing to bet Kathy herself went down that road a few times."
Olivia nodded, throat too tight to speak.

Olivia recognized Elliot's mother as soon as she stepped into the Stabler home, and she was relieved that the woman seemed to be more or less in her right mind. She knew that the woman couldn't help her disorder, but she also knew that the last thing Elliot needed to deal with was the older woman's sometimes frightening mood swings.

All five of the children were there now. Eli was asleep in his father's lap, and the other four were gathered around. There were a handful of other people there as well, and Olivia's eyes were drawn towards one; a tall, thin figure with white hair. He looked up, and his eyes met Olivia's. She suddenly wanted to cry. This was the more serious Munch, the man who'd stood on the roof of the 1-6 and told her, eyes shimmering, about a little girl across the street who had been thrown through a window, the man who somehow reached the victims despite the cynical exterior he presented for most of the world. Seeing that Munch here just drove home how serious this was.

He walked over to her and looked her over. "Liv, you're shaking."

She hadn't realized it until he said so. "It's just adrenaline."

"Yeah, sure." Then, to her surprise, he put his arms around her, hugging her tightly. "I think you and your adrenaline could use a little comfort yourself. When's the rest of the department expected?"

"Fin's on another case, he'll probably be here as soon as he can get here, and Cragen's just waiting for Fin to wrap up." She slowly stepped back from him. "I'm glad you're here."

"Me too."

Olivia slowly approached the people on and around the couch, trying to keep enough distance that she wouldn't intrude on the family. Dickie had one hand on his father's shoulder and the other on his twin's back as she clung to him. Kathleen was huddled up on the couch, wracked with sobs as Maureen, barely able to stand under the weight of her own grief, tried to comfort her. Elliot had one of Maureen's hands in his; the other ran repeatedly through Eli's hair as the child slept.

He turned his head and his eyes met Olivia's; she almost cried at the agony in them. He looked like he'd have reached for her if he had a hand free, but he couldn't bear to let go of Maureen's hand or break that contact with his youngest child. She reached for him instead, coming around to the front of the couch, her hand covering the one that rested on Eli's head. He looked up and met her eyes again.

"They told me what happened," he whispered. "Thank you for saving my baby."

Shame bowed Olivia's head; she couldn't look him in the eyes. "I couldn't save her. I'm sorry, El. I'm so sorry."

"You tried. I know you did," he said to forestall any protest, "because I know you."

Chapter End Notes

I really couldn't figure out how to finish this chapter, so I just finished it here. I think it works.
The bit about being relieved is something I pulled from bits and pieces from a number of Law and Order stories, most notably a conversation during the CI episode Amends. Munch tells Olivia about his neighbor in the SVU episode Legacy.

Please leave comments if you're enjoying the story! Love to hear what people think!
"How is everyone?"

Most of the cops in the room at Kathy Stabler's funeral had chosen to hang back, but Olivia had walked right up to Elliot. She knew he'd be expected to be the strong shoulder, that he'd expect it of himself, but that he'd need someone to lean on as much as anyone.

"It's...not good," he admitted. "Lizzie's started having nightmares again. She wakes up screaming three, four times a night. After what happened to her last year, this is just too much for her to take right now. I don't think she's had a full night's sleep since it happened. Eli won't go to sleep unless Maureen or I is with him, and Kathleen has been in a serious depression, she barely gets out of bed. Even with the meds, she's not in good shape. Dickie and Maureen are more or less holding it together - he's been taking care of Lizzie, and Maureen helps take care of Eli so I can try to help Kathleen, but the whole thing doesn't feel right. I shouldn't have to have my kids taking care of each other because I can't handle them all."

Olivia hugged his shoulder gently. "You didn't seem to mind when Dickie and Kathleen were helping their sister through her trial. That's what siblings do, El, at least if they're close. They help each other out. I know it feels different because you were able to be there for Lizzie along with her siblings, but you're suffering too here. No one's going to blame you if you can't hold the entire family up all by yourself."

He turned and hugged Olivia, clinging to her. "Thanks, Liv," he whispered, and she could tell from the tone in his voice that he was fighting hard not to cry.

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"Olivia?"

She turned to see the youngest Stabler girl watching her. "What is it?"

"I just wanted to say - I'm really glad you're here for my dad." Elizabeth brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Really. He needs someone just as much as we do."

"How are you doing, honey?" Olivia asked softly.

"I don't know," Elizabeth admitted. "It's like - I think I'm okay and then all of a sudden, I'm just not. Something hits me and I feel like I've just slid back on all the steps I've taken since then. Sometimes it's a flashback - but sometimes it's not quite that. It's more like I suddenly feel the way I felt just after - after he raped me."


"And helpless," she added in a near whisper.

"I had this idea that once he was locked up, it would all just go away. I mean, I knew it wouldn't. You and Dad and Detective Rollins all made that clear. But I sort of felt like it would - and now I sound stupid, don't I?"
"No," Olivia replied firmly. "Trust me, that happens a lot. There's still this idea of closure - that something can happen and then what happened to you doesn't bother you anymore. In all the years I've worked for SVU, I've never seen that happen. Now don't take that to mean that I don't think it can get better," she added quickly, "just that there's no magic bullet."

"I've been having a lot of bad days since what happened to Mom," Elizabeth said softly. "It's almost as bad as it was in those first couple of days - I mean, for days, not just for a little while. I can't sleep, I don't want to eat, I don't want strangers to touch me or come anywhere near me." She met Olivia's eyes with her own, and the detective was struck by how much her eyes were like her father's.

"What's wrong with me, Olivia?"

"Oh, honey, come here." Olivia opened her arms to the young woman, and Elizabeth readily accepted the embrace. "Nothing's wrong with you. You're overwhelmed, and what you're feeling about your mom is triggering some of the same feelings - fear, helplessness. You're still struggling with what happened to you on some level, and additional stress can make that worse. You can't expect to separate out the different pieces of your life."

"I was going to ask Dad," she whispered. "But I just can't. Not now. I - I hear him crying at night when he thinks no one will know. He and Mom were married since they were younger than I am now. I don't want him to know how bad of a time I'm having."

"I understand," Olivia assured her. "Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone outside your family anyway. Do you still have my cell phone number?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Well, you can call me anytime, if you need me, okay?"

And then Elizabeth began to cry, and Olivia held her tighter.

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"What's that noise?"

Olivia blinked her own eyes open. "It's my phone," she mumbled, rolling away from Brian. "Go back to sleep." She sleepily pressed the answer button. "Benson."

"Olivia?"

"Elizabeth?" She sat up quickly. "Are you okay?"

"I - I don't know. I didn't know what to do."

"Where are you?" Olivia got up completely, leaving the bedroom so she wouldn't bother her boyfriend. "Are you at home?"

"N-no. I had a really bad nightmare and I felt kind of trapped, so I just grabbed my phone and left and started walking, and now I'm something like two miles out."

"All right, honey. Where are you?"

There was a pause, and Olivia guessed that she was looking for a street sign. Then Elizabeth came back on the line and recited an address. "I'm sorry," she added.

"It's okay," Olivia assured her. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be there as soon as I can."
Olivia spotted her old partner's daughter right away, standing on the sidewalk, looking for all the world like she was less than certain how she'd gotten there, and like the fact frightened her. Her eyes lit up when she saw Olivia's car, and she ran over to the curb.

"I'm sorry, Olivia," she said again as she got in. "I can't believe I did something so stupid, I just, you know, felt like I couldn't breathe in the house."

"I know," Olivia assured her. It wasn't just a turn of phrase, either. Olivia had had those nights herself after Sealview, and again in the few months since her four-day ordeal, nights where she felt confined and felt that she couldn't stand to be stuck in her apartment for another moment. "Next time, just don't go so far you can't get back, and don't wander off so aimlessly that you end up not knowing where you are."

"Olivia?" she asked softly, staring at her hands. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, sweetheart."

"Has it ever happened to you?" she blurted out, and the detective suspected Elizabeth was trying to get through the question before she lost her nerve.

Olivia drew a deep breath and pulled the car over to the curb so she wasn't trying to divide her attention. "I've never been raped," she said softly, "but I've come close twice."

"People you knew?" Elizabeth pressed before abruptly pulling back. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be. The first time, it was a prison guard while I was undercover. I knew him a little, but not really. The second time, it was a guy I'd arrested. He got out on bail."

"That thing that was on TV?" Elizabeth asked. "Dad was going crazy, and they didn't even give that many details."

"I - I didn't realize it was on TV," Olivia stammered. She should have, she supposed. Someone would have made a plea to the public to help them find her, to call the police if they saw Lewis.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that."

"That's all right. You haven't done anything wrong. I just hadn't thought about how the investigation would have played out. Come on, let's get you home."

Elliot was standing in the doorway when Olivia and Elizabeth pulled up in the car. He hugged his daughter as soon as she stepped through the door. "Thank God you're okay."

"I'm sorry, Dad," she mumbled. "I won't do it again."

He tightened his embrace. "I don't expect you not to do it again, baby. I know this is hard for you. Just leave me a note or a voicemail next time, okay?"

She nodded. "Thank you."

"You feel better now?"

"Yes." She yawned. "I, uh, I think I'm going to go to bed. Night, dad."
"Night, sweetheart." He waited for her to ascend the stairs before he turned to Olivia. "Thank you so much." He got a good look at her. "Is something wrong?"

"Something Elizabeth said is all - and it's not her fault."

"What?" he pressed gently.

"Nothing. I shouldn't be putting this on you now."

"Liv." He gently cupped her cheek and turned her face up to him. "You're not getting out of it that easy. What is it?"

"She said that what happened to me earlier this year had been on TV. I didn't realize - I didn't realize you knew."

He suddenly hugged her close. She returned it, puzzled. "What's that for?"

"I was so worried," he whispered. "I almost came to see you in the hospital, but I wasn't sure how you'd take it, and the last thing I wanted was to upset you more."

"I wish you'd come," she whispered back, suddenly feeling like she was losing control of her emotions.

"Oh, Liv." He held her close. "I'm sorry."

A choked sob escaped her lips, and he looked down in concern. "Liv, what is it? You can tell me."

"He taunted me," she whispered. "Asked if there was someone I was g-going to miss, that I'd be sorry I wouldn't see again. And - I'm dating someone, but when he said that, I didn't think of him - the first person that came to mind was you."

And then she started to sob.

She hadn't cried about this in front of anyone. Not Brian, or Nick, or even Cragen - but with Elliot, everything was different. She didn't feel like she needed to be strong, to pretend she'd gotten through unscathed. In his arms, she could let go.

"God, Olivia," he murmured. "What did that bastard do to you?"

"He didn't - he didn't rape me," she whispered. "But he smacked me around, burned me, took me out of my apartment. He raped a woman in front of me and made me watch. He didn't give me food and he barely gave me water, but he kept pouring alcohol down my throat." Once she started, it all tumbled out of her. "I - we finally got to this cabin, and I saw a bathroom - I had to go really badly, I was afraid I was going to wet myself and I couldn't bear the thought of having him see that, so I asked him to take me, I can't believe I let him..."

"Shh, it's okay, it's okay," he whispered. "You didn't have a good option."

"I haven't told anybody this," she whispered. "I didn't know - sometimes I feel like I can't live with the secret, but then I can't think of anyone to tell."

He looked deep into her eyes. "You can tell me, Liv."

"After I used the toilet, he - he cleaned me up. Wouldn't let me do it myself, n-not that I really expected... He had a gun on me, and he rubbed it against me. He said 'don't you think that would fit nicely?', and all I could think about was that woman from the Congo we interviewed in that one
case, the one who had the gun fired inside her. Then he smirked and said we'd have time for that later, and he pulled my pants back up, tied me up, and left to ditch the car. I tried to get free but I couldn't - I did eventually but not until after he came back. Oh, God, El, I was so scared."

"Of course you were," he soothed. "You're safe now, Liv. You're safe."

She just clung to him and cried. When she finally was able to stop, she felt so weak she thought her legs were going to fold under her. "I should - I should go. Just give me a minute."

"No way in hell I'm letting you drive home," he replied matter-of-factly. "You're exhausted. There's a couch in the den that's comfortable enough."

"I can't impose on you guys like that," she protested. "You've got enough going on here. I'm sorry I even brought up the subject; you don't need this right now."

"You need this," he replied softly. "It's okay, Liv. The timing may not be perfect, but I'm always here if you need me. If I'd come to the hospital, we would've been able to talk this through before any of this with my family happened. Stay here tonight. I'll feel better knowing you're not trying to drive when you're this tired."

"Okay," she agreed finally. "I'll stay."

Chapter End Notes

So...who else wondered where Elliot was during that whole saga in Season 15? I know that in real life it's probably that they couldn't get Chris Meloni back for a guest appearance, but...fanfiction is not bound by the same rules, haha!

This chapter contains references to the episodes Witness, Surrender Benson, and Undercover.
"Brian, talk to me!"

"When?" he snapped back, finally breaking the silence they'd been in since he'd gotten home from work. "When you're at work? At your therapist's office? Or over at your former partner's place? He probably sees you more than I do."

"Being a cop isn't a 9 to 5 job, you know that," Olivia snapped back. "And they wouldn't let me back on full duty without the counseling sessions." She left out the fact she didn't like to admit even to herself, the fact that she probably needed those sessions for their own sake.

"And your ex-partner? I'm sure there's some logical explanation for that too, right?"

"What's the longest you've ever had one partner? A year? Two? You can't comprehend what exists between partners after more than twelve. He's my friend. His kids are my friends. They need my help now, and I'm not saying no."

"Liv, I can't do this."

"What?"

He took her hand, and when she turned to face him, his expression was solemn. "I knew when I started seeing you that I'd have to share you with the job. I accepted the therapy as a necessity, not only for the job but for you, because we both know what kind of shape you were in after the Lewis thing. I knew you'd want to help your former partner at first, but it's been three months and you're still over there every time I turn around. I can't share you with that many people, Liv. This won't work for me, and I can't bear to lie to you and say it'll be okay, because if I do I'll only end up resenting you." He bent down to kiss her, very gently, on the lips. "I love you. I always will. But this, you and me, it'll never work. I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said through a choked throat. "So am I."

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"He dumped you."

"He was right," Olivia pointed out. "He said I see you more than I see him, and he was right."

"Kathy -" Elliot broke off, and it was clear he was having trouble talking about his wife in such a casual way. "Kathy used to say the same thing." He sighed. "Then again, I suppose she almost divorced me over it, didn't she?"

"She didn't," Olivia reminded him.

"Because we spent the night together, after she'd already started divorce proceedings, and ended up with another kid. Don't get me wrong, I love Eli, I can't imagine my life without him, but -"

"But Kathy would never have let you in bed with her if she didn't still love you. Maybe your life would have taken a different track if you hadn't had Eli, but that's everyone's life, El. Kathy loved
you. I know she did. The day she - she was almost frantic over the idea that she wouldn't get to talk to you. Besides," she added in an effort to dispel the somber cloud that had come to hang over them, "Kathleen told me she walked in on the two of you in the living room during that Hudson case."

"She's exaggerating," Elliot tossed back, smiling despite himself at the memory. "We were only kissing. We still had all our clothes on."

Olivia smiled too for a moment before turning back to the issue that had started the conversation. "Brian and me - that relationship was on the skids anyway. Before the Lewis thing happened, things were tense between us. After - he really tried to be there for me and put me first, and I'm grateful for that, and I needed someone to lean on and he was there. But the issues we were having didn't go away, we just stopped paying attention to them. I don't blame him for ending it. Sooner or later, we were going to have to face the facts. I'm sorry it's over, but it's not his fault. If anything, it's mine. Maybe if I hadn't broken it off so abruptly the first time -"

"The first time was fourteen years ago, Liv," he reminded her. "There's no way to know what could have played out differently in that amount of time."

"I know. It just seems like every time I think I've found The One, something happens and then I'm alone again."

"You're not alone, Liv," he whispered. "There are other ways not to be alone than dating someone. I'm always here for you. You know that, don't you?"

"Yeah. I do."

"And the rest of the team - well, I don't know the new guys, but Fin and Cragen were always rocks in a storm, and I can't imagine that's changed now. And Munch - you could've knocked me over with a feather when I found out he retired, but I doubt he's out of your hair for good. We're here for you. That bastard Lewis' trial is coming up, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied, suppressing a shiver.

"Tell me when, and I'll be there. And if you don't, you know Fin or Munch will, so you might as well save me the time and tell me yourself."

"Got it."

Olivia had just about felt her heart stop when she learned that William Lewis intended to represent himself. She had to confront him in court, to testify against him, or how could she ever look a victim in the eyes and tell them honestly that the best thing for them would be to testify? And why was it she'd been so certain that confronting the attacker in court was always the best outcome? With Harris, it had been exactly what she needed. She'd been angry, and bringing him down had helped her take her confidence back. But Lewis was different somehow. He was in her head, invading her dreams, and it seemed as if it would never stop, and the last thing she wanted was to sit across a courtroom from him, let alone have him be the one to question her.

The click of a heel on the courtroom floor startled her, and Olivia turned in surprise and was even more surprised to see who was standing there. She recognized the petite blonde lieutenant, but even though she knew that any NYPD officer who could was packing the courtroom, this wasn't someone she'd expected to see. "Lieutenant Eames. What are you doing here?"

"It's Alex," the other woman corrected gently, "and as for what I'm doing here, the short answer is
that I wanted to be here to support you."

"You hardly know me," she pointed out. "Not that I don't appreciate the support, but why me? Why this case? You could hardly take time off to come to court for every case involving another cop."

"That's the long answer," the Lieutenant replied softly, biting down on her lip ever so slightly. "Tell you what. After court today, I'll buy you a drink, and you can buy me one, and I'll give you the full explanation of why I decided I had to be here."

"Deal," Olivia replied, managing to smile despite how upset she was.

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"I still can't believe they let people do that," the blonde said as she and Olivia sat down at a small table in the back corner of the bar. "I mean, I understand right to self-representation and all that, but when it comes to survivors of violent crimes, there should be an exception."

"Tell me about it," Olivia growled. "The other witness wouldn't even testify. She was all ready to go and then she heard Lewis would be the one asking the questions and crashed. I can't say I blame her."

"You did great in there," the other woman replied. "I'm not sure I could've -" she broke off and swallowed hard.

The waiter stepped up to them at that point and they ordered their drinks. It was Olivia who spoke first. "I'm scared some of the jury might actually buy his version of events, or at least some of it."

"That he didn't break free before you hit him?"

"Yeah. That part." Olivia replied, hesitant to say more. Alex was certainly acting like a friend, but the fear still lingered that if anyone found out what had really happened, especially someone she didn't know all that well, it would get back to IAB and even the jury for this trial.

"Look, Olivia, I don't care if he was still handcuffed or not. Don't tell me," she added quickly, "that way if anyone asks, I can say I don't know. You broke free under similar circumstances, what's to say he wouldn't have? Besides, people like the people on that jury, they don't understand what it's like. The fact that the attacker's handcuffed doesn't suddenly make everything all right with the world again. He's still the person who held you captive for days and did unspeakable things."

Her voice sounded off, even choked, and Olivia's concern was instantly piqued. "Are you okay?"

"I'm okay." She took a long drink from her glass and then looked up, and Olivia noticed tears shimmering in her green eyes. "I promised you the full explanation for why I was there today, didn't I? I suppose this is as good a time as any." She drew a deep breath. "Something - something similar happened to me."

"Oh, God, I'm so sorry." Whatever she'd expected to hear, that wasn't it. "When?"

"About eight years ago. My partner and I were working a serial killer case, and we ended up at the office until the wee hours of the morning. We hit a dead end, so I went home to get some sleep. I remember noticing my bird wasn't in his cage, and then something heavy hit me in the head. I woke up hanging by my wrists, blindfolded and gagged - someone else was screaming, just screaming all night, and there was nothing I could do."

"How did you -"
"The same way you did, more or less. After awhile, the screams stopped, and I didn't hear anyone walking around, so I managed to get the blindfold off. When I saw I was alone, I broke out of my restraints. It was some sort of storage cupboard, so I managed to use some of the junk left around to get out of the room. The outer doors had all been blocked shut, but there was a small window near the ceiling - I climbed up to it and attracted a man's attention, and he called 911." She sighed deeply. "I know what it's like, how terrifying it is, how it's not over just because you're free. I knew the jury wouldn't understand, but I wanted there to be one person in that courtroom today who did."

"That means a lot to me. I know it can't have been easy for you to listen to all that, after what you went through."

"Says the woman who just sat here listening to my story and barely batted an eye," Alex pointed out, "and your experience is a lot more recent than mine."

Olivia shrugged, accepting that statement as fact. "Fair enough."

"Who was the guy I saw you with outside the courtroom?" Alex asked, deciding a minor change in subject was warranted. "The one who was hovering so much I thought he'd follow us here?"

"My old partner. You remember, I told you about him."

"I remember." She smiled. "The partner I told you about, we were paired together when I was kidnapped. He was a godsend."

"I'm starting to think Elliot might be my godsend."

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"How'd it go?"

Olivia jumped a mile. "Damn it, Elliot! I know I gave you the key, but at least tell me when you're going to be here before I get in!"

One look at the genuine terror in her eyes and he realized his mistake. "God, Liv, I'm sorry. I didn't think - I just didn't think, period, apparently. I didn't mean to surprise you, I just wanted to be here in case you needed me."

She did need him. She'd spent the whole day trying desperately to keep her composure, and now she just wanted to be held, to cry out the torment Lewis had inflicted on her all over again. She ran to him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

His strong arms closed around her back. "I promise I'll call next time. It didn't occur to me how it might feel to you to have someone in your apartment that you didn't expect."

She buried her head in his shoulder. "And the thing is, if you hadn't been here, I probably would have called you the second I got here and asked you to come over. I'm sorry, I'm just so jumpy."

"Shh, it's okay. It's okay. You were so strong today."

Olivia started to cry, and Elliot pulled her closer. "There you go, just let it out. He can't hurt you now. You stood up to him and there was nothing he could do about it."

"Then why the hell does he scare me so much?" she sobbed. "What if the jury believes him? What if he's acquitted and comes after me? He's slipped through what should've been airtight cases before."
"He hasn't had a decorated officer testify against him before. You underestimate your own credibility, Liv." He kissed the top of her head. "Did you really tell him I would've known what to do with him?"

"Yes," she admitted. To anyone else she might have justified it; to Elliot, she felt like she didn't have to. "What would you have done?"

"I would've killed him," he told her flat-out. "Killed him and damn the consequences."

"I don't know why I didn't," she told him. "Somehow, that was just a line I couldn't cross. He was handcuffed," she finally admitted out loud. "He did sort of lunge at me, but he was still chained to the bed. I just reacted - he's lucky I reacted with the bar instead of the gun."

"It wouldn't have just been about revenge," he whispered. "I would've killed him just to make sure he there was no chance of him charming a jury, getting a walk, and coming after you again. And you - in the eyes of God, I don't think even killing Lewis would have been unjustifiable."

"I was right," she whispered, stepping out of the embrace as her tears finally slowed.

"About what?"

"I told Alex tonight I thought you might be a godsend to me, to help me through this. You are."

"I really wish I'd come to you sooner. I had no idea how much you were hurting."

"There were so many people there, but with all of them I felt like I had to stand up and be strong. They were all waiting to catch me when I fell, but I couldn't let them see me fall, not even Cragen. But you're different."

"So how did your meeting with Eames go? Since you're calling her Alex and since you got into talking about me, can I assume not all that bad?"

"Not bad at all. We had - we had an interesting conversation." She trusted Elliot, but she wasn't going to tell her Alex's story. It wasn't hers to tell.

"About me?" he teased gently.

"She had a partner who I guess was a little like you - well, I suppose I don't really know if he was like you, I've never met the man, but they were partners for a long time like you and me. She understands how close we are. I don't think I've ever met anyone who really understood that. She said it was almost like being married." As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. "Oh, God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"

"It's okay," he replied quickly.

"No, really, I'm sorry."

"No, really, it's okay," he insisted, matching his tone to hers. "It's been five months. I still love her and I still miss her, I always will. But that doesn't mean you have to walk on eggshells around me forever. Before all this happened, you wouldn't have hesitated to say what you said. I'm learning to live with it - I have to, if I want to go on living at all."

Olivia opened her mouth to reply, but yawned instead. Elliot put an arm around her shoulders. "Come on. Let's get you to bed."
"Will you stay with me? Please?"

"Of course."

She slipped into the bathroom to change into her pajamas and then half-sat, half-fell on her bed. Elliot helped her to lie down and covered her up. "Where do you want me to stay?" he asked gently.

"Here," she mumbled. "Like you were after Harris."

"Okay." He slipped into the bed next to her and pulled her into his arms. She was so exhausted, she was already more than halfway to asleep.

"Love you, Elliot," she murmured. Then she was out cold.

But even tired as he was, her admission jolted him fully awake. It wasn't like it was something that no one would have ever thought possible. He remembered clearly when his son had angrily asked Olivia if she was sleeping with him, and even though he knew the remark had primarily been meant to hurt and embarrass him, it had hit close enough to the mark that he'd almost felt the need to justify himself. If Olivia hadn't left undercover during most of the time when he and Kathy were separated - he'd kissed Dani Beck, and he'd barely known her. If he was honest with himself, though, Dani had been safe. Even if he had spent the night with her, it wouldn't have meant anything, just satisfying a physical need. But Olivia - he'd been torn between the love he still felt for Kathy and his inexplicable feelings for his longtime partner. He'd eventually gone back to Kathy, and he didn't regret the choice he'd made by spending that one night with her, and wouldn't even if they hadn't conceived a baby that night. But if he'd crossed that line with Olivia, there would have been no going back.

It wasn't Kathy stopping him now. He missed her, he loved her, but as he'd told Olivia, he was learning to live with his loss. But she was vulnerable and scared right now. Both of them had seen situations in which a person had, sometimes inadvertently, taken advantage of a victim's vulnerability, and he could not, would not, do that to Olivia.

Elliot felt Olivia tense up next to him as the jury forewoman mentioned their concerns about her conduct. The rest of the SVU team seemed equally unhappy, and he noticed Alex Eames frowning deeply on the other end of the bench.

"It doesn't mean anything," he whispered fiercely. She didn't reply but he knew she'd heard. Her hand gripped his tighter as the jury pronounced a not guilty verdict on the attempted murder and attempted rape charges. He knew that even if she couldn't show it, she was scared out of her mind that if he walked out a free man, he'd come after her and this time, she wouldn't escape with her life.

It wasn't until they pronounced him guilty on the kidnapping and assault of an officer that he felt her breathe again. He knew it was horrible that she hadn't been fully vindicated, but by the look on her face, he knew that right now she didn't care. Her concerns were practical; all she cared about was that he'd be locked up and unable to come after her.

She didn't say a word to anyone until she was in her car - in the passenger's seat, on Elliot's insistence, as he drove. "You know what I want to do?"

"What?" he asked.

"When the dust settles from all this, I want to have a party. Just to prove that the world goes on."
A lot going on in this chapter, but it was all pieces I wanted to cover. Olivia and Cassidy's breakup was deliberately written sympathetically, since other than the fact that he interferes with EO I really have nothing against Cassidy. As for Eames, I'm a huge fan of Criminal Intent as well as SVU and I love Eames' character. The connection to her own experience let me bring her back for this and also possibly set her up for a later appearance in this series.

This chapter references the CI episode Blind Spot and the SVU episodes Gray, Turmoil, and Psycho/Therapist, and the mention of the party at the end is my way of setting up the major events of Amaro's One-Eighty since in this arc Olivia and Cassidy are no longer together by then.

Please leave comments if you enjoy...I'd love to hear what you think!
When Elliot saw her, all he wanted to do was cry.

Olivia was dressed in a set of hospital sweats, and she was shivering. He realized quickly that she was terrified, as he'd expected. Despite Lewis' conviction, Olivia's worst nightmares had come true when he'd broken free from prison and come after her. Elliot probably wasn't supposed to know exactly what had happened after that, but Amaro had clearly decided that the connection between his partner and her former partner merited a little bending of the rules, and had told Elliot everything he knew about the events of the past few days. The more he got to know about Olivia's current partner, the more he liked the younger man.

Lewis had kidnapped a young girl and told Olivia she'd have to confess that his version of events with regard to the beating was true. Apparently, the lieutenant who'd been put in command suddenly following Lewis' escape had tried to dissuade her, but she'd insisted on doing as he said. Cragen would've known better, he couldn't help thinking. He'd have known that trying to stop her was just wasting time.

This new Lieutenant - Murphy, if he'd heard Amaro right - had given Olivia a security detail, but she'd slipped them. Another thing he was sure Cragen would've done differently. Either he wouldn't have bothered with the detail at all, knowing she would do just what she'd done, or he'd have made sure the detail was briefed on Olivia's connection to the case and knew she wouldn't sit quietly. At any rate, she'd met with Lewis who had threatened her and held a gun to her head and then killed himself in front of her just moments before the rest of the squad had come onto the scene. And as if that weren't bad enough, now it looked like some of them were turning his suicide into a murder accusation against Olivia.

She saw him in the doorway and their eyes locked. He hurried to her side and she threw herself into his arms. "Shh, sweetheart," he soothed. "He's dead. He can't hurt you anymore. He's dead. Damn, what did he do to you?"

"He didn't do anything," she choked out, and he believed her. Lewis hadn't raped her, hadn't hurt her physically in any way. But what he had done was a lot worse than Elliot thought she was fully realizing in this moment. She probably thought she'd be fine, like she had after Sealview. He would never forget coming by to see her that night, how bad her condition had been.

"I'm taking you home," he said firmly, and he was more worried by the fact that she didn't protest when he carried her to his car than he had been by anything else. She sat, silent, in the front seat as he drove.

"Wait," she asked at one point, seeming to realize they weren't headed towards her apartment.
"Where are we going?"

"My house," he replied gently. "Only Lizzie and Eli are there, and they'll give you space. That apartment isn't good for you right now."

He was probably right, she mused. Alex Eames had admitted to her that she'd had to move from her Rockaway house after she'd been kidnapped because she couldn't stop jumping at shadows in that place. At any rate, she didn't protest his chosen course.
"They didn't indict."

Elliot let out a long breath. He still couldn't believe that the Bronx DA had decided to go ahead with charging Olivia for the murder of William Lewis. He'd been impressed with Olivia, who'd flatly refused to make a false claim of self-defense that he was pretty sure a jury would've bought, but he'd been worried that would lead to an indictment, and conviction or no conviction, an indictment would end her career. "So they did believe your story."

"That's what I thought at first," Olivia replied. "But no. They believed Murphy."

"Murphy?"

"He lied for me," she said softly. "He told them that he knew my confession to beating Lewis while he was cuffed was false because he ordered me to do it as a tactic. El, I confessed to him. He knows what really happened. He has no deniability, if he's caught -"

"The only people who really know what you said to him are you and him," Elliot pointed out. "He took a calculated risk. I'd like to send him flowers for it."

"I suppose it's time I head back to my apartment, huh? You'd probably like to sleep in your own bed again." Olivia had been staying at Elliot's since she'd left the hospital. She'd slept in the spare bedroom, but her nightmares had been so bad that first night that Elliot had joined her, and they'd been sharing that bed ever since. Neither of them had suggested sharing the bed in his room; he'd shared that bed with Kathy for so many years, it just wouldn't feel right.

"You don't have to." He swallowed and then decided there wouldn't be a better time. He'd been sitting on this for three months, afraid to ask in case it wasn't what he hoped. "Do you remember the night after you testified against Lewis?"

"When you were waiting at my apartment? What about it?"

"I put you to bed and laid down with you."

"I remember."

"Do you remember what you said to me just before you fell asleep?"

She tried, but she'd been so exhausted, all that was a haze. "No. Why? What did I say?"

_All in._ "You said you loved me."

"Oh, God." She was stunned. "God, I'm so sorry."

"Did you mean it?" he asked bluntly.

He'd know if she tried to lie or wiggle out of answering. "Yes," she admitted. "If that makes you uncomfortable -"

"Just making sure it wouldn't make you uncomfortable if I did this." Then he put his hand under her chin, tipped her face up to his, bent down, and kissed her.

The kiss left her breathless. There was more passion and emotion and love in that kiss than in any kiss from Brian, even at the height of their relationship. She hadn't felt this way for anyone since David, almost two years ago, and even that - she'd gotten over David so much faster than she'd
gotten over her partnership with Elliot.

"I love you," he whispered when his lips had separated from Olivia's. "I love you."

"I've loved you for so long," she whispered back.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

"Kathy. You had such a wonderful family, I couldn't come between it. I was working up the courage to tell you when you were separated, but then I went on that undercover and I came back and saw you and Beck, and you were flirting, and I knew I'd missed my chance."

"You didn't," he said quickly. "Miss your chance. Dani - she wasn't anything. She was safe because she wasn't anything. I could walk away whenever I wanted, no strings attached - we didn't get past kissing and flirting, but even if we had, I could've dropped it at any time, and that would've been that."

"And me?"

"I loved you too much. I had you on one end and Kathy on the other, and I still loved her too. Once we took that step, there would've been no going back. I guess I was scared."

"I know," she admitted. "That's why I stalled for so long. I was scared too."

"Not everything's changed," he whispered. "If we do this now, there's no turning back."

"I don't want to turn back."

"Neither do I."

He kissed her again, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, staying in his arms long after the kiss was done. "Let's go on a date," he said softly.

"When?"

"Tomorrow night. I'll buy you dinner and a movie."

"Then it's a date."

"And Olivia?"

"Yes?"

"You don't have to leave."

xxxxxxxxxx

Olivia yawned and stretched, momentarily disoriented by the unfamiliar room. Then she remembered. She was in Elliot's bed.

They'd stayed in the guest room the night after Olivia had been cleared, but after their date the day after, they'd ended up in his room instead, in his bed, and they'd done quite a bit more than just sleep. With anyone else, Olivia would have said sex after the first date was rushing it. But she'd known Elliot for so long. She didn't need the dating process to get to know him; she already knew practically everything about him and he knew everything about her. It had felt right the night before and it felt right now.
Elliot groaned softly and rolled over. "Morning, sleepyhead."

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too."

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry, this is just the end of the story, not the series. There will be more to come, but it will feature Elliot and Olivia's relationship as a background element while dealing with actual SVU cases, so I wanted to start a new story for that.

This chapter references the events of SVU Beast's Obsession and Post-Mortem Blues. The mention of Eames having to move because of her attack comes from the fact that she has a different address in a season 8 episode than she does in CI Blind Spot, and the fact that she was kidnapped from that house seems like a likely reason for the move. I also realized I forgot to give credit to an episode that I referenced in the previous chapter, and someone suggested that was not an Acceptable Loss.

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