Sine Qua Non

by silraen

Summary

This is an AU story where Raymond Reddington does not leave Masha Rostova's life while she is young. After rescuing the four-year-old girl from the fire, he does leave her in Nebraska to be raised in secret by Sam, but he keeps in contact with her, physically appearing during various, important moments in her life.

The two of them develop a profound bond throughout the years she matures from child to woman.

But something happens to make Red immediately break off their contact for years.

It is during her FBI training when Liz learns the man she has known for most of her life, the man she called "Red," is Raymond Reddington, the "Concierge of Crime."

Eventually Red comes out of hiding to work as an asset for the FBI--but, like in the show, this is to ultimately protect her from those who wish to hunt her down.

Their relationship is shattered, and yet they both find that they are still drawn to one another. Will they be able to reestablish the bond they had made while she had been growing up? Will they be able to rebuild their trust in one another?

*This story is currently being illustrated. It is the wish of the artists that permission be asked
to share the artwork on other sites. TY!

Notes

*Sine qua non*, which is Latin for "without which not," refers to those things we consider as essential for life to have any value...those things without which we cannot endure living. The phrase fits them so well that I honestly couldn't think of a better title for this new story. Why bother fighting something that works? :)

There are a few differing definitions of what a twin flame relationship is. If you're interested, the main articles I am using to define Red and Elizabeth's are:


https://www.elephantjournal.com/2015/11/3-signs-youve-met-your-twin-flame/

Please note that I am not affiliated with these sites, nor have I read any other article published on these sites.
Flames engulfed the walls of the mansion, first swiftly streaking up to the ceiling, then striking down like lightning to ignite the golden wood flooring and priceless Persian rugs. The ropes of fire twisted and writhed like vibrant, orange and crimson serpents, hissing and spitting...utterly enraged. Then they furiously surged forward once again, rising and tangling together, melding into one, roaring, savagely wild creature.

By this point, it was beyond taming.

Shrills of human panic sounded above the sizzling and popping and crackling...even above the sudden and deafening collapse of part of the house as the fire gluttonously consumed it.

The air shimmered with sweltering heat. All her toys were melting, everything in her room was burning, and nothing could be touched--nothing!

She was utterly petrified. Sweat poured down her forehead and cheeks to mingle with her frightened tears as she huddled in the only corner of the room that wasn't alight in flames. But she couldn't escape the smoke. It insidiously whirled around her, thick and black and completely indifferent to her whimpering cries. It was disorienting her--she couldn't see!

Terror consumed her. "Mama! Mama!" she wailed in Russian. The ashes burned her watering eyes and plugged her nose. She couldn't breathe! Weeping and coughing hoarsely, she hunched in on herself, desperately trying to hide from the horror encircling her.

"Mamaaaa!"

"Masha! Where are you?" a gruff, deep voice called out in snarling alarm over the roaring of the flames. "Masha!"

The girl jerked her head up toward the close sound of the voice--but it wasn't her mother calling for her. Then suddenly she cried out in pain as someone heavy tripped over her. Embers rained down in a torrent of fire from the smoldering wooden beams above them and the someone--a man--screamed in agony.

Her panicked shriek echoed his as he writhed on the floor next to her to put out the flames that were hungrily eating into his flesh and muscle. Then, gasping, weeping, he lurched to his feet and grabbed her, yanking her up and off the floor, half-dragging, half-carrying her away from the blazing inferno.

"Red!" Masha sobbed wildly in distress. "Red!"

"I'm here, baby. I'm here!" a fierce whisper answered her as strong yet gentle hands gathered her close.

The real world snapped into focus as the little girl woke abruptly from her night terror. Everything around her was unrecognizable and cold and so very dark. Then she saw his familiar green eyes come into her line of sight.

"Red!" she whimpered in relief, tears streaming down her cheeks.
"I'm here, Masha," the man soothed, stroking her long hair away from her sweaty brow before wiping her tears and nose with a soft cloth. Christ, she was shaking so hard. "I'm here. Breathe with me, sweetie. Like this. Slow and deep. Good. Good girl. That's it."

"Red, there was fire," her small voice was tremulous as she remembered the ghastly horror that she had just been rescued from. "It was burning us. It was everywhere!"

"It was just a dream, baby. You're safe. There's no fire here." The man called Raymond Reddington cradled the traumatized four-year-old girl in his arms, his heart breaking for her. Hearing a creaking step just outside her bedroom, he looked up.

His friend, Sam Scott, slipped inside. Softly the older man padded over to kneel down on the floor beside the bed so he could be on eye level with them, his taut expression quite pained indeed.

"This one was really bad," Sam murmured. "She has them more often than not, Red. Sometimes I can wake her up. Sometimes I can't." He glanced away from Masha to give his friend a grateful look. "I'm glad you were able to bring her out of it."

"S-Sam?" Masha stammered uncertainly.

"Yes, darling, I'm here."

"I'm so scared," she whispered, clutching at Red even more tightly. "D-don't leave me alone."

It was a plea that came from the very depths of her soul. The anguish in her voice pierced Red's heart, and he closed his eyes, arms tightening around her as he brushed the tip of his nose against her temple in immediate response to it.

"We aren't going anywhere, honey," Sam crooned reassuringly, stroking the back of his index finger soothingly down her smooth cheek. "We'll stay with you."

Trust and intense relief glittered in her beautiful blue eyes as the exhausted girl nestled further against Red's chest, sniffling, her lids already heavy as sleep began to reclaim her.

Tenderly Red wiped her runny nose again, glancing at Sam. "Have you given any more thought to my suggestion?" he asked quietly.

The other man shook his head, lips pressed in a tight line. "You mean that fringe science crap? No, Red. No. I haven't changed my mind. I don't want those fucking people anywhere near her."

"She remembers the fire. She remembers me, Sam. She remembers I was there."

The older man's expression was stony.

"She doesn't remember now...but you know what she'll remember when she's older."

"She may not."

"If she's anything like her mother, which I have no doubt she is, she will remember," Red snapped, then quickly bit the inside of his cheek, reining in his temper while glancing down at the girl. Luckily his raised voice hadn't woken her.

God, she was such a pretty little thing. Angelic. Seeing her now peaceful, sleeping face slightly eased something tight inside of him.

"That shit is unpredictable and unreliable. What if something goes wrong?"
Red looked at him, a brow raising. "Unpredictable and unreliable? For most patients it's been proven to work. You've read the same research I have."

Sam made a scoffing noise, but his expression was not quite as closed as it had been a moment ago.

Sensing his opportunity, Red pressed, "It should stop the night terrors. She won't remember any of it, Sam. Nothing. It's for her protection." *From those who wish her harm.... And from herself.*

"I don't like it, Red."

Red placed a hand gently on the girl's dark, silken hair. The need to protect this innocent child was near overwhelming. "I don't either." The intense look in his flinty eyes, however, was gravely resolute. "But to keep her safe, it needs to be done."

Masha mumbled something in her sleep and both men glanced down at her apprehensively, waiting to see if she would begin to wail. But all she did was press a curled hand more tightly against her cheek, burrowing closer into Red's arms.

"I know you're the one raising her, Sam," Red murmured as he gazed tenderly down at the girl. "And I wouldn't normally interfere with the decisions you make for her well-being." Then after a moment, his fierce eyes met the other man's once more, and his expression was vehement. "But after the Hell I saw her go through again tonight, I'm not going to stand idly by and just wait for you to fucking see the sense of what I'm proposing. It *needs* to be done. In fact, I insist on it."

Sam pursed his lips unhappily--but he knew better than to argue any more about it tonight. Sighing out his lingering anger and frustration, he looked pityingly down at Masha. Reaching out, he softly touched her cheek again before he rose to his feet. "I'll be awake for a while. I know you will be too. Coffee?"

Red shook his head.

Sam gave the little girl one last lingering look, then inclined his head deferentially at Red before quietly leaving the room.

After waiting a few minutes, Red tried to gently maneuver Masha back down onto her bed. But the girl stirred and clutched tightly at his shirt. He instantly stilled his movements, unsure of how to disengage himself without waking her.

Then a soft snore escaped her, those thick lashes of hers fluttering against her pale cheeks as she heaved another, snuffling sigh.

A genuine smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth at that.

Ah, well.

Gingerly Red scooted backwards, inch by careful inch, until he was pressed more comfortably against the headboard. He made sure his hold on Masha was secure before he leaned his head back against the wood paneling.

The aromatic scent of the brewing coffee sure smelled good. Maybe he would have a cup after all. In a little while. For now, he would just rest his eyes for a bit....
Chapter End Notes

It is late January 1990. Masha is four years old. Red is twenty-nine years old.

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission.
Thank you!
Did I do the right thing?

Red rubbed his face. Christ, was he tired. Exhausted, really. Emotionally drained.

He needed a fucking drink.

The man walked over to Sam's liquor cabinet and grabbed the first bottle his fingers brushed against. Uncorking it, he poured a short glass tumbler half-full and downed it. The amber liquid burned its way along his throat, and, in a way, it was gratifyingly cleansing.

Sighing sharply through his teeth, he poured more and threw another back.

And then he did it again.

Waiting in that God-forsaken, horribly sterile room while the doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists had worked with young Masha had been interminable.

The anxious, frightened look she had tossed over her shoulder at him while the nurse had been leading her away, her startlingly blue eyes huge and tear-bright, had nearly made him call a halt to the whole damned procedure.

But then he had immediately remembered why he was putting her through this ordeal.

As Red had stared at Masha’s pale face, which was nearly as bleached of color as the hospital’s unpigmented hallway, he had vividly recalled the sound of a gun firing, the bullet hitting its target squarely in the chest with a sickening thud. The sight of the man collapsing forward, his blood, dark and thick, pooling beneath his body. Katarina screaming her pain and rage. Masha's little hands violently trembling as she dropped the heavy gun, eyes wide with shock...her innocence forever lost in that moment in time. He clearly remembered her wailing shriek as she fled down the hall, flames roaring to life after her....

As the little girl’s lips had quivered, Red could almost taste the acrid smoke in the back of his throat. His shoulder had twitched, the left side of his back aching slightly in remembrance of the searing pain that had forever left its mark on his body.

He had done it for her--to protect her from those who would come hunting for Katarina’s daughter if they knew she existed. But, ultimately, he had done it to protect her from the knowledge that she had shot and killed a man, her own mother’s lover, at the age of four.

She was too young to carry such a soul-burden. It would be too scarring. Too traumatic.

Certainly she was too young to understand it now, but, as he had told Sam, she would recall it as she became older. If her memories weren’t blocked now, in a year's time, in two, she would know and understand what she had done.

"It would lead to questions we can never answer out loud, Sam," Red had explained with fierce vehemence to his friend. "And not only that, the knowledge of what she has done would destroy her."
"She will remember one day, Red," Sam had warned disapprovingly. "You mark my words: she will remember. Then what will you do?"

Red had viciously snarled his denial at the other man, stalking angrily away, knowing full well that he would never have Sam's blessing for what he needed to subject Masha to.

But that awful look she had given him as she was being lead away had nearly broken his heart. Tearing his eyes away from her, he had glanced down at the stuffed bunny he'd forgotten he had been holding.

"Wait," he'd barked hoarsely.

The nurse had stopped walking, patting Masha's hand soothingly as Red came up to them both, heavy footsteps echoing in the deserted hallway.

Completely ignoring the nurse, he had knelt down before the girl. His eyes, his whole attention, had been only for her.

"I will be right outside this window." He had pointed at the large piece of glass that separated the room he had to stay in and the room she had to go into. "You won't see me, but I will see you. I will be watching over you the whole time, sweetheart. Okay?"

The girl had nodded mutely.

"You'll be fine," he had murmured. "Since I can't go in, here's someone to take with you." He had placed the stuffed bunny in her arms.

"Actually, Mr. Reddington," the nurse began, "she really shouldn't--"

The scathing look he'd shot her way had made her mouth shut abruptly with an audible snap.

"You take Bunny with you, baby," he'd told Masha, casting one last warning glare at the nurse before he returned his attention to the girl. "You'll be just fine."

He had wondered who he was really trying to convince--her? Or himself?--as he had hugged her reassuringly one more time. Guiltily unable to look at the tears glittering in her eyes, he'd closed his own and had leaned forward to kiss her on the forehead.

"I'll be here when you wake up."

Red wasn't surprised to find himself suddenly leaning against the doorjamb of Masha's bedroom. She was sleeping on her side under the down comforter, clutching the stuffed bunny tightly to her body, her little nose buried in the floppy ears. Sam sat in the rocking chair next to her bed, reading by soft lamplight.

Did I do the right thing?

Red lifted the glass to his lips and drained the last of the alcohol.

Hearing him, Sam glanced up, then looked pointedly at the glass Red held, frowning.

Red shrugged a shoulder, not giving a fuck if his friend thought he was drowning himself in alcohol. He wasn't. Just dulling the painful edge of a dreadful day.

Sam rose to his feet and met him at the door. "Masha's been sleeping well for the last few hours. No nightmares, Red."
The men were silent for a time, watching the peaceful rise and fall of her chest as she slept, both very thankful for it.

"We can't call her Masha anymore," Red finally said quietly.

"I know."

"Elizabeth."

Did I do the right thing?

"It's a beautiful name, Red."

"Yes," Red husked softly, gazing down at the girl. "It is."
Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

Thank you for reading :) I really appreciate every kudos and comment given--thank you!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This
gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
And so Masha Rostova became Elizabeth Scott. But it was so hard on her, that first year of living with Sam. In the early months she would cry more often than not. Sometimes she would call for her mother, switching between English and broken Russian. Sam would do what he could to ease her heartache, but his steady care and gentle affection wasn't always enough and sometimes he had to just let her weep until she slept from emotional exhaustion. It broke his heart, but during those times there was literally nothing he could say or do to truly comfort her. All he could do was hold her and murmur soothing nothings while he stroked her hair.

"Give her time," Red would advise him over the phone when he would call to check in on them. "She needs time."

"That's not all she needs," Sam had finally growled in rebuke one night after Red had given him the same, rather condescending lecture. "You're not here dealing with her day in and day out like I am. I care for the girl, Red. I'm even coming to love her." He closed his eyes, pained. "But sometimes I feel like I'm not doing enough. She needs more."

"What she needs is her life back, Sam. Everything she was familiar with. Everything she loved. She needs her mother. But Katarina..." his voice trailed off, and Sam pretended not to hear the hitch in his tone. After a moment, he cleared his throat. "Elizabeth's life will never be the same again. We can't give her what she needs most. All we can give her now is time."

"In all this time she has, she's grieving," Sam informed him quietly. "She's mourning her mother, though she doesn't realize it. She's mourning her lost childhood memories. Her innocence. It's too much for her. We have to get her over the hump," Sam had sighed, rubbing his forehead. "Red, maybe you could come see her."

A startled exhaling of breath. Then, "I don't...I don't know if that's such a good idea."

"Of the two of us, she knows you best. She was happier--well, more content, at least--when you were here. I think it's because....she knows you. In her heart. She remembers you. Because you were with her before."

"That's exactly why I shouldn't come see her. What if my travels attract certain...unwanted...attention?"

"Are you telling me that you, Raymond Reddington, have the means to have our phone calls be completely untraceable, but do not have the means to slip under the radar for a weekend country getaway?" Sam's tone had mocked him.

Red had snarled softly at that. The fact was, he did have the means and the ability to disappear off the grid. It was something he was exceptionally good at. But any lapse in his vigilance could cause something evil to slither in through the unprotected gap and endanger Elizabeth's life. How could he even think of chancing it?

"But if I'm followed, Sam? What then?"

"You, Red? I don't think so."
Silence reigned on the other end of the line.

"At least consider it. Please. I really think you could help her. More than you realize."

Red had agreed to think on it.

Over the next couple weeks he had wrestled with himself over what to do. This decision could not be made lightly. During that time of inner conflict his emotions had been especially volatile. Fear that visiting Elizabeth would ultimately lead to her demise hounded him. Deep-seeded guilt for literally stealing her memories and then abandoning her to a lonely life in Nebraska with a man she liked but didn't know very well plagued him.

Red had held himself apart, withdrawing from everyone, even his own beloved family, to determine with an open heart and clear mind what the right action was. It would be catastrophic if he were followed to Nebraska. But Sam had been right--no one could fly under the radar like he could. If he took extra care and extreme precautions, it could very well work.

But what if it didn't?

Red stared up at the ceiling. It was the middle of the night. His wife lay asleep beside him, but he was mentally very far away, wandering well-trodden paths there in the shadows of vicious, circling thoughts.

*She's grieving. She's mourning her mother, though she doesn't realize it.*

Frowning, he rubbed his temples as he recalled Sam's words to him.

*She's mourning her lost childhood memories. Her innocence.*

The remembered sound of the gunshot rang loudly in his mind. He could almost hear her agonized shriek as she had fled from the hideous sin she had committed. Flashes of that murderous fire burned before his eyes. The ghostly cries of her fear and screams of her terror echoed phantasmally in his mind heart-wrenching enough to curdle his blood as the flames came at them, that terrible noise fusing and becoming her weeping for him while she had suffered in the clutches of those ghastly night terrors.

*It's too much for her.*

Red closed his eyes. He remembered every time he had woken her. The way she had grasped at him. Christ, it had been as if she were drowning in memories and he her only lifeline to hold on to. How could any soul, especially one so young, survive such a trauma? She may not recall those harrowing memories herself any longer, but the scars would always be there. And she was suffering from having no choice but to bear them.

Even now she could be weeping in Sam's arms.

Red felt the familiar pang of guilt at the thought, but this time it hit him hard enough to make him gasp. Self-loathing for *not* being there with her swiftly followed. He suddenly couldn't *stand* himself.

What a fucking coward he was!

In that very moment, he knew what he needed to do with piercing clarity.

*I'm coming back, sweetheart. I'm coming back.*
Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

Thank you for reading. Your kudos and comments are so appreciated! :)
"Lizzy? Sweetheart, please come down."

"No!"

Elizabeth scooted further away until her back abruptly hit the corner of the barn's loft. Wedged in as far as she could go, she brought her knees up to her chest, wrapped her thin arms around them, and then hunched over, piteously burying her face away from him and the rest of the whole wide world.

Hot tears streaked down her cheeks and she sniffed noisily, wiping her running and sticky nose on her bare knees. Then she squirmed uneasily, for the pile of gleaming yellow hay she had clumsily plunked herself down into was incredibly sharp. It poked painfully at her back through her thin shirt. And now that she was sitting still, she was starting to realize that it had also scratched her bare arms and legs when she had scuttled through all the golden piles to escape him.

Feeling the uncomfortable burn of those cuts brought fresh tears to her eyes.

"Lizzy," his deep voice held that exasperated, warning note she hated so much. It usually meant she was in trouble.

Not that he ever spanked her.

Sam usually did that if she were really naughty.

But Red never did. And it was because she knew he would never do it that she had run from him to hide up in the loft.

"Go away!" she yelled heatedly at him.

"I want to talk to you." His growling tone was firm.

Well, she didn't want to talk to him.

The dispirited little girl sniffed again, refusing to respond. Besides, she already knew what he was going to say, and she didn't want to hear it!

Maybe if he didn't say it directly to her, it wouldn't happen.

Red gave a deeply resigned sigh and then she caught the sound of him heaving himself up onto the tall ladder, his heavy footfalls slowly and carefully climbing the wooden planks until he reached the landing.

Liz could hear him muttering to himself as he then crawled on his hands and knees in the half-dark of evening toward her hiding spot. And she knew by all his grousing and grumbling that he was annoyed by all the mounds of poking straw.

*Well, good,* she thought defiantly, scowling into her knees. Now he knew how it felt!

The floorboard creaked and then groaned under her and she could suddenly feel the warmth of his body. He was close enough to touch her...but he didn't. Instead, he silently settled against the wall.
beside her, arranging himself as comfortably as he could get in an old barn's loft.

Then he waited.

And waited.

Stubbornly she kept her face hidden from him. She didn't want to look at him. He always did this. He would just sit there like a rock, never moving, never speaking, waiting her out. And she would always peek to see if he really was there still. And he always was.

Holding herself with obstinate rigidity, she squeezed her eyes even more tightly shut.

He could just sit there all night long for all she cared! She wasn't going to fall for his tricks this time!

The deafening silence between them stretched and stretched.

It felt like forever had passed when Liz finally fidgeted, restlessly squirming to try and find a more comfortable position to sit in without having to look up. The planks beneath her bottom were so hard, and the straw was so prickly, and her back was starting to ache since she'd been curled over her legs like a pillbug for God knew how long...but she didn't want to lift her head and see him, even though it meant it would ease her physical discomfort if she did.

How long had it been, anyway? She knew "forever" wasn't entirely true...but it sure felt like it!

Her nostrils flared impatiently as her eyes hesitantly flickered open. She could just make out through the small space between her knees that the sun had finally set, casting a dusky purple glow over the entire loft. The night bugs were beginning to sing their "good morning" songs. Well, that's what she called them, anyway, because right now it was actually their morning. Soon they would be looking for their breakfasts.

Funny how their morning was her nighttime.

Her eyes felt really gritty and itchy from all the crying and hay dust. By habit, she lifted her head to rub them...and made the mistake of warily glancing in his direction.

Red was smiling gently at her. "I like it up here."

Upset that she'd caved and had actually looked at him, she pursed her lips and quickly glanced down at his long legs that were stretched out in front of him, crossed at the ankles.

He wasn't wearing his jeans or boots. Instead, he was wearing his "going away clothes." Well, that's what she called them, anyway, because whenever he wore those shiny shoes and those fancy slacks he always left on that same day.

"I can see why you like to come up here," the man was saying kindly. "You can see everything...the main house, the road, the vegetable and flower gardens. The paddock. The creek and the lake."

"And the treehouse." As soon as the words left her mouth, Liz rebelliously clamped her jaw tightly shut with an audible snap.

He'd tricked her into talking! He was so darn good at that.

"Mmm, yes," his murmered, his voice deepening with a patient lilt of fond amusement. "The treehouse too."

It wasn't a treehouse so much as blocks of wood nailed into the large trunk of the bur oak tree so she
could climb with ease up to the spacious branches, but she insisted on calling the oak "the treehouse," so that's what it was known as.

"Maybe during my next visit I can hang a rope swing for you on that really long, thick branch," he cajoled gently, pointing.

She grudgingly looked out to where he gestured.

"That big, thick one sticking out to the right. That'd be nice, wouldn't it?"

Liz hitched a shoulder noncommittally, that awful, uncomfortable lump coming back into her throat.

He sighed softly, giving up trying to draw her out by diverting her attention and instead confronted the reason for her recalcitrant behavior directly. "Lizzy, I know you're...upset that I'm leaving. But I'll be back."

"I wish you wouldn't always go away all the time," she muttered, staring woefully down at her bruised and scratched knees. "Why do you always do that, Red?"

He carefully picked straw off his pants. "What does Sam say?"

"He says you need to be with your family."

"Well, he's right."

Liz felt a sharp stab of acute jealousy. "He says you have a daughter. Kind of my age."

Red's lips quirked slightly. Lizzy was only six. "She's a little bit older than you, honey."

She shrugged stiffly. "He says you love her."

"I do love her."

Her heart felt like it was plummeting to the very soles of her feet.

"More than me?" she whispered in plaintive wistfulness.

"No, baby," he murmured gravely, finally and tenderly wrapping an arm around her. "Not more than you."

Her head dropped against his chest as he squeezed her briefly against him. He was very glad she hadn't resisted his hug. It meant that she was at last open to listening to him.

And since she was concentrating, he needed to dispel this particular misunderstanding she harbored immediately.

"I love you both the same," Red told her quietly. "And because I love you both the same, I want to see both of you. Spend time with both of you. Do you understand?"

Chewing thoughtfully on her lower lip, she nodded reluctantly. She didn't like it, but she understood how important sharing was. And so she would share Red...since she had to.

Then Elizabeth suddenly brightened as a new idea flashed through her mind. After wiping her sticky cheeks free of those lingering, dried tears, she propped herself up against his chest to look him in the eyes, her own now shining with hopeful excitement.
"Can I come with you? To your other house?"

Red closed his own eyes briefly, his guilty heart twisting painfully in his chest. Only once he was certain that he had his expression completely under his control did he gaze steadily down into her sweet, sunkissed face. Reaching out, he tenderly plucked straw from the wild tangle of her dark hair.

"Sam would miss you too much, I think."

"Oh." She hadn't thought of that. "He could come too," she offered tentatively.

He smiled regrettfully, continuing his ministrations to her appearance. He combed his fingers through her wavy tresses, tucking them behind her ears. "But he lives here," he replied softly, sensitive of her feelings. "This is his home, Lizzy. And yours."

She looked down, crestfallen.

He swiftly tapped a finger under her chin and her forlorn eyes flickered up to his again. "I'll come back," he tried to cheer her with his upbeat reassurance. "I always do, don't I?"

"But...it takes so long."

"It only feels long. It's not so long, sweetheart. Before you know it, I'll be back to hang that rope swing, go walking in the woods, play....help you with your homework...." he teased, grinning at her sudden and predictable moue of distaste.

"And read?" she asked hopefully, some of her melancholy fading at last--his smile was infectious.

"Naturally!"

Red was immensely proud of her ability to read as well as she did. He knew Sam--being well-versed in literature--had much to do with her increasing comprehension skills. He had a sneaking feeling, though, that her adoration for stories and other bookish things was just inherently in her and was blossoming under daily encouragement.

"I love it when you read to me, Lizzy."

She flushed happily under his praise.

"Be sure to have a nice, tall stack of books picked out to read to me by the time I come back. New ones."

"New?"

"Mmm. I'll make sure to tell Sam before I leave to take you to the bookstore. That way he can't say 'no,'" he winked.

Liz gave him her best unsure-but-game smile, her small hand unconsciously plucking at his satin tie until it slipped out of the V of his waistcoat. "When will you come back?"

The man hesitated.

One of the problems with this arrangement he had worked out with Sam was that he was never quite sure when he would be able to come back. He certainly could not come to Nebraska at regular intervals, always leaving and returning on the same days every month, or every few months. That kind of obvious predictability would draw too much attention to himself and anyone else he was in contact with.
"As soon as I can," he promised, knowing it was the best, honest answer he could give her.

She puffed out her cheeks briefly, deliberately thinking his answer over as she continued to absently finger his tie. Then she released that breath of air in a small, *whooshing* sigh. "Okay," she acquiesced in a murmur, knowing that it was the best he could offer her and trying hard not to be disappointed about it. Soon wasn't too long to wait. And besides...she knew Red always kept his promises.

He tucked a wayward lock of snarled hair behind her ear, showing her by the familiar, affectionate touch that he was proud of her for coming around to accepting something that was so difficult for her. Luckily she accepted his promise without pressing him further.

This time.

But he knew that one day, that sharp mind of hers would be older, more mature, and would want clearer answers from him. More concrete promises. That time would come sooner than he thought and had to be prepared for it...prepared for her.

With a soft light in his gaze, Red reached out and gently tweaked her nose. "Are you ready to go down now?"

Liz hesitated, licking her lips nervously. "I'm going to be in trouble," she mumbled. "Sam saw me yelling and crying. Being mean to you." She hung her head, ashamed.

"What if I tell him that we aren't mad at each other anymore? That we worked everything out together?"

The sparkling expression in her beautiful blue eyes was one of adoration as she lifted them to his. "Really?"

"Well," he gave her a slow smile, "we did, didn't we?"

After thinking it through for a moment, she nodded fervently, dimpling brightly and gratefully up into his face.

"Well then." He ran the back of his finger down her cheek in a quick and affectionate caress before releasing her. "Let's go down, hmm?"

"All right." Slowly she gathered her pale legs beneath her, making to rise...then she paused, hands braced against the top of his thigh for balance. "Red?"

"What is it, baby?"

"I'll miss you."

He reached out to steady her before carefully pressing his lips warmly to her brow. "I'll miss you too, Lizzy."
This moment between Red and young Liz takes place two years after the night of the fire, which in my AU happened in 1989. My timeline loosely follows the show's, though I've aged them by a couple years. The year is 1991. Lizzy is now six years old. Red is thirty-one years old.
As always, thank you so much for reading :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Heavy footsteps ran past her room and near-galloped with urgency down the stairs.

Elizabeth's eyes flew open, her heart pounding in sudden dread as she was wrenched abruptly from sleep. With a shuddering intake of breath, she quickly rubbed her eyes and then squinted up at the ceiling. Pitch-blackness swallowed her entire bedroom, alerting her to the fact that it was very late indeed.

What was going on?

She sat upright in bed, tense and vigilant, keen ears straining to hear any kind of commotion.

"....Red!" Sam's vehemence was muffled by her half-closed door but she was absolutely certain he had called the man's name.

Red was here? In the middle of the night?

Despite her uneasiness, her heart leapt. Excited and confused all at once, Liz jumped out of bed and trotted over to her door, pushing it open all the way.

"....heard the rumors, Red. And then you disappeared. That was several days ago...."

The harsh alarm in Sam's voice stopped her from rushing headlong downstairs like she had intended to do. Instead, she warily crouched down by the banister, eyes intently trained on the dark living room below. But the two men were in the kitchen. The light was on in there and she could see the faintest outline of a shadow--Red's. But while she couldn't discern anything more than that or hear everything they said, she did pick up bits and pieces of their muted conversation.

"....didn't know.... had to shake them.... waited them out then I.... killed.... gone.... so much blood, Sam...." Red's voice broke on that last word, as if he were crying.

Crying.

Something was wrong.

Her hands clutched the railing tightly, real fear squeezing her heart until her lips split apart to let out an anxious gasp.

Something was horribly, terribly, wrong. Red never cried.

She hadn't even known he could cry.

The sound of liquid being poured into two glasses drifted up the staircase. Then all was silent for a time as Liz sat there, shivering in the late December cold. But then...the heavy stillness was broken by one of the kitchen chairs being pushed back as someone stood up. The friction between the tile and wood shrieked discordantly and Liz winced, clapping her hands over her ears. Almost as quickly as it had happened, the appalling noise's echo finally died away.

Once she had carefully taken her fingers out of her ears, she could detect whispering. Then louder, unintelligible words of bitterly impassioned rage, and then...profoundly deep sorrow.
Her acute hearing picked up Red's gravelly tone again. ".....couldn't go.... didn't know where else to lay low before...."

Sam's gentle murmur of acquiescence.

"....won't stay long....just the night. Then I must...." his voice faded away.

More murmuring from Sam.

"Thank you," she heard Red say quietly.

Elizabeth scrambled to her feet as her adoptive father suddenly appeared in the living room, quickly making his way to the staircase. She smoothly folded her arms over her chest and quickly pressed herself back against the doorjamb of her room--but it was too late. He had seen her.

"Liz?" Sam's expression was distracted, pained. "What are you doing up? It's late. Go back to bed, honey."

"Red's here." It wasn't really a question, but he nodded his confirmation anyway. "What's the matter? Why is he upset?"

"He's...he's not feeling well, sweetie." The moment the man said the words he winced, knowing his sharp little girl probably wouldn't believe the obvious lie.

Her sapphire eyes narrowed in suspicion, confirming that his intuition about her was correct.

"He needs to rest," Sam told her in a firm, no-nonsense tone. "He needs to sleep so he can get well, just like you need to do when you're sick."

She gave a stubborn huff, watching as he opened the hall cupboard.

"I need to grab some extra blankets for him. It's a cold night and you know how we haven't made up the guest room's bed in months."

"I can help...." she offered quietly, observing Sam lay two soft blankets over his arm.

The man shook his head, coming closer to her. "Thank you, Lizzy, but no. It's really late and you need to go back to bed."

She resisted slightly as he reached out, turning her around.

His strong fingers squeezed her shoulder, a non-verbal warning for her not to argue with him. "He'll be all right."

Knowing that Sam was eyeing her very closely to make sure she did as he asked, she feigned meekness and obediently climbed back into bed without a fuss. Then she laid down, holding Bunny close.

"Good night, sweetie," he whispered before closing the door with a gentle click.

Liz frowned up at the vaulted ceiling, eyes wide open. Now she couldn't hear anything! How was she to know when Sam went to bed?

The minutes ticked slowly by. She wasn't sure how long she impatiently waited there in the dark. But when she felt like enough time had gone by that Sam might finally be asleep, she sat up and took off her socks.
It was easier to avoid the creaking floorboards when she could feel the wood of each panel directly beneath her feet and toes.

Then she soundlessly slipped out of bed, bringing Bunny with her—and the top book from the nice, tall stack of new novels on her night table.

Liz gingerly crept across her room, deftly avoiding the panels she knew were squeaky. Then she slowly turned the doorknob, opening the heavy wooden door just a crack. She listened attentively.

Silence met her ears.

Next was the tricky part. Her door would oftentimes make annoying noises when it was cold out. Biting her bottom lip, she held her breath as she inched it open a bit more, little by little.

*Creeeak.*

God, it was the loudest sound she had ever heard in her life!

The blood drained from her small face as she stood there, heart thudding nervously. Had Sam heard? The silence that followed was almost deafening. Then, she heard his snore from down the hall.

Liz let out a grateful sigh of relief and confidently seized her opportunity, quickly squeezing through the narrow opening she had made. Carefully she picked her way quietly down the stairs, knowing by heart exactly which places on the steps to give a wide berth to so she could escape detection.

Once she was at the landing, she dug her chilled toes into the soft fur rug, taking a moment to warm her cold feet. Then she slipped around the banister and ghosted down the hall toward the guest room. She could hear weak popping sounds and could see warm light faintly glowing in the space between the closed door and the floor. A fire had just been stoked to flicker in the fireplace. And one of the lamps was on. She knew it would be.

Red always stayed up late.

Bravely she reached out and turned the doorknob, letting herself inside.

He was sitting hunched over on the edge of the bed, his elbows propped on his knees, his head bowed, face hidden in his hands.

"Red?"

Startled, the man looked up.

Liz stared at him. His face was very pale. His eyes were swollen, as if he'd been weeping, but...his cheeks were dry.

How could someone cry without tears?

Unsure now, she shifted from foot to foot. Had Sam been telling the truth all along? Was Red really just ill?

"I...I heard... Well, Sam told me you weren't feeling good." She peered at him closely. "When I'm not feeling good, I hug Bunny. She makes me feel better. And sometimes I read." She held up Bunny and the book. "I thought you could borrow them. So you could feel better."

"Oh, *Lizzy,*" Red whispered brokenly.
And in that moment, she knew that he wasn't suffering from illness, but rather from agonizing sorrow that had lodged itself deep in his heart, fresh and bleeding. She recognized it in the hoarse tone of his voice, in the look his bloodshot eyes gave her, this young six-year-old girl, although she didn't have the words for it...because she also carried a similar, piercing wound, even though she couldn't quite remember how she had gotten it. But it was there still, that terrible grief she couldn't name or remember fully, seeping just beneath the surface.

With her heart in her eyes, she went to him, as like is drawn to like.

He had been searching desperately for an outlet for this blinding rage and excruciating emotional pain that overwhelmed him--an outlet he'd tried to find in hard liquor and many...worse...things over the past few days.

But as this little girl came to him, this sweet girl whose soul he had tried to keep pure from all the evils she had unwillingly witnessed in her life, he knew he had been looking for release in the wrong places.

His breath stank of alcohol. The blood of men—not all who were responsible for the murder of his family, but a few—was on his hands. He wasn't worthy to touch her. Hold her. Take comfort in her. But as her small arms went around his neck, he couldn't stop himself from hugging her tightly, pressing his cheek against her soft hair.

How could a girl so young understand?

*Because the soul is ageless. Infinitely wise, it can show itself even within the confines of humanity.* The thought drifted into his exhausted mind. He'd heard that somewhere before. When he had been traveling in the East. India, maybe.

They stayed like that for a time, unmoving. Not a word passed between them, but then again, no words were needed.

Red exhaled a shuddering breath, then forced himself to draw back from her. And suddenly his Lizzy was just a little girl again, gazing uncertainly up at him with worried eyes. He didn't have it in him to smile reassuringly at her, but his expression was gentle as he released her.

"Thank you for bringing me Bunny and the book."

Elizabeth gave him a hesitant smile. "I could read to you?" she offered. "Sam reads to me when I'm not feeling good."

She really should be in her own room, sleeping soundly. It was so late.

But...Red didn't want her to leave. He didn't want to face another night alone with his terrorizing dreams and the devastating grief that he knew would consume him.

Knowing it was incredibly selfish of him, he inclined his head. "I'd like that, Lizzy." Careful not to bump her, he rose slowly to his feet. "I'm going to brush my teeth." So he wouldn't smell like alcohol. "Take a really quick shower." To at least pretend as if his hands were clean of blood. But they never would be. "And get my pajamas on. Okay?"

She nodded and clambered up onto the bed, settling herself in her usual spot against the pillows as he went through his ablutions. When he came out of the bathroom, he half-expected her to be asleep—and was honestly surprised when she wasn't.
Selfishly, he was glad for it.

He grabbed another throw off the armchair. After tucking her more firmly under the heavy covers, he then made himself comfortable on top, using the blanket from the chair to cover his legs.

"You can hold Bunny," Elizabeth told him quietly as she nestled companionably against him, opening the book to Chapter One.

Red dutifully wrapped one arm around the stuffed rabbit, and then curled the other gently around her. She began to read, voice soft in the night. He kept his attention completely focused on the story, asking her comprehension questions more to keep his mind occupied than hers.

Eventually though, her words began to slur together during the first few paragraphs of Chapter Four...and soon after the third page of the chapter, the sound of her voice faded completely, book sliding from her fingers to drop to the blankets.

Red watched as her head slowly fell against his chest. She was sound asleep and he didn't have it in him to wake her or to even get up to put her in her own bed. He was so exhausted. So deeply bone-weary. But as he gazed down at Lizzy, the despair throbbing in his heart eased just a little.

The pain of his loss would never truly be gone. Like Elizabeth, he would carry this soul-wound for the rest of his life. But, for now, in this moment, the solace he found with her was enough to begin to soothe his ravaged heart.
Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

The year is 1991. Liz is six years old. Red is thirty-one years old.

As always, thank you for reading. Your feedback, comments, and kudos are life. :)

 
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Moonlight shone through Elizabeth's bedroom window, pouring through the thick glass like molten silver. It sheathed her small, upright frame in an otherworldly array, highlighting the fact that her chest heaved as she gulped down cold air as quickly and as quietly as she could to calm her frantic heartbeat.

She'd had another nightmare.

They didn't plague Liz very often. But when she did fall helplessly into their clutches, they were dreadful. Horrific...and so incredibly vivid it was like she actually was present in those hellish dreamscapes.

Try as she might, when she woke up she could never fully recall what they were about. But her body remembered. Sometimes she woke up sweating, as if she had been running really fast. Sometimes she woke up crying, a bloodcurdling scream threatening to tear itself ruthlessly out of her throat...her chest...her very soul. Sometimes she woke coughing and gasping into her pillow, believing that smoke was plugging her nose and filling her lungs with its terrible fumes.

Tonight, she woke with all those symptoms.

Liz rubbed her running nose vigorously, hoping to oust that acrid, phantasmal smell. She wiped the sticky beads of sweat from her brow and then the hot tears from her cheeks, trying to scrub away the bad, anxious feelings as she did so.

She used to tell Sam about these kinds of dreams. But he'd always been so worried about her when she confided in him. Every time she told him about her nightmares, he would get this funny, almost scared look on his face and ask her what they were about. When she said she couldn't remember, he tended to respond with a hug and a "It's probably for the best you don't remember, butterball."

But for days afterward, Liz would catch him watching over her with a troubled expression in his eyes. When she would look his way and sometimes ask rather testily what was wrong, he would quickly recover and hide his concern behind a quip or an excuse—but it was always too late. She could read him so well...she had seen his uneasiness.

About a year ago she had finally had enough, so she had stopped telling him. She had grown tired of that particular look on his face, of him babying her. She wasn't a baby! She was ten years old! Too old to be having nightmares. And certainly too old to wake up crying, like real babies did.

Sighing, she dried the last of her tears on Bunny's fuzzy body. "You won't tell on me, will you?" she asked her favorite stuffed animal softly.

Bunny gazed back at her, loyally silent, as always.

Liz smiled gratefully and kissed her on her battered nose. "Let's open the window a little, Bunny. I'm hot," she whispered, sliding out of bed.

The girl ghosted over to the huge window and tugged at the latch, grimacing. Even though it wasn’t snowing, it was so cold outside that it was stuck tight! Grunting determinedly, she gave one last heave.
"Ouch!" she hissed in pain, snatching her hand back.

The latch had given way but her finger had jammed into it, tearing through her skin. Scowling down at the droplets of blood appearing in a jagged line right below her nail, she stuck her finger defiantly in her mouth and sucked, eyes drawn to the snowy wonderland glowing in the moonlight below.

It was so pretty outside. It should've been like this on Christmas Eve. Instead she and Sam had been holed up inside the house, hiding from the howling snowstorm.

Liz had been so worried that Santa Claus wouldn't be able to find their house. She'd been so afraid he and his nine reindeer would get hurt. The blizzard had been terribly violent!

“How will Santa be able to drive his sleigh safely?” she had demanded anxiously of Sam. “How will the reindeer even be able to see?”

To help soothe her worries, Sam had poured her a mug of her favorite, rich hot chocolate garnished with a handful of tiny marshmallows. Once she’d had it cradled in her hands, he had then curled up with her on the couch to reread *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* for perhaps the tenth time this Christmas season.

“Santa will make it here safely, honey. Don't worry.” The man gently tapped a finger on the shining red nose of the reindeer gracefully soaring over the book’s front cover. “Remember, he has Rudolph to guide all of them—and he has a bit of magic of his own!”

Elizabeth hoped the weather would be better for Santa, Rudolph, and the other reindeer next year. Ideally, it should be exactly like it was tonight: shiningly clear without a cloud marring the sky.

Her gaze was traveling admiringly over the glittering front yard when suddenly her heart skipped a beat, eyes widening in delighted surprise. Then an elated smile spread across her lips, joy erasing all lingering stresses caused by her nightmare.

Red was here!

She'd recognize his car anywhere. Though how he drove something that wasn't a truck in this deep, powdery snow she had no idea—even if the car did have chains on the tires.

She hugged Bunny excitedly before placing her on the bed. Liz was wearing her flannel pajamas but she still paused in her mad dash to the door to put on her fuzzy red slippers.

As she raced down the stairs, she could smell coffee brewing in the kitchen. The living room was dark, but the Christmas tree was plugged in, lighting the way for her. As she flew past it, she took note of the brightly wrapped gifts and one rather large red box with...holes?...resting beneath its green boughs. Then she skidded to a halt just as she entered the kitchen so she wouldn't run headlong into Red.

Liz clasped her hands behind her back, rocking forward on her toes from the force of her stop. "Red! Hi!" she beamed breathlessly up at him.

"Don't you ever sleep?" Red teased, kneeling down so he could be on eye level with her. "Come here, sweetheart."

She threw herself into his arms, hugging him tightly. “I've missed you!” she exclaimed into his neck. “We were wondering if you were going to make it before New Year's. We kept the tree up just in case.”
"I'm glad you did!" he smiled, pulling back to meet her happy gaze. "It looks really beautiful. Did you hang all those ornaments yourself?"

Elizabeth nodded, dimpling up at him. "Sam even let me go up on the ladder this year and hang the ones at the very top!"

The tree was definitely an imaginative display of a ten-year-old's charming taste in decor. Red hid an affectionately amused grin against her brow, then kissed it for good measure. "You did a great job, Lizzy. I'd actually love to go sit out there and look at it with you. But let me grab some coffee first?"

She nodded and considerately dropped her arms.

"And while I'm at it," his eyes twinkled knowingly at her, "do you want me to make you some hot chocolate?"

"Yes please!" she grinned winningly at him.

"Well!" the man chuckled. "That settles that!" Right before he let her go, he suddenly paused, his sharp eyes noticing her scabbing finger. He gently caught hold of her hand and lightly held the cut finger between his thumb and forefinger. "How'd you do this, hmm?"

"Oh." She'd actually forgotten about that. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

He arched a brow at her expectantly.

She sighed, resigned. "I was trying to open my window," she explained. "The latch was stuck...so I forced it. And my finger got cut on it."

"Mmm." He searched her face for a moment but luckily didn't ask her why she was up so early in the morning. She was glad because she didn't want to tell him she'd woken up crying due to a nightmare. "Why don't you go get a bandaid from the bathroom cabinet and I'll meet you on the sofa."

"Okay."

Ten minutes later, she was curled companionably against Red on the couch, finger freshly bandaged and a mug of hot chocolate warming her hands. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He was gazing at the Christmas tree, but his eyes had a faraway look in them. She wondered what he was thinking of....work? His family?

Elizabeth looked pensively down at her drink, worrying her lower lip.

A couple years ago, she had been told why Red was suddenly away so much more often than he used to be.

For days on end she had been peppering Sam with questions about Red...well, maybe pestering Sam about Red was a more accurate description of her behavior....wondering where he was, why he didn't come around as much, had she done something wrong?, was he mad at her?, was he mad at Sam?, was he just with his family?....

Finally Sam had sat her down one evening and had relayed to her, as gently as possible, that Red's wife and daughter had both died in an accident, around the time Liz had been six years old. Losing them had made Red sad. Very sad. After they had passed away, he had gotten a new job, and this job took him traveling far and wide all over the world.
"Now that I've told you this, Elizabeth, you'll have to promise me that you'll never bring it up to him."

She had gazed up at Sam with wide eyes.

"Red doesn't like to talk about what happened to his family. Not ever. It hurts him inside. Do you understand, honey?"

She had understood. And she had promised Sam (she had even had crossed her heart) that she wouldn't talk about Red's family with him.

Even though she was young, she could see how every Christmas after was so difficult for him. There would be times when he wouldn't smile, when his eyes would gleam so sadly. She knew it was because he didn't have his own family to make holiday memories with anymore.

She hoped he realized that she and Sam could be his family.

Red and Liz both glanced suddenly towards the staircase as the sound of shower water rushing through the pipes echoed throughout the house. "I guess Sam is awake," she remarked.

"He probably heard you galloping around the house and figured he might as well get up," Red chuckled.

"I wouldn't say 'gallop' around him, Red," the girl chided.

“Oh?” The man looked over at her. “Why not?”

Liz took a nervous sip of hot chocolate. "Umm...he didn't tell you?"

“No...” The beginnings of a suspicious frown were crinkling his brow. “Tell me what?”

She winced. Why hadn't she just kept her big mouth shut?

"Lizzy?” His tone had that soft, growly note to it, warning her that she better tell him the truth.

"Okay, okay." She puffed out her cheeks, then let the air out in an apprehensive whoosh. "Well, you know how Sam likes to ride horses, and you know much I love horses. So he decided to take me riding. It was my first time. The horse I was riding, Peanut, well, he sort of...took off. We galloped!" Her eyes glistened dreamily. "It was like we were flying. It was the...coolest thing I've ever...like...." she paused, searching for the right word.

"Experienced?” Red offered helpfully.

She nodded pensively. Then she blinked, coming out of her reverie...and chanced a hesitant look in his direction. Seeing that he was waiting patiently for the rest of the story, withholding judgement, she took in a deep breath and continued, "But I fell off and broke my arm. It wasn't Peanut's fault, Red. I didn't hang on tight enough and I didn't make him stop and I fell."

"You broke your arm?" And no one told him? Of all the fucking—

She was watching him closely.

Squashing that train of thought so she wouldn't be able to read it in his face, he raised a brow again at her instead.

He was going to have to have a little chat with Sam later.
"Well, I guess I didn't," she amended. "The fall broke it."

Oh. Wonderful. She was at that age where she could play with semantics. "Which arm broke?" he managed to ask calmly, but he wasn't able to swallow the protective growl that slid traitorously into his tone.

Liz glanced at him warily. He was using that gravelly voice. She didn't want him fussing over her! She was a big girl now. Setting her mug down on the coffee table, she held out her left arm. "Right here," she pointed at the top, near the shoulder.

Red reached out and lightly fingered the area.

"It's all healed now," she informed him proudly.

"Mmm."

She'd been lucky she hadn't crushed her shoulder!

"Sam blames Peanut. But...it wasn’t his fault!" the girl repeated, her shining eyes beseeching him to believe her.

The man gentled his expression. "Let me guess...Sam won't let you back on Peanut."

"Peanut, or any horse," she confided sadly. "I really want to ride, Red."

Yes, he had really wanted her to ride too. Sam had told Red just how hard it was for her in school the older she got. Oh, Liz had some friends, but no one she was kindred spirits with. She was smart as a whip and did extremely well in her classes, which many kids found off-putting, like she was showing off all the time.

Elizabeth put on a brave face, but Sam could tell she was suffering quietly inside for lack of true companionship with boys and girls her age. Sam and Red had agreed that the local equestrian club would be a good place for her to meet new people and, at the same time, be around one of her favorite animals. Sam must have had a near heart-attack, seeing Lizzy tumble from the back of a runaway horse. Red could almost hear her bones crunching as they broke.

Yes, he had to admit that if he'd been in Sam's position, he probably would have banned her from keeping the company of horses as well!

"He just doesn't want you to get hurt, baby."

"I know," she huffed. "But I know now what I did wrong, and I won't do it again." Her voice was tinged with frustration. "How can I get any better if I can't practice? I have to do it to be good at it!"

*Touché, darling.*

"Almost all the kids at school ride. They talk about the trails they go on a lot together with their dogs and horses."

The wistfulness in her tone made his heart twist painfully in his chest. She needed this. It would be good for her. He had to put what was good for her first, before his admittedly selfish desire to keep her safe from any and all harm. As much as he knew he and Sam both wanted to, they couldn't keep her caged forever. She had to test her wings.

And horseback riding? While it wasn't the safest of activities, it certainly was what she needed.
Red set his coffee mug down on the table next to hers. "I'll tell you what," he whispered conspiratorially.

Her full attention was immediately fixed on him.

"You promise me that you'll follow whatever safety rules Sam will lay out for you regarding horses, and I'll convince him to let you ride."

"You will?" she asked excitedly.

"I will," he replied seriously. "But you have to promise me."

Her blue eyes shone. "I promise, Red."

"Good." He tweaked her nose affectionately. "Now, in the meantime, while you wait for me to boss Sam around...."

She giggled.

"....You see that big red box under the tree?"

"The one with the holes?"

"Mmm. I want you to go open it."

Liz bounced up from the couch and knelt down before the box. Carefully she lifted the lid, peeking inside—and gasped.

"I think he'll keep you busy until the snow thaws enough for you to ride," Red smiled as she turned around to face him.

In her arms she cradled a beautiful black and sable puppy. Her expression was one of incredulous wonderment. "He's mine, Red? He's really mine?"

"He's all yours, Lizzy."

Tears of happiness glittered in her eyes and she buried her face in the puppy's thick coat, sinking to her knees. "Hi there, puppy. Hi! You are so cute...look at you!"

The puppy licked her nose and cheeks with his soft, pink tongue, little tail wagging so hard his whole lower half trembled back and forth.

Red smiled tenderly down at them.

It had occurred to him over this past year that with all the time Lizzy was spending outdoors, away from Sam's vigilance, she needed a companion who would be a friend...and, once it grew up, could eventually protect her if something were to happen.

Sam had scoffed at Red's paranoia, but had agreed that the girl wouldn't be so lonely with a puppy to train and love. Sam had wanted to get one locally for her, but Red had stopped him. He'd been traveling through Austria at the time, pursuing a lead for a business opportunity. One quiet and calm afternoon, he'd happened upon a small farm situated just on the outskirts of the town he'd been passing through, overlooking acres of green where sheep grazed in carefree abandon. Sheepdogs had watched over the flock, but they had been unlike any sheepdogs he'd ever seen before.

Red rose from the couch and knelt beside her. "He comes all the way from Europe." Reaching out,
he ruffled the puppy's ears, grinning as he tried to nip at his fingers playfully. "He's a Sarplaninac. Usually dogs like him guard livestock."

"Like sheep?"

"Yes, but they've been known to guard cattle, goats, horses...even chickens!"

“But...” she looked up at him, brow creasing in confusion. “We don’t have any of those animals.”

“I know,” the man smiled. “Even though his parents and siblings guard animals, that won’t be what he will do. He is here especially for you, Lizzy.”

She gave him another beaming smile before she turned her gaze back down to the puppy wiggling happily in her lap. “How do you say his breed’s name again?”

“Sarplaninac.”

"Sarpleka..." she tried the foreign word on her tongue, wrinkling her nose as she mispronounced it.


"Sarplaninac," she repeated proudly, cuddling the puppy closer. "He's beautiful, Red. And so fluffy!"

“He is. And he’ll be a big boy when he's grown, Lizzy.”

“How big?”

“Very,” he told her gravely. “He’ll probably be about this tall when he’s all grown up,” he demonstrated by raising his hand impressively high off the ground.

The girl’s eyes were wide with awe. “I didn’t even know dogs could get that huge!”

“Since dogs like him usually have to protect their charges against big animals like wolves, coyotes, mountain lions...even bears...they need to be just as big to scare those animals away.”

“Yeah,” she agreed thoughtfully, looking down at the pup curiously snuffling her palms. “That makes sense.” Then a grin curved her lips. “Looking at him now, it’s hard to imagine that he’ll get so big though!”

“It’ll happen before you know it! You know how animals grow up faster than we do.”

“I’ll blink and he’ll suddenly be taller than me!” she giggled.

“Only when he stands on his hind legs,” Red grinned back.

Elizabeth cupped the puppy’s fluffy face in her palms and dropped a kiss on his perfectly black nose. “I think he really likes me.”

“With the way he’s licking you all over your cheeks like that? Of course he does!” As the man watched her cuddle the dog, his expression turned a little more pensive. “These dogs, Lizzy...they’re very loyal to their families. Besides being excellent guards, they also make wonderful friends. I think this little guy will be both to you.”

Her smile was knowing, and suddenly she was older than her years. "Because you can't be here with me all the time."
Red gazed down at her, admittedly taken aback—but then again, this wasn't the first time she had outwardly shown her keen insightfulness into how people thought and behaved. "Is that why you think I brought him home for you?"

"Isn't it?" she asked softly, running her fingers through the puppy's downy fur. "I know Sam's been telling you things."

His eyes searched hers intently.

"I know he's told you that I don't have many friends." She swallowed around the sudden shiver in her throat and looked quickly away, embarrassed.

Anger flared, and his eyes flashed with it. She was vulnerable...hurt...and besides giving her this puppy, there was nothing else he could really do about it. "Anyone who doesn't want to be friends with you is a little piece of—"

Elizabeth’s wide eyes snapped to his, half in shock, half in curiosity for what his colorful expletive would be.

He clenched his jaw shut, forcibly reining in his temper. "....Isn't thinking clearly," he finished with a quiet snarl.

She snorted self-deprecatingly, a very adult response he wasn't expecting. But the way she bowed her head and hid her face behind her long hair was a physical reminder that even though she sometimes showed understanding beyond her age, she was still growing up...she was still a child who not only needed guidance, but reassurance as well.

"I mean it," he told her firmly. "Look at me, Lizzy." His tone brooked no argument.

Rubbing the puppy's ears, she reluctantly met his eyes.

"You are a smart girl. Sweet. Clever. Funny—witty, even," he listed her admirable attributes without hesitation. "You are loyal. Caring. Loving. And you are strong."

Very strong. Red had a feeling that as she grew up, the inner strength glowing inside her would mature into fiery resilience. She'd be a formidable woman, just like her mother had been.

"You," he put a soft emphasis on the word, "are worthy of friendship."

She smiled tentatively at him. "We're friends right, Red?"

"Yes, Elizabeth." He reached out to affectionately tuck a lock of sleep-tangled hair back behind her ear. "We're friends. And even though I'm away on business a lot, I will always come back to you. It's what friends do."

She favored him with a wider, more assured smile before looking back down at the now sleepy puppy in her lap. They sat there on the floor in comfortable silence for a while, each gently stroking the puppy's coat.

"Red?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart."
To Be Continued...

The year is 1995. Liz is ten years old. Red is thirty-five years old.

As always, thank you for reading. Your feedback, comments, and kudos are life. :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"I don't know, Lizzy...."

"What's not to know?" Elizabeth asked with an impudent laugh. "You just walk up to him and mount. If he tries to bite you just smack him on the nose. It's like kicking a man in the balls--"

"Language," Red rumbled warningly.

She rolled her eyes at his tone. "--but horsey-style."

_Horsey-style._ He smirked in spite of himself. "He looks pretty grumpy," the man observed after a moment, warily eyeing the stallion that restlessly pawed the dirt and snorted deeply, wide nostrils flaring.

"That's why we are taking him out," the fourteen-year-old girl explained with a dry patience that made him slant an appraising glance at her. "The stud's in a mood and he needs to run it off."

"I haven't ridden a horse in _years,_" Red grumbled, cautiously edging closer to the handsome dapple gray as he wondered--again--how in the Hell he got roped into agreeing to go out on this particular....animal.

"I thought you liked horses, Red."

"I prefer to _like_ them from a safe and respectful distance," he rejoined, scowling darkly at the massive stallion that seemed to be scowling suspiciously back at him, pointed ears laying flat against his head. "Usually from the stands at the racetrack."

"Watching isn't experiencing. Aren't you always telling me to experience life to the fullest?" Elizabeth's eyes sparkled mischievously at him. "You should follow your own advice!"

He turned his hard scowl on her. "I don't tell you things like that so you can throw them back in my face when you want me to do something for you," he grumped.

She giggled impishly. "Quit stalling and mount already. I want to get going!"

He bared his teeth at the teenager in what he hoped passed for a smile, mentally steeled himself, and then strode with determination toward the stud.

"All right, old son," he murmured as he came closer, holding out his hands placatingly. "Now you behave while I--" _shit!_" he snarled in alarm as the horse swiftly whipped his head around to take a nice, big chunk out of his arm.

"Knock it off!" he heard Liz growl fiercely, her palm immediately connecting solidly with the stud's nose with a purposeful _thump_ before those teeth could close on his unprotected flesh.

The horse immediately jerked back, snorting and shaking his heavy mane in shocked bewilderment.

"Hurry up and mount while he's distracted." Elizabeth thrust the leather reins into Red's hands before whirling to mount her own horse, Conny.
Conny was a spirited yet sweet little gelding with a heart as pure as his snowy white coat—nothing at all like the tempestuous demon he now sat astride.

Liz whistled sharply. "Come, Bronn!" Instantly her huge Sarplaninac was with them, ears pricked, keen, golden eyes shining with anticipation for the trail ride ahead of them.

Red honestly couldn't be more pleased with that dog of hers. There was such intelligence in that liquid gaze and a protective vigilance in his stance while he was with Lizzy. Bronn had even been wary of him this visit—at first. But once Elizabeth had laughingly reintroduced them to each other, Bronn had reaccepted Red as part of his pack. The two of them, man and dog, had been through this same initiation several times before while Bronn had matured from puppy to adult. Red would go through it a hundred more times if it meant Bronn would remain the wary guardian he was to the girl.

They rode out into the open field at a brisk walk, leaving the big house and paddock behind. Bronn paced easily beside Conny.

"You need to keep your heels down," Lizzy told Red, critically eyeing his form. "And ease up on the reins. He's prancing beneath you like that because you're so tense."

Gritting his teeth, the man did as she bade, forcing himself to relax, muscle by muscle. The last that loosened were his fingers on the reins. "Better?" Even as he spoke the word he felt the stallion ease into a smoother gait.

"See?" she grinned proudly at him. "I know my horses."

"That you do."

Technically the stud was Sam's, but he wouldn't quibble. Actually, she might as well claim more than a bit of ownership since she could handle this devilish creature just as well as Sam could.

Which was a good thing, since Sam was going through chemo treatments and couldn't ride or take care of his own horse right now.

Red glanced surreptitiously over at Elizabeth. She'd had to grow up far sooner than he would've liked over this last year. She took care of Sam as much as he took care of her. And with Red's steady supply of money funneling their way, Sam was able to get all the treatment and medicine he needed.

But money couldn't solve all problems.

Elizabeth hid it well enough most of the time, but Red could sense the fear within her—that horrible, gnawing terror of possibly losing her adoptive father to cancer. Sam was her rock, the one steady figure in her life she could depend on who was always there by her side...unlike him.

Guilt, heart-wrenchingly familiar and certainly unwanted, washed over Red. Oh, he came to Nebraska when he could, called when he could. Supported them both financially, as he could. But Lizzy didn't depend on him the same way she relied on Sam.

Red wasn't her father, nor had she ever even considered him as such. That honored title, though unspoken, belonged only to Sam. She needed him like a daughter needs a father. She loved him. After all she'd been through in her earlier years, losing him was almost unthinkable. It would be devastating.

*Keep fighting it, Sam,* Red thought emphatically. *Keep fighting it. For her sake. She needs you still.*

The stud suddenly tossed his head and broke into a frisky trot, the abrupt, jarring movement jolting...
him back into the present moment. Feeling himself slipping to the side, he clumsily grasped the saddle horn while twining the reins more firmly around his fingers, stifling a long string of colorful curses.

Trying desperately to hide her amused grin and failing miserably, Elizabeth clucked at Conny and was soon trotting beside him. "Don't feel bad, Red," she tried to soothe his smarting ego. "He'll even take advantage of Sam if he isn't paying attention."

The man righted himself with a painful grimace, pulling on the reins waringly. The stallion's gray ears flicked back in response to the nonverbal threat and Red could swear that he picked up his glossy hooves even more.

The fucking horse was laughing at him!

"Your seat was good before he got tricky," Elizabeth was saying. "But see, it's coming back to you. Riding, I mean. It's like riding a bike. Doesn't matter how long you go without doing it...your body and mind remember what to do when you start again."

Red favored her with another, sharp glance. She was looking at him earnestly, and he suddenly realized that she was worried he wasn't enjoying himself. Well, he wasn't sure he relished being astride this particularly sly animal, but he certainly enjoyed being in her company...with the late afternoon sky changing colors above them, stretching as far as the eye could see in every direction, view unobscured by the buildings of civilization he was so used to.

He offered her a reassuring smile. "Don't look so concerned, Lizzy. I'm glad to be out here with you."

"Sometimes I feel guilty even leaving the house," she confided softly. "I know I need to take care of our horses, but..." her voice trailed off and she shook her head. The tightness around her eyes and mouth betrayed her inner thoughts. Maybe the stud was in a mood and did need to run, but Red was certain that Elizabeth needed to let loose just as much.

"Lizzy."

Her eyes darted to his.

His expression was one of understanding. "Ready to pick up the pace?"

"Are you sure you're ready? We're barely ten minutes from home!"

Flashing a grin at her, Red boldly kicked his mount into a gallop.

Elizabeth gave a startled but delighted whoop and followed suit. He tried to allow she and Conny to lead them, but the stud, naturally competitive of course, wasn't too thrilled with that arrangement. Affronted, the fiery horse fought for his head.

"Let him have it!" she cried over the loud thrumming of hooves as she gave her own horse more rein.

They streaked across the field together, side by side, grass and dirt flying out from beneath their horses. Red leaned over the stud's neck, fingers wrapped tightly around the reins and digging into the thick mane to make doubly sure he wouldn't fall off and break his head.

Adrenaline coursed hotly through his veins. His heart pounded with it. What an incredible rush!
Before he knew it, he let out a wild yell full of the thrill of being alive. Lizzy trilled back to him with a silvery laugh as they charged up a hill, heading straight toward the tree line.

As they came closer to the forest, Red did allow Conny to move ahead of the stallion, and their pace finally slowed to a lope as they entered the grove. It was obvious to him that Elizabeth had come through here plenty of times before. The trail wasn't marked but she clearly knew it by heart.

As they approached their destination, they slowed to a trot and finally to a walk. Bronn had caught up to them, gait as spry as if he'd just left the house. It certainly hadn't taken him long to reach them. Maybe he had more wolf in his bloodline than Red had thought.

Lizzy dismounted gracefully and lead Conny to the babbling creek so he could drink. Red groaned as he followed her example--but his dismount wasn't nearly as smooth as hers had been.

Nothing like riding a horse to make a man feel old before his time!

His joints creaked as he walked stiffly over to join her. He watched the stud warily as he bent his head to drink, but no teeth came chomping in his direction.

Well, good. Maybe the snarly mood he'd been in had been driven out of him by the run after all.

Lizzy was still obviously basking in the afterglow of their wildly carefree gallop across the field. Her blue eyes shone happily as she turned to look at him. "That was fun, wasn't it?" she asked breathlessly. Her dark hair was a tangled, windswept mess around her face. He resisted the desire to comb it back with his fingers, like he had done when she'd been a little girl.

"Mmm. Like flying."

She grinned at him, remembering when she had first shared that observation with him. "No broken bones this time though!"

"Good thing! How on Earth would I explain that to Sam?"

"You wouldn't have to explain anything to him. I would," she grimaced, hobbling Conny and the stallion. They finished taking care of their mounts then Elizabeth lead him over to a clear spring.

Stripping her boots and socks off, she stuck her bare feet in the cool water, wriggling her toes in pleasure. Bronn took his usual spot on her left side, lying down. She stroked his head, gazing admiringly out across the water. "I found this place a few months back," she told Red as he eased down to join her on the large slab of rock. "It's technically on our property so no one else can come back here."

The man looked around, admiring the beauty of the arching trees, the long grass and water reeds, the jade-colored moss that carpeted the ground up to the pond's edge. "It's an idyllic spot."

"I come here sometimes to do homework. Read. Be by myself." This last was a whisper.

Ah. She was back on that, was she? "Lizzy...."

She shifted uneasily.

"Look at me, sweetheart."

Biting her lip, she met his eyes reluctantly.

"It's okay to want to be alone," he told her gently. "Away from the house for a while. It doesn't mean
that you don't love Sam."

"I just feel so guilty, Red."

"You shouldn't. Everyone deserves time to themselves." His expression softened. "You know what
Sam told me?"

Elizabeth shook her head.

"He told me you're going above and beyond what he expects of you. You know that's high praise,
coming from him."

"He really said that?" she asked with a watery smile.

Red nodded gravely.

Looking away, the girl raised one foot out of the water, watching the droplets trickle down her heel
to the pond. Then she dipped it back into the water, swirling it slowly around, her expression gravely
meditative. "I love him, Red. I love him so much. What will I do if he--if he--" her voice broke and
she swallowed thickly, unable to finish the thought.

God, how he wished he could take away her fear. He itched to draw her close, to soothe away her
dread, but he held himself back from giving in to the impulse, allowing her the time she needed to
speak. She wasn't a little girl anymore. It was essential for her to give voice to her fears, to articulate
what she felt. It was important for him to listen and then give her the words she needed to find her
strength again to continue forward.

"If he dies," she finally whispered shakily, "I'll be all alone."

"No." Red's tone was sharp, adamant. "You wouldn't be alone. I wouldn't leave you alone."

"I'd live with you?"

Careful, old son. Careful. "I wouldn't leave you alone here in Nebraska, Elizabeth. You'd be in my
care."

"But I wouldn't live with you."

He couldn't lie to her. "Lizzy...."

"Why not?" Her voice had risen. "Why, Red? Is it because you travel all the time?" she demanded,
hurt skittering across her face. "That's what Sam told me. That you travel all the time for work."

"I do travel quite a bit, yes."

More often than not, he was almost always constantly on the move. She could never know the real
reason why. And he selfishly wouldn't dare let himself think about what would become of their
relationship when she was an adult and would start searching for answers herself.

"It would be wrong of me to allow you to roam around the world without first completing your
education and growing--" He snapped his mouth shut--this was always the wrong tact to take with
her and he knew better--but it was too late.

She glared at him, tears glittering in her eyes. "I'm not a child!"

"No, but you are not yet a woman," he replied firmly, finishing his original thought with different
words. He watched as the angry tears trailed down her cheeks, and he gentled his tone. "Just because you wouldn't travel with me doesn't mean I wouldn't see you. I would never abandon you, Lizzy."

Sniffling, she dashed her tears away.

He'd give anything to be able to reassure her that Sam would pull through. But he wouldn't lie to her, and she was clever enough to understand the distinction between white lies and truth. He would give her the facts.

"Sam is strong. Determined. He has a will of iron. You've seen it yourself all these years. He may beat this illness yet."

They were silent for a while, looking out across the pond. A family of ducks ventured out from the sheltering reeds into the middle, six little ducklings trustingly following their mother.

"Sam does say that this is just a pothole in the road," Elizabeth said quietly. "That we're rolling into it now. That the tire is squealing as it's trying to move up and out."

Red smiled, recognizing the metaphor.

"He says it may be rough on the tire but eventually we'll make it out."

"You need to believe it, Lizzy. Reaffirm it to yourself every day that he will make it through. Words and thoughts have a lot of power. More than people realize. Use them."

"Is that true, Red?"

"Oh yes," he replied softly, eyes gleaming almost predatorily in the shadows of the trees. "It's true."

Elizabeth watched him intently, not used to seeing that particular expression on his face. In fact, she was certain she had never seen it before. If it weren't Red sitting beside her but a different man entirely, she would've jumped up, mounted Conny as fast as she could, and would have galloped for home. The look was fierce, feral. And it made her wonder about him in a way she never had before...about the kind of man he was when he wasn't with her.

As if he could feel her eyes on him, he turned his head to gaze down at her. She studied him unabashedly, from his light hair, which he now cut short to his scalp, to the hard, familiar lines of his face, to his green eyes that still held that trace of savagery. But it wasn't a malicious savagery, she realized as she searched his face. No. It reminded her of how Bronn's eyes could get when they explored the unfamiliar parts of the woods together. It was ferocity born from the need to protect his own.

She wanted to ask him what he had done to be so certain. She had a feeling it had something to do with his mysterious past...with the tragic accident his family had died from. Even though she had promised Sam all those years ago that she would never bring up Red's family with him, the question was right there, hesitating just on the tip of her tongue.

A hint of a sad smile ghosted at the corners of Red's mouth and he tilted his head just slightly enough for her to recognize that he was shaking his head, deterring her from asking that question.

"Trust me," he murmured, tucking a lock of windblown hair behind her ear--a familiar gesture of affection. "Affirm to yourself every day what you need to have happen. For yourself. For Sam. And I'll continue do the same."
Chapter End Notes

To Be Continued...

The year is 1999. Lizzy is fourteen years old. Red is thirty-nine years old.

Thank you for reading :) I appreciate your comments and kudos so much!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission.
Thank you!
"Come on....yes. That feels so good...." the woman beneath Red purred, long nails trailing up his back, making him shiver in pleasure.

Growling softly, he released her breast and caught her lips, tongue dancing with hers while he worked at the rest of the buttons on her blouse, peeling the silk from her body. Everything was so smooth...so soft.... Her fingers traced fire along his skin...her teeth caught and sucked on his lower lip...his hands grasped her, pulling her closer....

Suddenly his ears caught the sound of buzzing.

"Hey, Red," she murmured huskily in between fervent kisses, "your phone's going off."

"Like I give a fuck," he growled, parting her legs with his knee, pressing himself against her.

"Red," she chided. "At least turn it off or something...."

Whoever it was had the worst Goddamned timing. Groaning, he propped himself up to reach for it on the nightstand, intent on putting the fucking thing in silent mode so he could be left in peace.

"I thought your conference call wasn't for another couple hours or so," she remarked as he impatiently snatched the offending piece of technology up in his fist.

"It's not." Red looked down at the flashing screen, immediately recognizing the number.

Instantaneously it felt like a bucket of ice-cold water had been thrown over his throbbing body.

As the calling number continued to blink insistently at him, his rational mind began clawing its way through the misty haze of lust into undiluted clarity. And yet he hesitated for a moment, wavering with indecision on whether or not he should answer.

Seeing his uncertain expression, the woman arched her body tantalizingly beneath him, fingers teasing the skin exposed by the V of his collared shirt, half unbuttoned.

He distractedly caught her slender hands with his free one, kissing her fingers in a show of regret while he gazed at the phone. Making up his mind, he tore his eyes away from the screen and pressed his lips against hers apologetically.

"Apparently the conference call is happening earlier than I thought. I better not ignore it. Bad for business." He pushed himself off of her and stood, quickly resettling his pants on his hips and zipping them carefully up. "I'll be back in a while. Why don't you take advantage of the suite's bathroom. It's like a fucking spa in there."

Her throaty laugh followed him out the door just as he picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line before he heard the familiar, young voice. "Hi, Red."
Red closed the study's heavy door firmly behind him, locking it. "Hi, Lizzy. Are you all right?"

Another slight pause. "Yes.... Why?" He could almost see her perplexed expression at his serious tone.

"I just thought something might be wrong. We weren't supposed to talk for another couple hours."

"Is it such a bad thing that I called you early?" she huffed testily. "I mean, are you busy or something?"

As a matter of fact... His eyes darted to the closed door. "Actually, Lizzy--"

"Is there a woman with you, Red?"

He sat down in the plush armchair, the burnished leather giving way to his weight as he settled himself comfortably. "I'm not busy, sweetheart," he avoided her rather pointed question smoothly. "You're obviously calling me early for a reason. But I think that can wait just long enough for me to say this: happy sweet sixteen, Elizabeth."

He could hear the smile in her voice. "Thank you."

"Do you feel any older?" he smiled back.

"You ask me that every year!" she snorted. "No, I don't." Then she quickly changed her mind. "Well.... Actually...kind of." Her voice lowered with reticence. "Maybe."

Red could hear crackling on the other end of the line. "You're nervous."

"How.... Why do you say that?"

"Because you're twisting the phone cord. You only do that when you have something to say but you're not sure how to say it."

The crackling stopped abruptly.

"See?" he chuckled, crossing one leg over the other. "What's going on, honey?"

"I've...I've been asked out."

A brow rose.

"On a date," she added, as if the statement needed clarifying. "Tonight."

"Oh?" Red tried to keep his voice neutral but didn't quite succeed.

"Yeah."

"And who's the--" boy "--young man?"

"Derek. From school."

That little prick asked his Lizzy out? He swallowed a snarl. "Derek?"

"Yeah. Derek. Why the tone, Red?" she asked defensively.

He wouldn't insult her intelligence by lying to her. "Sam has...mentioned him to me, Lizzy."
Almost immediately he sensed a change on the other end of line. He could just see her there in his mind's eye, sitting cross-legged on her bed with her back against the headboard, phone's housing cradled on her thighs, fingers clutching the handset tightly as she began to simmer with temper. He knew her well, his Lizzy.

"What did he say?" she gritted.

“That he's a senior,” came the even reply. “That he's good-looking and knows how to be charming when he wants to be. That he's turned that charm onto you. That you've been hanging around him and his friends a lot lately. That Derek isn't motivated in school or in work and it gets him into trouble. And that he is very motivated in pursuing other...interests."

"Meaning he sleeps around."

Red's mouth hung open slightly at her bluntness.

"Right?" she demanded heatedly.

"Yes," he growled tightly. "And doesn't he?"

Her heard her exhale angrily. "He did in the past. Before we started hanging out."

Oh, of course. Red rolled his eyes in exasperation, but bit his tongue before the sarcastic remark could escape.

"He isn't like he used to be. He's trying harder in school. And he hasn't slept with anyone since...well, since we started hanging out."

"Sweetheart, people don't change their ways just like that." He snapped his fingers loudly together. "It takes seven years to make a habit and seven years to break one. He may have stopped temporarily but it's just to finagle his way into your—pants—good graces."

Liz was seething. "Your pep talk sucks, Red."

"And you're being naive," he shot back. She's only sixteen, he chidingly reminded himself. She's still young, old son.

Keeping a firm hold on that thought, the man reined in his temper a bit. "Lizzy," he sighed, "you're sharper than this. Boys like him--Hell, most boys that age--have one thing on their minds and most will do anything to get it."

"And I guess you'd know, huh?" she asked caustically.

"Yes, I guess I would," he returned in a wry drawl.

Her silence was uncertain. He had agreed with her without any qualms whatsoever and she didn't know how to respond to his blatant honesty. Crackling sounded on the other end...she was twisting the cord again.

He allowed the uncomfortable stillness to expand just a little longer before he broke it, murmuring, "I just don't want you to get hurt."

The noise ceased. "I'm not a baby, Red,” the girl muttered irritably. “You don't always have to be so over-protective all the time. I'm not even a kid anymore. I'm sixteen now," she declared proudly. "Old enough to go on dates. Even old enough to have—" she immediately clamped her mouth shut.
with an audible *snap* before that word could tumble thoughtlessly from her lips.

"Being old enough to have sex doesn't automatically make any teenager a man or a woman, Lizzy."

"I didn't say I was going to sleep with him!" she hissed, affronted.

"No," he conceded patiently. "You didn't. But I know it's on your mind." She began to protest but he spoke over her, "Sam said you haven't really talked to him about sex. He said he's tried to talk to you but you only listen so much and then bolt every time. He thinks you're probably embarrassed.” His tone softened with understanding. “And I don't blame you, sweetheart.” A droll smile curved his mouth as he confided, “Lord knows I didn't talk to my mother about it.”

That elicited an amused snort from her, probably in spite of herself. Good. She was angry but not so much so to stop listening. He was extremely grateful she felt comfortable enough with him to even come talk to him about all this, for he was fairly certain Sam didn't know she was going on a date tonight.

"I'm not going to sleep with him, Red." She was quietly indignant now, but her tone was so fierce he hoped to God that she was telling the truth. The very last thing he wanted was to envision Lizzy allowing that *boy* such an intimacy.

She was too fucking young, anyhow. Maybe not in body anymore. But she was in heart...in spirit.

Red cleared his throat. "Going back to your earlier point, my caring about your well-being and safety isn't being 'over-protective.'"

"You're acting how I figured Sam would act. I didn't call *you* to hear what *he* would say," she told him, frustrated.

"If I told you what you wanted to hear, how is that being a good friend to you? It wouldn't exactly be fair to me or to you, Lizzy. I wouldn't be giving you the respect you deserve."

That gave her some pause. Then, "I was hoping you'd at least be happy for me, Red."

"Happy that you're going out with a guy of questionable character?" he asked dryly.

"You're not giving him a chance," she snapped. "You weren't exactly an angel when you were his age. You told me. But that didn't make you a bad person." She hesitated, then steadily went on, "In fact, you're the best person I know. Besides Sam."

He closed his eyes, feeling like his heart was being wrenched around in his chest. Christ. If she knew everything about him...who he *really* was...all the terrible things he had done in the past...the role he had played in the earliest years of her life....he didn't think she could forgive him.

And then his damnation would become all too real.

But she *wouldn't* know. Not if he could fucking help it.

"Why don't you like it when I say stuff like that to you?" she asked quietly when the silence between them stretched too long.

"Why are you really calling me, Lizzy?" he returned just as softly.

"I guess I just wanted your blessing."

Her frank honesty surprised him.
"And I know now I'm not really going to get it." He could feel her shrug, feigning nonchalance. 
"And that's fine. It's fine."

"Elizabeth...."

"I won't do anything stupid tonight, I promise." He could hear the slight tremor in her voice and knew she was unhappy.

*He'd hurt her.* What a fucking prick he was to make her feel this way--and on her birthday, no less. But Red couldn't change how he felt about her going out with that boy, and he wouldn't lie to her to make her feel better. He'd be damned before he made a mockery of them both.

"Lizzy."

"....Red."

An olive branch. "I'll be seeing you in a few days, all right?" He made it a question, giving her the freedom to tell him to stay away for a time...if she wanted him to.

The brief silence was weighty. Then, "Make sure you knock at the front door. Bronn almost took you out last time you tried to let yourself in through the back."

He smiled, some of the tightness in his chest easing. "He's a good dog, that one. He knows how to protect his own."

"Red?"

"What is it, sweetheart?"

Brief crackling on the other end. Then, "I'll see you in a few days."

"I'll see you in a few days."
Chapter End Notes

The year is 2001. Lizzy is sixteen years old. Red is forty-one years old.

Thank you for reading! Love and appreciate your comments and kudos, as always :) 

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Elizabeth stared down at the phone cradled in her lap. She should have just said it. The words had been right there on the tip of her tongue as she'd twined the cord around her fingers. But she had blurted out "I'll see you in a few days" instead. Well, okay, maybe she hadn't blurted the words--she had handled herself with more dignity than that. But she might as well have with how quickly her confused and hurt feelings deterred her mouth from saying the phrase "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you" was what they always said to one another as Red was leaving Nebraska to return to work, or right before they ended their conversations over the phone. They had been saying it to each other for as long as she could remember.

Liz had actually asked him recently who had started that tradition. It had been a couple months ago. They'd been sitting side by side at Terabithia--that's what she called her secret grove with the pond...she'd borrowed the name from a book that had been one of her favorites growing up--their bare feet dangling in the cool water. Chuckling, he had recounted the time when she had been six years old and had thrown a fit when he had tried to hug her goodbye.

"You were so upset I was leaving that you threw one of the most spectacular temper tantrums I have ever seen in my life!" he had teased her. "And then before I could do or say anything you flew out of the house like a bat out of Hell and hid up in the loft."

"I didn't!"

"You did! And you wouldn't come down so I had to climb up there after you. Lizzy, I crawled around in the straw wearing a fifteen hundred dollar suit!" he had moaned dramatically. "Not to mention the fact that I scuffed my very expensive French shoes on the ladder...."

She had laughed, flushing in both embarrassment and amusement. "I bet you were quite a sight!"

"Oh I was. But you were too, with your scabby knees and dirt smudged all over your face. And your hair looked like a bird's nest with all that straw tangled in the strands." Then his laughing eyes had roved affectionately over her. "You know, nothing's really changed all that much. You still have smudges," his thumb had briefly rubbed at her cheek, removing a spot of dirt, "and stuff in your hair," his fingers had pulled a leaf and some dandelion fluff from her ponytail.

Liz had wrinkled her nose at him, trying to ignore the little flip her tummy had done at his touch. "I think I kind of remember this now." She'd waved a hand. "Vaguely."

"Mmm." He had rubbed the dandelion seeds gently between his fingers before blowing on them. The breeze had carried them out across the water. "You wouldn't talk to me or even look at me so I waited you out."

"You know, I actually do remember doing that!" she had grinned.

"Mnhmm. I waited a while, you know. Stubborn girl."

"Who me?" she had asked, widening her eyes in feigned innocence.

"Yes, you," he'd snorted, tapping the tip of her nose with a finger.
She had bitten her lip, looking down at their lazily splashing feet and the tiny fish that had come over to brush curiously against their toes.

"But eventually you looked at me and I got you talking to me again."

"Yeah. And you told me you'd come back."

"Mmm. Then I made a solemn promise that you wouldn't get in trouble with Sam for losing your temper." His smile had been warm as their eyes had met. "That's when you said it."

And that was the moment, there at Terabithia, when she had realized that she liked him.

Liz frowned down at her phone.

The realization had struck her as sort of weird at first because she knew just how old Red was. But the thing was, he didn't seem old, like how Sam was old, or how her teachers at school were old. Red was always so...energetic.

And the more she had thought about it, trying to make sense of it, the more she realized why. He had a deep appreciation and zest for life, embracing it passionately without hesitation and--seemingly--without fear. Curiosity spurred him on to keep learning and trying new things so he was a man of many talents and hobbies. He was very well-read and an excellent storyteller with an inherent flair for comedy and the dramatic. He had gained wisdom from living his life out in the busy world...and from experiencing firsthand rapturous joy and heartbreaking pain and loss. He understood people, how they thought, and why they behaved the way they did. He had a sense of humor, ranging from dark to light, snarky to witty. He could be gentle and kind, but he also had a temper that could burn slowly or rage like a wildfire. All those things were mixed up inside him, making him more than an age.

To Elizabeth, he was just Red.

No matter what they were doing, whether they were bumming around the house or yard chatting, whether they were walking Bronn or riding, whether he was helping her with her homework...just being in his company made her feel happy, as it had ever since she'd been a little girl. Even when he was being downright arrogant or condescending, and she was irritated or honestly angry with him, she found that despite it all she still wanted to hang around him.

It was quite the opposite with her adoptive father. Whenever she was irritated or furious with Sam, usually a slamming door somewhere in the house followed their argument and she got as far away from him as possible.

Which reminded her....

"Shit," she muttered.

She should probably tell him about Derek asking her out, otherwise there was going to be an extremely awkward moment at the front door in a couple hours.

And she'd be screwed if Sam heard about the date from Red first rather than from her.

Sighing, Liz set the phone on her nightstand and stood up. If only it were as easy to set her regret aside! She should've said the words. It felt strange that she hadn't.

*Whatever, Liz. Forget it. They're just words. Focus on the night ahead.*
Derek was taking her out for dinner and a movie. It was probably the most cliche date in the history of the modern world, but it was still a date. Her first one.

What the Hell was she going to wear?

Chewing on her lower lip, she opened her closet and stared at all the jeans and tops hanging there. Most of her clothes were casual. But lately she'd been using her allowance to buy fancier stuff...blouses that were cut a little lower than the basic tee...bras and underwear that actually had lace woven in to them...jeans that were different colors besides varying shades of blue--and a size smaller so they'd hug her body a bit more.

Peeling off her shirt, she threw it in the laundry basket and stood in front of the full length mirror to look critically at herself. Athletic build, she supposed. Runner's legs. Flat tummy. Small breasts. Skinny arms. Pointed chin. Sharp cheekbones. Long, unruly dark hair. She guessed her nose was cute. That's what Derek told her, anyway. And she did like her blue eyes.

Not a little girl anymore, but as Red had so bluntly pointed out, not yet a woman either.

Liz glared at her reflection, a wave of anger crashing over her, stealing away her regret. She was mad at him still. That was the main reason why she hadn't kept with the traditional sign off. Despite forgiving him--kind of--she was angry with him for insisting on treating her like a child, for not approving of Derek, for having a woman in his hotel room.

She wasn't an idiot. She'd heard that very feminine chuckle in the background before Red had probably gone into another room. And then he had completely ignored her question, like she was too young to handle the fact that he was hooking up with someone. And then to freaking lecture her about sex when he was probably with that woman right now and....

Snarling quietly to herself, she turned away from the mirror and grabbed her newest black bra. After she hooked it into place, she tugged the black blouse with the capped ruffle sleeves off the hanger and slipped it on over her head. The V came further down her chest than her other shirts, and it clung to her figure--or lack thereof--like a second skin. Sam wouldn't approve. It showed a lot of pale, milky skin.

She'd have to wear a jacket until she got to the movies.

Liz angrily kicked off her shorts and tugged on her new black denims. God, she looked like she was going to a funeral. Was it too much black?

She should break it up with a belt.

Kneeling down, she dug around in the lowest dresser drawer until her fingers brushed against what she was looking for. Pulling the belt carefully out of the disorganized mess, she gazed down at it.

It was a vintage piece but the brown leather had been polished until it shone, the huge, genuine silver buckle gleamed in the lamplight, and the rearing horse that had been etched into it looked so real she could almost hear it neigh. It was a beautiful piece of art. Red had given it to her a couple years ago for her birthday. She didn't really want to wear something he'd given her right now but it was the fanciest, most expensive belt she owned.

With narrowed eyes she threaded it through the loops on her jeans and then defiantly tightened it until it emphasized her small waist the way she wanted it to.

Liz braced her hands against her hips and studied herself in the mirror. Not bad.
She needed to do her makeup.

Since she didn't have a mother to teach her—it was second nature now for Liz to ignore the sharp, twisting pain within her heart whenever she thought of her long-deceased mother—she'd had to go off of what she had seen in movies and in the girl's locker room at school to figure out how to do her own makeup. Observation was an adequate teacher. Certainly not the ideal—not even close—but at least it got the job done.

Liz dusted her face and lids with various fresh and dusky colors, then finished all her efforts off with a stroke of mascara for each set of lashes. Brushing her hair, she attempted to braid it back...then stopped. No. She'd leave it down to frame her face and shoulders. It was prettier that way.

And she wanted to be pretty tonight. She wanted to experience that particular masculine attention girls got on dates, and she certainly wasn't going to get it from the person she wanted it from. That would be like a serious felony or something. Besides, he'd never see her that way anyway. He'd made that perfectly clear over the phone this evening.

Liz's brow furrowed. If Derek, funny, charming, "bad-boy" Derek, was to be the one to give her the kind of attention she wanted so much, then so be it. If tonight went well—and she had a feeling it would—then she would continue to go out with him.

If she did that, then maybe Red would see that she wasn't such a young kid after all.

Maybe he would begin to see that she was older...and more... than what he persisted in believing her to be.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading!
Red had forgotten just how noisy a summer night in the country could be. Though it certainly wasn't how a city such as New York was cacophonous, with all those damn cars whizzing around, vendors yelling, dogs barking, cats shrieking, birds calling, people talking, laughing, walking, jogging, running, their shoes clicking and slapping on the pavement...a constant tumultuous racket that at times Red could certainly appreciate and revel in.

But the sounds of the countryside were different. Not noisy—Red took it back. These particular sounds were beautiful together. Harmonious. A person born and raised in the city, or even the suburbs, would probably refer to the country night as "quiet," but it really wasn't. One had to sit still and listen attentively to pick up on the harmony.

The night breeze moved gently through the valley, rustling the leaves of all the trees of the bordering forest and making the long grasses of the fields slip and slide sensually against one another. The creek gurgled and babbled, obliviously happy as it flowed through the land. The crickets and other nocturnal insects whirred all around him, singing unabashedly into the night.

Somewhere an owl hooted lowly. Another answered soothingly. The wooden pieces of the various-sized wind chimes hanging around the patio clucked hollowly against one another, making rather lovely music that reminded him of a tribal ceremony he had witnessed in Africa long ago. The rocking chair creaked every so often as he rocked it slowly back and forth, back and forth. Red was even aware of Bronn's breathing adding to the music.

But he wasn't asleep. Oh no. The dog was awake and alert at Red's feet. His sharp eyes were trained on the dirt road that wove its way from the front of the house, winding around the lake and fading from sight.

He was waiting for Lizzy to come home.

And so was Red.

It was actually quite late. Or rather, quite early in the morning. She was out past her curfew. From the anxious and angry look on Sam's face, Red could tell that this wasn't the first time Elizabeth had stayed out past curfew, nor would it probably be the last since she was still dating that Derek.

Red didn't need to know every dirty little detail about the relationship. The strained expression in Sam's eyes told him everything he had suspected and now knew for certain about the boy.

He wasn't a good influence on Lizzy.

Not that Elizabeth was a victim in all of this. Oh no. Every person was an individual and had the freedom to choose how they would behave.

What was frustrating to Sam, and to Red, was that she knew better than to make these fucking dumbass decisions. And yet here she was, staying out late most nights, partying, drinking--stealing?--playing hooky....

"Is she having sex?" Red had asked Sam bluntly.
"I don't know," his friend had growled, fists clenching. "She gets mad when I ask her and won't say. Which, to me, is a big, fucking yes."

Well, at least she wasn't lying outright.

"I want to kill that little piece of shit Derek," Sam had continued savagely.

He wasn't the only one who cherished that macabre fantasy.

Suddenly Bronn lifted his head from the floor, ears pricked forward.

Red followed the animal's intent gaze to the road where a pair of lights could be seen flashing in the distance, bobbing closer and closer.

The man stayed sitting in the shadows of the house as the unfamiliar, beat-up truck pulled up, large tires crunching in the dusty gravel as it came to a halt.

The mud-splattered, scratched passenger door groaned open and Elizabeth tumbled out of it, snorting in tipsy laughter.

Derek followed her out, grabbed her hands and pulled her tightly against him. His mouth fastened on hers as he turned her around and pushed her against the truck.

Bonn sat up, growling deep in his throat.

"You don't like him either, do you, old son?" Red asked softly, green eyes gleaming as he studied the teenagers, possessive anger slowly building deep down in him.

That little shit was going to leave bruises on Lizzy's neck, kissing her like that. He was all teeth, tongue, and slobber. There was no finesse. No affection. Just raging, hormonal lust.

Red's disgusted growl echoed Bronn's and he stood up, walked down the steps, and leaned against the wooden rail, arms folded across his chest. They were so inebriated they hadn't even heard or noticed him.

And that made him angry.

"Lizzy," Red snarled.

Elizabeth started so violently at the sound of his voice that she nearly tripped over her own two feet as she jumped away from the boy.

Derek's face had gone white. "Who the Hell are you?" he demanded, reaching around for the knife that hung at his belt.

'Someone who will give you a black eye if you pull that fucking knife on me," Red replied, tone pleasant, but expression murderous.

"A family friend," Liz explained quickly, glaring at Red.

"You're late," Red told her mildly.

"What are you, the fucking curfew police?" Derek asked cockily, laughing.

Red uncrossed his arms and took a step closer.
The boy's laugh died a truly pitiful death at the menacing expression in the man's eyes.

"Time to go," Red bared his teeth in a predatory smile and pointed demandingly to the truck. "Now."

He had to admit, the boy had gumption. Derek did his best to stare fiercely back at Red in challenge, but the man just continued to smile at him. It was a lazy, arrogant smile that didn't flicker or falter one iota. His eyes held the boy's until the teenager swallowed audibly, face paling slightly.

Then, all at once, Derek suddenly cleared his throat and looked away from Red to Elizabeth. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Liz," he told her before turning around. He didn't run, exactly, but he didn't really walk to the driver's side with much dignity either.

Red snorted, shaking his head as the truck peeled off down the road. Then he turned his full attention to Elizabeth, who was glowering at him.

"Thanks so much for that," she growled, irritated. "Now I'm going to have to come up with some sort of explanation--"

Red waved her words away unconcernedly. "No. You won't need to."

"He's going to want to know who the Hell you are exactly--"

His grin was malicious. "Just remind him that I'm the fucking curfew police."

Liz's snort turned into a hiccup.

Red's eyes narrowed and he really looked at her. Her clothes were wet. So was her hair. "Since when do you drink and then let someone who's drunk drive you home?"

"He's not totally plastered and neither am I," she rolled her eyes, turning away from him and stomping up the stairs. "It's not like he's going to get into a car accident at two-thirty in the morning. No one is on the road anyway. He was being careful."

"Oh, sure." This time Red snorted sarcastically, following her up the steps. "You're playing with fire tempting fate like that, Lizzy. Don't do it."

"You sound just like Sam." She knelt down to greet Bronn, who licked her chin, tail waving enthusiastically.

"You mean I sound like someone who cares for you and is looking out for you."

"Like a father cares for and looks out for his daughter."

Her tone was clipped, angry, and Red didn't understand it. "Cut that out, Lizzy."

She stood and turned around to face him. Her eyes were like chips of ice. "Cut what out?"

"The attitude. Just stop. I'm trying to talk to you."

"So talk. I'm listening."

Red regarded her severely. "How much have you had to drink?"

She shrugged, eyes shifting away from his. "A few wine coolers. And a beer, but I didn't like it." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "It was disgusting."
A "few" wine coolers indeed. She was going to have a Hell of a headache tomorrow. "Why are your clothes all wet?" he demanded.

"We went swimming in the river by his house but I forgot a towel." She made a face. "Ugh! I hate the feeling of wet clothing against skin." And then she began peeling off her shirt.

"Lizzy!" he admonished, immediately averting his gaze.

The girl rolled her eyes as the wet material dropped with a unceremonious slap onto the porch. "I'm wearing a bikini, Red."

He glanced over at her. If that was meant to be a fucking bathing suit, it was two sizes too small.

Lizzy stared back at him defiantly as she wriggled her way out of her short denim cut offs. Then she stood there in front of him, eyes flashing, as if daring him to say something about the inappropriate, skimpy cut of the bikini.

He gazed at her, refusing to rise to her wordless baiting.

It was at that moment when the breeze decided to pick up again. Goosebumps rose on her bare skin, and she finally crossed her arms over her breasts, glancing away first.

Without a word he handed her the blanket from the rocking chair. Once she had it wrapped around her slender frame, he pointed to the chair. "Sit down. I'm going to make us some tea. And then we're going to talk."

"What, like an intervention?"

"Lizzy," he warned.

"Sorry," she sighed as she flopped down. "Fine. We'll talk."

Ten minutes later, they both sat side by side in the rocking chairs. Elizabeth was curled up in hers, her legs tucked up against her chest as she gratefully nursed her hot drink.

Red had known the tea would help in more ways than just how she felt physically. In the brief time he'd spent in the kitchen brewing their drinks, her temper seemed to have finally simmered down, which had been his intent. It was easier to get truthful answers out of her when she was calm and reflective. Not that truth didn't come pouring out of her when she was angry, but this was the better approach for both their sakes.

"Tell me, Lizzy," Red said at last, breaking the heavy silence, "and be honest... Are you bored?"

Her eyes snapped to his, confused. "Bored?"

"Do you not have enough to do around home or at school?"

Immediately seeing where this was heading, she pursed her lips and looked down at her mug.

"You've been doing a lot of things that seem...out of character for you. That's why I'm asking."

"Sam has a big mouth," she muttered.

"So do you." His tone was firm. "I want truth from you, Lizzy."

"This is about Derek."
"Mostly, yes," Red agreed easily, unfazed by her simmering temper. "You weren't doing any of this shit--and yes, I mean shit--before you started dating him seriously."

“He’s different than all the other drones who live here,” she said stiffly, ignoring his reprimand.

He raised a brow. "Drones?"

"Yeah," she replied defensively. "Drones. Everyone thinks the same around here. They're all caught in this wheel of routine. But Derek isn't like everyone else. He...he thinks outside box. Sees things differently." She shrugged. "Kind of like me."

Deciding to table his original point, he allowed her to guide the conversation. Perhaps she’d open up to him, and in so doing, he would be able to get through to her. “So he's intelligent.”

Some of the tightness in her shoulders eased when she realized he was willing to listen to her. "Yeah," came the reflective response. "He's smart. He'd ace all his classes if he showed up more, or, like, tried harder on tests...."

"But?" he prodded when she trailed off uncertainly.

She hitched a shoulder. "He thinks it's a waste of time since he feels like he doesn't need to prove he's smart to a bunch of teachers and state officials."

"Do you think school is a waste of time, Lizzy?"

She hesitated before hedging, “I kind of agree with him. I mean, why should I have to prove out to these people? I know what I'm worth.”

"It's the way the system is. It's not perfect." He shook his head. "It never will be. But proving yourself in class is what you need to do to go to a good college and have a rewarding career."

"But what if I don't want to go to college?"

Red laughed.

She glared fiercely at him. "Don't laugh! I'm serious, Red."

"Let me guess: Derek isn't going to college after he graduates in June?"

Her silence was answer enough.

"Lizzy, you shouldn't feel ashamed of doing well in school and wanting to go on to higher education just because the guy you're dating isn't doing well and doesn't want to further his own education."

She frowned, pressing her lips together.

"If he's not encouraging you to pursue those things--things that would help you make a better life for yourself, by the way.... Then he's not treating you the way you deserve to be treated."

Elizabeth ran her finger repeatedly around the rim of her mug and wouldn't look at him.

He switched tactics. "If you don't want to be like everyone else here in this little corner of the world, wouldn't going to college be a step in the right direction to get out?"

After a moment, she nodded reluctantly.
They were silent for a time as Red allowed what he had told her to sink in. The more she mulled over it, then perhaps she would acknowledge the truth behind his words.

"I had sex with him."

The man looked sharply over at her, and he was shocked to find tears glittering on her cheeks.

"I told you I wouldn't do it. That night. On my birthday. But I did, Red." Her red eyes flicked defiantly—angrily—to his. "I slept with him."

"Did he pressure you?" he asked quietly, wondering at her anger, and her tears. Despite Derek’s bad-boy reputation and obvious failings, she seemed to like him well enough...so why was she crying?

"No! No." She shook her head vehemently. "I...I started it. I did it because—” she swiftly bit her lower lip against the confession threatening to escape.

*I was mad at you.*

The words hung unspoken between them.

“I'm no better than all the other girls he's been with,” the admission burst from her to fill the beat of awkward silence, and he wondered if she were really speaking to him, or to herself. “I thought I was. I acted like I was.” The tears were streaming steadily down her cheeks and her hands were shaking so badly tea spilled onto the blanket. "But I'm not."

Red certainly didn't approve of Derek, or her more recent, wild behavior, but he couldn't stand to see her so distressed. He stood and took her mug away from her. After setting both drinks down, he held her hands gently in his.

"There now, sweetheart," he murmured. "Come here."

She rose, burying her face into his shoulder as he folded her into his arms. Every shudder her body made against his own made his heart constrict for her.

The man pressed his cheek against her hair, stroking her back soothingly. "Ssssh."

Frustration seethed hotly inside of him. He wanted to murder that damn boy. But he couldn't do away with Derek for just being a male who took what was willingly offered.

Elizabeth's rebellious behavior made sense now. She had held herself to a higher standard than most teenagers did. That was the perfectionist in her. And when she had failed herself, breaking her promise to him, to herself, making that mistake, she had decided to fall further, because, well, why shouldn't she? She'd already taken that first step off the precipice. Might as well continue her way down.

That was a dangerous way of thinking. And Red would know, for he had traveled those shadowed paths himself many times before. He had to show her the way out of that self-destructive behavior while she was still young enough...before the habit was set.

Once her tears had subsided and he sensed she was aware of herself and him again, he pulled back slightly to look down at her. She was studying his chest, worrying her lower lip.

"Lizzy."
Hesitantly she lifted her gaze to his.

Red could see her soul cringing behind her blue eyes. She knew he was disappointed in her. But he could see now that she thought he would hate her, too. And he didn't hate her. Could never hate her.

His hold on her was gentle. "What's done is done. The past is over. You can't change it," this last was a gravelly murmur. It was the same litany he had said to himself thousands of times over throughout the years. "You can, however, take each new day as it comes. Seize it. Make of it what you will."

"Carpe diem?" she asked softly, and Red was relieved to see a tiny smile ghost at the corners of her mouth.

He smiled back encouragingly. "Exactly. The past can only define who you are if you allow it." Tenderly he stroked a lock of hair behind her ear.

Her eyes flickered to his face at the touch.

"We all make mistakes, Elizabeth. We all do things we regret. If you allow those mistakes and regrets define you, you'll become stymied. And you deserve so much more. You are so much more than your mistakes and regrets."

“So are you, Red,” she whispered.

Startled by that, he met her eyes.

She didn't know much about his life, but she knew him well enough to understand that he spoke from experience...and that, perhaps, he needed someone besides himself telling him the same thing.

As he searched her gaze, realizing this, he suddenly and unexpectedly caught a glimpse of the woman she would become: devastatingly beautiful, confident in her abilities, strong in her convictions...gentle and hard all at once.

Then Elizabeth blinked those big eyes of hers and the vision was gone. She was sixteen again. Young and searching for assurance. Needing guidance to become that woman he saw in her.

He became aware of the insects chirring softly in the fields beyond, of the creek singing, of Bronn stretching, yawning sleepily.

Slowly Red released her. "We've talked about a lot tonight, sweetheart. The rest can wait, I think, until tomorrow."


"Today," he agreed with a small smile of his own. "In the morning I'll concoct something potent for that headache of yours that you're going to have."

The girl wrinkled her nose, grimacing. "Thank you?"

"You'll genuinely thank me after you drink it," he teased gently, leaning back against the wooden planks of the patio railing. "Off to bed with you."

Rewrapping the blanket tighter around herself, she bent and gathered her wet clothing. Then she made for the front door, Bronn following loyally at her heels. As she began to turn the knob, she suddenly paused, looking over her shoulder at him. "Aren't you coming in?"
"I will in a little bit. I'm going to stay out here and enjoy the night for a while longer." And think about what he had seen in her, what she had confided in him, what other pearls of wisdom he could impart to her that she'd listen to and hopefully take to heart.

"Okay." She hesitated, as if she were about to say something else, but then changed her mind. "I'll see you in the morning, Red."

"Goodnight, Lizzy."
Chapter End Notes

This chapter takes place seven months after Lizzy's sixteenth birthday.

Thank you for reading and for your comments and kudos, as always :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"Thanks for coming, Red," Sam said as soon as he opened the door, quickly stepping aside to let the other man inside the house. "I know you were just here a couple months ago and that you prefer to stagger your visits more...."

"You know why I have to do that, Sam," Red replied, setting down his suitcase to embrace his friend. "I'd come more often--if I could." If he weren't being watched so closely by his enemies, by even his own fucking people. If he didn't hold a spot on the fucking FBI's Most Wanted List. "And I'd've been here sooner but I had to be absolutely certain my trail was untraceable."

The other man winced. "I'm sorry. I know you're taking a risk coming here now. But as I said over the phone.... I don't know what else I can do. She has completely shut me out." His expression was pained.

"You're sure she's not seeing Derek anymore?"

"I'm positive," Sam assured him, following Red down the hall to the guest room.

Thank God.

"And I know I have you to thank for it."

"Don't give me so much credit, Sam. I didn't make her do anything," Red replied, kicking off his shoes and shucking out of his suit to dress in something more country-appropriate. "Lizzy has a will of her own. She did it herself. Or...did he break it off with her?"

Sam shrugged, averting his gaze to give his friend privacy while he changed. "I don't even know that much. All she said was that it was over between them. Hopefully she'll tell you more because she sure as Hell won't tell me. And I know something happened, Red. Something happened that night to cause her decline."

Her decline.

Sam never bandied words about carelessly.

Red zipped up his jeans, compartmentalizing the facts of the situation and doing his damnedest to keep his emotions out of it. But oh how they roiled just within reach, straining against the inner barriers of his mind. He mentally leashed them tighter. Now was not the time to allow them to run rampant. He needed stability. Control.

"And you think she'll talk to me."

Sam glanced at him sharply, half in exasperation, half in jealous anger. "That's why you're fucking here, isn't it?" He ran a frustrated hand through his short hair. "She confides in you. Trusts you. She opens up to you in a way she doesn't with me. She always has."

"Sam--"

"She adores you, Red."
"She adores you too."

"Yes, but it's different. I'm her father." The expression in Sam's eyes was serious. "You hold a very...unique position in her life. She doesn't see you as a father figure. You've been protective, a guardian of sorts to her for as long as she can remember. Longer, even.... But you're not her father. And she understands the distinction between a father--me--and what you are. Appreciates it. Cherishes it."

Sam smiled, but it was bittersweet. "You were her favorite playmate when she was little. And as she has grown up, you've become her closest friend. I'd even go as far as to say her confidant." Red began to protest but Sam held up a hand and shook his head, stopping him. "Don't try to soothe my ego. You'd be lying. We both know it. And you know what you are to her, Red. I've seen you with her. It's because of your relationship with her that you can help her in ways that I can't."

Red gazed at his oldest friend, momentarily speechless.

His eyes took in physical details while his mind reflected on what Sam had confided. Once swarthy and robust, Sam was now as thin as a rail. And much, much grayer. Old before his time. The cancer had gone into remission about a year ago but he hadn't been able to recover the same vigor and vitality he had embodied before. His face looked so haggard. His eyes were strained with deep concern for his adopted daughter, and yet at the same time they were burning in earnest, compelling Red to understand why he had called him back to Nebraska for her.

Despite the disquiet for Lizzy battering against his mind, Red couldn't help but feel a spark of hot anger directed toward her. Didn't she realize that not talking to Sam was harming him physically? Emotionally?

"I don't want your fucking pity," Sam snarled heatedly.

Ah, there he was. That was the Sam he recognized! "Any adult man raising a teenage girl alone is entitled to some pity being thrown his way."

That made Sam snort, his temper cooling somewhat.

Red pulled on his boots. "Where is she?"

"Terabithia with Bronn. And that reminds me, Red.... She takes that dog everywhere with her now."

"She did that before."

Sam slowly shook his head. "This is different. She'll be going to the fucking gas station for a quart of milk and she'll bring him along 'so he can stretch his legs.' But I know better. And on weekdays, she purposefully leaves the back gate open....like she's encouraging Bronn to follow her to school. It's almost like she's--"

"Afraid."

Their eyes met and Sam nodded reluctantly. "And that's not like her at all."

Most definitely not. "Mind if I take a horse out there? I'd love to arrive at Terabithia before dawn tomorrow."

Sam shook his head at his friend's wry dramatics. "But you just got here, Red. Do you want to sit down for a little while to at least catch your breath?"
"I got a second wind, Sam." Even after hours of traveling Red wouldn't be able to sit still after all that had been told to him. It wasn't in his nature to be idle when a problem needed to be solved. He wanted to move on this. He needed to act now.

"You'll have to take the stud. Liz took Conny."

"Fuck."

"He'll be glad to see you too, Red."

Luckily Red had been able to saddle and mount the stud without incident. Well, without serious injuries, anyway. There had been a bit of drama. There always was. And Sam had just stood there, guffawing, while the stud had not only tried to take Red's hand off with his teeth, but had also tried to lop off his head with his gigantic one. Red wouldn't be surprised if he lost hearing in his left ear for a fucking day--or week--after that collision of skulls. Jesus fucking Christ. So to show the stud just who was the boss around here, he'd slapped him on the nose, just like Elizabeth had taught him to do when the sly stallion misbehaved. Well, maybe it had been more of an open-handed punch, but that was open to interpretation. Then the devilish horse had stomped on his toes in retaliation. Luckily Red's hardy boots had saved his bones from breaking.

Honestly, considering their years of history together, it was one of the calmer experiences he'd ever had in mounting the stud.

Of course, once they were outside beneath the open sky, following familiar trails beyond the barn and paddock, man and horse got on swimmingly. On any other day Red would have taken the time to really soak up the beauty around him, to relish the feeling of being astride this powerful animal that could take him across the fields in mere minutes at the slightest touch of heel and rein.

But this wasn't a pleasure ride. Lizzy waited at the heart of his destination, unknowing that he was here in Nebraska specifically to make her talk.

Red mulled over what he had been apprised of back at the house. It hadn't been easy on Sam to admit defeat. Normally Elizabeth was communicative with him, even when she was angry. A half-smile touched Red's lips. Perhaps especially when she was in a temper!

He tapped his heels against the dapple-gray and they broke into an easy lope.

Of course there were exceptions to this behavior but she did tend to open her heart to her father more often than not when something was wrong. She hadn't this time, and Sam had told Red that the weight of this particular burden she carried within her was taking its toll on her in every possible way. Sam had tried everything he could think of to convince her to unburden herself, but nothing had worked.

Red guided the stud carefully through the grove of trees, following the unmarked path to Terabithia he now knew just as well as Lizzy did. He had seen that it had wounded Sam deeply to admit to him that he, Raymond Reddington, may be able to do more for Elizabeth due to the unique bond they shared.

The man pulled gently on the reins, halting the stud just at the edge of the small clearing. The long shadows of the trees and the thick green foliage hid him from sight. His eyes roved over the idyllic area. Almost immediately he spotted Conny hobbled and grazing contentedly where the grass grew the sweetest.

His nostrils flared slightly, aware of something, or someone, watching him. As he continued to scan
Terabithia, he realized it was Bronn's intent gaze he felt. The huge dog sat on the slab of rock that stuck out into the pond, intelligent eyes staring directly at Red.

Red was extremely honored by the dog's apparent trust in him, for he hadn't sounded any alarm to Lizzy, who was floating on her back in the water.

Even from his position beneath the trees he could see her ribs clearly defined against her skin. Already thin, losing that much weight made her look almost sickly. It was good that he had arrived today, but after seeing her like this, he wished he could have come sooner.

Elizabeth certainly wouldn't appreciate the ambush the two men had set but it was better this way. If Sam had told her Red was coming, she would have had plenty of time to think of ways to evade him. With him surprising her like this here in this special place she had shared with him for years, she wouldn't be able to run and hide...literally and figuratively speaking.

He dismounted quietly, leading the stud over to Conny, then hobbled him. He bent over and took off his boots and socks and then rolled his jeans up his calves. The moss was cool and as soft as velvet against the soles of his feet as he made his way to the pond's edge.

Of course, with him backing Elizabeth into a corner like this, his and Sam's plan could just as easily backfire. She could very well lash out, or sink even deeper into herself and remain unresponsive. He sat down on the rock beside Bronn, who silently nuzzled his hand in greeting.

Red sincerely hoped their instincts were guiding him in right action.

Using his foot, he splashed water over at her. The droplets sparkled in the sun as they rained down. Startled out of her meditative reverie, Lizzy spluttered and then went immediately vertical, wiping her face and shading her eyes against the sun.

"Red?" Her tone was a mix of shock and pleasure.

"Hey, Lizzy," he smiled, wiggling his fingers at her.

"God--you scared me for a second! But then I figured Bronn would've sounded the alarm if it had been anyone else. What are you doing here?"

As she swam closer to him, Red could see that she had even lost weight in her cheeks. Her blue eyes seemed huge now, almost fey-like in how large they were in her narrow, pointed face framed by her long mass of wet hair. She could have been a lake sprite from Russian mythology come to life...but the stark, dark circles under those eyes shattered that fantasy, the shards of reality falling back into place.

"Red?" she asked uncertainly into the silence that was stretching between them. Her fingers grasped the edge of the rock and she looked curiously up at him, slowly treading water.

Better to be straightforward and honest with her, especially since he wanted those two sentiments reciprocated. "Sam told me that you and Derek broke up."

"Oh." It was incredible how her guileless eyes turned suddenly so flinty, as if she were laying brick and mortar over them from lower to upper lid. "Yeah. We did."

"He said you haven't been eating much."

Her expression was tight.
"Or sleeping well."

Her lips were pinched.

"And that you take Bronn out with you everywhere you go."

"That's why you gave him to me, remember?" Lizzy retorted defensively, voice clipped.

"Yes, I remember." He forced his tone to be calm. Even. "But I don't remember you ever being truly afraid enough of anything to where you had to have him nearby all the time." He held her eyes with his. "It's unlike you to be afraid. Even when you were thrown off that horse and broke your arm. Remember? No fear whatsoever."

She quickly dropped her gaze.

"Of course, you didn't have Bronn then, but the fact remains: you weren't afraid."

She wouldn't look at him.

"So the question now isn't whether or not Bronn is doing his job. The question is why you want him doing his job in the first place."

"I knew he'd tattle on me," Elizabeth muttered in annoyance, more to herself than to him. "I knew Sam wouldn't leave well enough alone." Her eyes gleamed angrily as she chanced a glance up at him. "That's why you're here, isn't it? To run interference for him?"

"I'm here for you, Lizzy." He added a bit of emphatic heat to his voice to get her attention. It worked. "It makes sense now why you wouldn't take my calls this last week. I knew something was wrong then. And Sam finally confirmed it for me. So I came here. For you."

"You don't need to worry about me." Attempting to regain her reserved composure, she shrugged an aloof shoulder. "I'm fine."

"Suffering from a broken heart, Lizzy?" He purposefully made his words sarcastically cruel, and he fucking hated himself for it.

"No!" she snarled vehemently, eyes flashing with fury. "I hate the fucker!"

His own eyes widened in shock at her word choice--but he'd finally gotten an honest confession out of her.

Elizabeth suddenly and swiftly clamped her mouth shut with an audible snap, as if she almost couldn't believe what she'd said herself.

An awful silence fell between them as Red watched her face. Then she began to laugh. It was a cold, twisted laugh that he had never heard her utter before.

But his soul recognized that deep, dark place where it came from. Oh yes...he knew it well.

"I've called him that in my head a lot of times," she confided in a low murmur. "But that's the first time I've ever called him 'fucker' out loud." And then she laughed again, her eyes glittering peculiarly.

If it had been anyone else before him with that look in their eyes, he would've thought they were mad. Her expression combined with that eerily wild laugh actually made the hairs stand up on his arms.
"What did he do, Lizzy?" he asked quietly once that horrible laugh died away.

She shrugged a shoulder yet again, looking away, once more trying to hide her true feelings from him. "He was a dick." One of her hands unconsciously slipped to her chest, just below the water.

His sharp eyes followed that movement.

"So I told him it was over." Turning away from him, she heaved herself up and out of the pond. Christ, she was too thin. She knelt down and smoothly reached behind her for her towel, all the while keeping her back to him.

Odd.

"What did he do, Lizzy?" Red asked again, standing up even as she rose to her feet.

After wrapping the towel around herself, she finally turned to face him, expression guarded.

Red couldn't help but notice how tightly her fist clenched the material close against her body...almost as if she were holding a shield instead of a towel.

"I already told you." Her tone was too casual.

He took a careful step toward her.

She took a careful step back. "He was a dick. So I told him it was over."

He took another step closer, eyes intent on the way she held herself. Her chin was raised defiantly, but her hand was beginning to tremble under his scrutiny.

Before she could retreat any further, his index finger slid down between the towel and the damp skin of her throat.

She stood rooted to the spot, suddenly paralyzed.

"Elizabeth." Her name was a soft growl on his lips. "What did he do?"

"Please, Red," she whispered as his finger gently tugged at the towel to see what she was purposefully hiding beneath. Her shaking fingers released their death-grip just enough to where he could see her pulse beating frantically in the hollow of her throat. The material slowly slid down her chest. "Please. Don't tell Sam."

Rage, white hot, momentarily blinded him. Something down deep within him reared up, howling in near-uncontrollable wrath.

Then he blinked and the blazing inferno abruptly left him. But a worse kind of anger immediately roiled to the fore, taking its place.

Red had only experienced this kind of intense ferocity thrice before. It was a bitterly cold and savage fury, and it swelled, swiftly spinning and spiraling through him. He could maim and murder without a second thought or regret when he allowed this type of glacial maelstrom to sweep him away.

That *something* residing deep in his soul ceased howling just long enough to unsheathe its claws, snarling, clamoring for blood, *blood*!

Revenge.
His hand shook slightly as he softly traced the skin just below her collarbone. Three deep burns, blistered pink and red, inflamed and perfectly circular, marred the skin just above her right breast.

"How?" he rasped.

"With his cigarette."

An inhuman sound escaped his throat and her eyes snapped up to his. "You can't tell Sam." There was real fear in her voice now. "Promise me, Red. You can't tell him."

Control. He needed to fucking control himself.

He forced his gaze away from her wounds to her face. Their eyes met, and he held hers intently with his own. Those clear blue depths anchored him...keeping him from being swept away by the savage storm of howling rage. He could feel her heart thudding against his palm. Timing his breathing to it, he was able to catch his breath, and with it, a shred of composure.

"He needs to know."

"No!" She shook her head vehemently. "He'll--he'll try to kill him."

"Ridding the world of this particular fucked-up asshole is an excellent idea," Red snarled furiously.

"No! Because Derek could hurt him. Even--even kill him. Red, Sam's not as strong as he used to be. If he went after Derek, it would end badly for him." Her panicked eyes beseeched him. "And if by some miracle he escaped, the police would come knocking on our door and haul him away." She shuddered. "Red, he'd die in jail. He can't confront Derek. He can't!"

And this, Red realized, was why Elizabeth hadn't confided in her father. Because she thought that revealing this dreadful secret to him could very likely lead to a serious injury, imprisonment...even his death. She had harbored her pain and humiliation deep down within her soul to spare Sam. She would rather rape her own heart and wither away from the trauma than see the man dearest to her suffer.

Red gazed down into her adamantly entreating face and recognized himself mirrored there in her eyes. His heart twisted agonizingly in his chest. Oh yes, he understood her sacrifice...more than she would ever truly know.

"I won't tell him," he promised quietly, hearing her deep breath of relief as he carefully rewrapped the towel around her body. "But you could have told me."

"You would have told him. I know how close you both are. How you talk about me." She shook her head, self-consciously pulling the towel tighter around herself. "I couldn't risk it, Red."

He gazed down at her. She was probably right. He most likely would have told Sam if events hadn't played out like they had this evening. However....

"You still should have told me."

In seeing the strained expression on her face, Red was aware again of that piece of himself just beneath the surface quivering with bloodlust and the need to remove the breathing, walking, living threat from her life.

Derek had to pay for what he had done to her.
Before engaging a target, Red normally would gather all the nitty-gritty facts he could to make the correct decisions. But now wasn't the time for Lizzy to tell him the whole story. He wouldn't make her relive it until she was ready to unburden herself on her own terms. But he did need to know the truth of a couple things before he went...out...tonight.

Bracing himself to hear the worst, he touched his fingertips to her chin, guiding her eyes back up to meet his again. "Did he rape you?"

She hesitated. "No."

"But he tried?"

She swallowed hard, looking away.

*Christ.* "What stopped him?" he asked in a low, fierce growl.

Her eyes lifted quickly to his at his tone. "Bronn," she whispered. "He came out of nowhere and jumped on him and..." Her breathing hitched, voice trailing off. Her eyes were wide and unseeing as she began to relive those terrifying moments.

Gently Red caressed her cheek, bringing her back to him.

She blinked, shuddering. "Bronn hurt him. I was able to get in the car. Drive away. Get home. Bronn...he came home later. He...he saved me, Red."

Yes, he had.

"You don't need to tell me anything more, Lizzy. Not until you're ready."

Her wide eyes gazed up into his face, understanding suddenly dawning on her. "What are you going to do?" she breathed.

He didn't ask her how she knew. Perhaps she had seen the howling maelstrom of icy rage in his eyes and had recognized it for what it was. Had anyone else asked him that pointed question, he would have lied. But since this was Elizabeth....

"The less you know the better, I think."

"I want to know."

"No," he denied her sharply.

Elizabeth glared fiercely up at him. "I need to know, Red."

He shook his head, unshakably resolute. "Trust me, Lizzy. You may think you do. You may believe you can find closure this way. But instead...it'll infect your soul. It'll warp a part of it into something unrecognizable." And he wouldn't allow that to happen to her.

"But...what about your soul?" she asked quietly.

"Mine?" His smile was pained. "It was damned long ago."

The moment the words slipped passed his tongue he knew he shouldn't have said them. Not to a girl of sixteen--especially not *this* girl. But it was done, and he couldn't take them back.

"Why don't you put your coverup on and we'll ride back to the house," he finally said into the heavy
silence stretching between them. "I can get us something to drink while Sam throws some burgers on the grill?"

Her expression was unreadable as she slanted another intently searching glance at him before turning to shrug into her clothes and then carefully pick her way through the mossy undergrowth toward the horses.

As she got ready to leave, Red looked over at Bronn. The huge dog was watching her with such protective adoration in his golden eyes.

A predatory smile slowly curved the man's lips.

Perhaps when he went out tonight, he wouldn't need to go alone.
Chapter End Notes

This chapter takes place a few months after Chapter 10. Lizzy is a couple months away from turning seventeen.

Thank you for reading :) your comments and kudos are always appreciated.
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Red gasped as the frigid water of the creek stung his face. He scrubbed at his skin furiously, doing his damnedest to remove the grime, sweat, and blood. The water was moving too swiftly for him to get a good look at his reflection, but from what he could glimpse between the ripples and bubbles in the light of the moon, he'd gotten rid of the evidence. A hot shower would definitely wash away the rest....but that would have to wait.

The man moved his jaw experimentally and winced. The prick-ass had actually landed one on him as he'd gone down beneath the full weight of Red's body, thrashing like he'd been fucking possessed by something demonic. Red supposed really no one could escape flailing punches like that, but it was still fucking annoying as all Hell to his pride.

Feeling a nudge at his arm, he glanced down at Bronn. As the dog bent his head to lap at the rushing water, Red's fingers stroked through the wiry fur, thoroughly checking the dog's long body once again for any signs of bleeding or cracked bones.

"You're unscathed, old son," he assured him quietly.

Bonn lifted his head to thrust his cold nose into the man's hands before trotting wearily away toward the house. Tired he may be, but Red observed the confident stature and the proudly lifted tail.

That dog was as smart, if not smarter, than the German Shepherd police dogs. He certainly must comprehend that they had accomplished what they had set out to do tonight. Red gazed after him in frank admiration. What a fighter that animal was--and an excellent partner that had intuited what the man had needed him to do.

The Sarplaninac had been able to trip Derek effortlessly with his muscular body, and then had latched onto one of his legs with his sharp teeth until Red could get to where they struggled, straying off the path into the woods. He could remember the eighteen-year-old's scream of pain and Bronn's answering growl, both noises covered by the raucous cacophony of the people drinking, dancing, and laughing inside the town bar.

And Red could still envision the look in Derek's shocked gaze as the man had slowly and steadily stalked toward him. Fear had shone fever-bright in those panicked eyes as if he were seeing his own death approaching.

"Remember me?" Red had smiled before he'd grabbed the inebriated asshole, bodily lifting him up and off the ground.

No, he hadn't killed him. But as he had relentlessly punched the prick-ass in the gut, in the ribs--and three times in the face, finally breaking his nose on the last--he had wanted to.

No. Wanted was too mellow of a word. Red had craved his death. The savagery in his soul had been howling wildly as they had fought, desiring to satiate the bloodlust with more than just fists.

Red had been so caught up in that maelstrom of glacial fury that he had almost--almost--allowed its current to sweep him away from all rational thought and sense beyond the intense desire to murder this abusive, would-be rapist.
The gun had been a sweet weight tucked up against the skin of his back beneath his shirt.

But the man had regretfully--painfully--pulled back from that seductive, inviting current, recalling through the haze of snarling ferocity that the boy's death would raise too many questions...that it would leave Sam and especially Elizabeth too vulnerable to the small town's scrutiny.

Furious to be so thwarted, Red had hauled Derek again to his feet and had shoved him so hard against the sharp bark of the nearest tree that the boy's teeth had cut into his own lips. Then the prick-ass had stared numbly at Red. Blood, bright red and sticky, had streamed from his nose and mouth, dribbling down his chin to the ground where Bronn sat, fangs bared ever so slightly in a silent snarl, watching him intently.

Red had taken his firearm in hand and had stroked it slowly against the boy's grimy, unshaven cheek.

"You're going to listen," the man had crooned, "and you're going to listen well so I won't have to repeat myself."

Derek's nostrils had flared, bloodshot eyes following the gun's muzzle.

"Look at me," Red had growled.

The boy's frightened eyes had snapped back up to his.

"You will never," the man had tapped the gun's muzzle against the bloody arch of Derek's cheek for emphasis, "ever," tap "see Elizabeth Scott again." Red's livid expression had been vehement. "You will never talk to her, talk about her, look at her, think about her, fantasize about her, even fucking breathe in her direction." Then he had leaned closer, maliciously shoving the firearm into Derek's cheek until a whimper of pain burst from him. "If you do any of these things, I will know. And I will hunt you down and kill you."

Derek had released a gurgling gasp as Red had increased the pressure of his forearm against his windpipe, stifling his ability to breathe normally.

"Do I make myself perfectly clear, Derek?"

The boy had tried to nod, but the man had tightened his fist in his shirt, slamming him back against the tree's trunk one more time.

Red had relished the real terror throbbing in those eyes.

"And as far as your injuries are concerned...." The man had casually waved his gun from Derek's swollen face down to his bleeding leg, "you tripped and fell. None of this will ever lead back to Elizabeth, to her father, or to me, will it, Derek?" he had snarled softly, eyes gleaming fiercely as he leaned intimidatingly closer.

Hearing a dry twig suddenly snap behind him, Red was brought abruptly back to the present and he leapt to his feet, whirling around, teeth bared as he immediately prepared to defend himself from whatever was sneaking around.

Elizabeth stood frozen before him, staring at him with wide, wary eyes, hands held out in front of her, as if he were some wild, feral creature she was fending off.

"It's me, Red!"

He swayed slightly. "Elizabeth." Taking in a deep breath and letting it out slowly, he mentally
stepped away from that predatory killing edge he'd risen to far too easily.

And it took quite a bit of effort.

"It's just me." Her voice was soft in the night as she slowly lowered her hands to her sides, palms facing up, instinctively showing him that she wasn't a threat.

Red focused all his attention on her voice, her face, her eyes. Then he let out a long, shuddering breath and sat down--hard--on one of the rocks bordering the creek. "You should be asleep," he admonished, his voice husky with sudden exhaustion.

"Probably," she agreed, picking her way carefully over to him. Viewing his shifting over as an invitation to join him there on the rock, she slowly eased down to sit beside him.

They were both quiet for a time as they each gazed out across the field, watching the fireflies flicker lazily amongst the tall grasses while listening to the other insects whir soothingly into the night. When Red shifted slightly to rest his forearms on his thighs, Elizabeth finally gathered enough courage to glance surreptitiously at him out of the corner of her eye.

Then she blinked and really studied him.

Upon sitting this close to him, she could actually see just how rumpled his clothing was, just how swollen his knuckles were, and just how roughened his visage was. The questions she'd been holding at bay ever since they'd sat down on this rock together began to burn uncomfortably within her. But...she couldn't bring herself to ask any of them, not even the most important one.

"I didn't kill him." Red's voice shattered the stillness between them, answering her unasked question.

A heartbeat passed. Two. Then, "I wish you had." Her own reply surprised her. Perhaps she was heartless and cruel after all.

"Me too."

She shot him a sharp look, shivering at the icy calm of his tone. "Does it make us bad people?" she asked quietly. "To wish he was dead?"

"It makes us human."

Elizabeth looked away. "That wasn't my question."

She could feel Red's gaze on her. "If I had done anything...extreme...it would have brought unwanted attention to you and Sam," he finally told her, breaking the heavy silence growing between them by sidestepping the original point of discussion. "Be assured, that pathetic excuse for a human being won't be bothering Sam, or you, ever again." Fury directed toward Derek flared in his voice and his green eyes flashed with temper. "Nor will he do any damage to your reputation here in this town. As a matter of fact, I very much doubt you'll ever see his face again. My instructions were extremely clear, Lizzy."

"You hurt him."

"Yes."

"You've hurt people like this before."
A slight hesitation. "Yes," he whispered.

Elizabeth turned her head to meet his eyes. She hadn't expected to see all his defenses down...exposing the raw pain and cold rage shining there. Her breath caught in her chest and she suddenly felt guilt so fiercely that it made her heart ache.

*She* had done this to Red. He wouldn't be adding this particular black mark to his soul if it hadn't been for *her*.

"No," he growled with quiet vehemence. "Don't you do that to yourself. Don't you fucking dare, Elizabeth."

Her mouth parted in shock. "What--"

"Don't you dare blame yourself for something I did." His eyes ruthlessly searched hers, expression fierce.

She licked her lips, clasping her suddenly trembling hands together. "How do you do that?"

He blinked, the ferocity gleaming in his green eyes fading slightly. "Do what?"

"Read my mind."

His gaze softened a little more as it searched hers. "I believe that after all these years...I certainly know you well enough by now to understand how you think, sweetheart." He didn't smile, but the expression in his eyes as they held hers was so knowing. So...intimate.

Her heart began to pound peculiarly and she felt the heat of a flush creep up her neck to her cheeks. Before she could think twice, she boldly reached out, the tips of her fingers lightly brushing against his hand.

She watched curiously as the expression in his eyes changed, awareness of her sharpening.

Before she could figure out what that look meant, he glanced away and down to where her fingers rested on top of his red and swollen knuckles. He gently gathered her hand in his and gave it a soft squeeze. "Tell me, Lizzy. Did you ask me to go after him?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Then there's nothing to blame yourself for. I chose to go after the asshole. You didn't send me."

Elizabeth thought about this for a long moment, then she shook her head again. "You wouldn't have had to...to go after him...if I hadn't dated him in the first place." She took in a deep breath and then let it out quietly. "I started to see the warning signs, Red. After you talked to me that one weekend. When I would talk to Derek, confide in him my ideas for the future...you know, like finishing high school and going to college and stuff...he would...he would get upset."

As the flashes of memories began to resurface, she felt a shudder pass through her body. "We would be drinking. And he always would be, like, more over the top when he had a few beers in him. Kind of like his dad. I should've broken it off then. But I thought, oh, he'll come around to my way of thinking. He...he loves me." Her voice cracked on the word *loves*, and she swallowed thickly. She was dimly aware of Red's thumb stroking her hand back and forth...back and forth.

"But that night...we actually weren't too far from here...not at Terabithia though...he...well, we'd had a few drinks and then we...did it. And I always liked talking to him afterwards because it...I don't
know. God, it's stupid." She hunched her shoulders, lowering her chin. "Because it made me feel grown up. Like, here we are, sleeping together...like adults...and then here we are, trying to figure out the future...like adults."

She flushed, embarrassed. "So I started talking to him about it all again. He was smoking. And he got angry. Like...really angry, Red. Accusing me of a bunch of crap that wasn't true. Then he was like, 'It was that fucking older guy that put these ideas in your brain, wasn't it?' And I couldn't lie to him, so I admitted that you encouraged me. I told him that I wished he would encourage me. And that's...that's when he lost his temper."

Her voice grew even quieter as the emotions this awful memory stirred in her heart began to steadily overtake her. "I don't really remember it all anymore after that point." She swallowed around the growing lump in her throat. "It's all kind of foggy. But...I remember flashes of moments. I-I remember that he pinned my hands, that he took his cigarette...and...and burned me. I do remember that really well." She pressed her free hand against her right breast, and she blinked, hot tears trailing down her cheeks. "Sometimes I can still feel them burning."

Elizabeth felt Red gently squeeze her hand, encouraging her to keep speaking. And, God, how she needed to. Now that she had started she couldn't stop. Images of that horrible night flashed before her unseeing eyes as she relived all of it.

"It was like he turned into a whole different person. Like he turned into his dad. I...I remember screaming at him. One hand got free and I hit him, Red. But not hard enough to get him off me. And I think...I think he got, like, turned on by hurting me. 'Do it again, babe,' he told me and he was laughing and he started to like...get on top of me." Her breathing hitched as the words tumbled in a rush from her mouth. "Then--then Bronn came out of nowhere and tackled him. And I--I was so scared that I got in the truck, naked, and just started driving as fast as I could. I left Bronn behind. And it didn't even occur to me until I was at home that I should've rescued Bronn the way he'd rescued me," she rasped.

Red released her hand and gathered her close, holding her tightly against him as she cried, as the horrors of that night finally began purging themselves out of her mind and body through her words...and now her tears.

"You did the right thing in getting away immediately," he murmured against her hair. "You may not feel that you did the right thing now, in this moment, but you did, Lizzy."

She shook her head, angrily dismissing his words. "It's my fault. All of it! What you had to do tonight...you wouldn't have had to do it if I had stopped seeing him sooner. If I had only listened to your warning, and Sam's, almost a year ago--"

"Sssshh...." he soothed, stroking her hair. "No, baby. No. It's not your fault," he stressed firmly. "Remember what I've said to you before: the past is over. You cannot change it. You'll drive yourself insane if you fixate on the what-ifs. The what-ifs don't matter."

Liz opened her eyes to stare numbly down at his shirt. The material was stiff and scratchy against her cheek. It was dried blood, she realized. Was it Derek's? Or Red's?

They sat silently for a long time. As her tears began to slow and eventually stop altogether, she contemplated on what he told her, trying to make sense of how she felt. "It feels like they do matter," she finally whispered.

She felt Red shake his head. "There's a fine line between self-reflection and fixation, Lizzy. Self-reflection is good. It's admirable. It shows strength of character. But that strength can easily swing to
stubbornness, and that's when self-reflection turns to fixation...obsession."

As he shifted, gently moving her into more of a sitting position, her eyes lifted to his.

"You can internalize needless guilt and continuously punish yourself for things you can't change," he continued softly. "Or, and I don't mean this harshly, sweetheart...you can learn from what happened. Rise up stronger."

"I guess there's some truth to what people say..." she murmured, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Red gave her a small smile of encouragement. "Maybe that's why it's a saying."

She smiled tentatively back at him. "Red?"

He gazed at her, waiting.

God, how could she even begin to thank him for everything he had done for her? Liz felt like she should say something...but how could mere words accurately express the emotions she felt that went so much deeper than gratitude, deeper than respect, deeper than....

But Red must have read her mind again, because the answering look he gave her was warm and knowing. Then he slowly stood up, holding out his hand to her. She slipped her fingers into his and he pulled her to her feet.

"It's a few hours until dawn. We both should probably get some sleep or Sam will be awake all by himself for most of the day."

Elizabeth snorted softly. "We do have a habit of keeping each other up late, don't we?"

"Come on."

And so she followed him.
Chapter End Notes

This chapter takes place soon after the events in Chapter 11.

Normally I'm not able to update so soon after a previous update but inspiration struck and I had the time so I wrote it all down.

I really appreciate all your kudos and comments. Thank you for sticking with *Sine Qua*
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"Red, please? Just one sip? I'm begging you!"

Red chuckled as he set both hot thermoses of dark roast coffee down on the ground. "Such dramatics. You know better than to ask me that, Lizzy! How long have we been practicing? A year? Nothing but this," he shook her water bottle at her, "until after your workout."

"But it's so early," she grumbled, snatching the water bottle from him, popping the lid open and taking a defiant swig.

"It's only four o'clock."

"You're proving my point, Red."

"You should've gone to bed early last night."

"I didn't know you were coming this weekend! And then do you wait until a reasonable hour to get me up? No. You barge into my room and turn on all the fucking--"

"Language."

She wrinkled her nose at him. "--lights, telling me--so cheerfully, I might add--to be outside by the rope swing in ten minutes or else."

He leaned back against the tree and smiled lazily at her.

"I mean just because you're on European time--or wherever the Hell you've been time--doesn't mean I need to suffer with you!"

"Shirt."

Growling quietly, she stripped down to her sports bra. "Couldn't you have waited at least until the sun came up?"

He tossed the tape at her and she caught it deftly. "I used to ask myself that same question when you would burst into my room at any and all ungodly hours of the morning to bounce and crawl all over me to get me up so you could play--"

"I was, like, a little kid back then, Red!" she interrupted, half-affronted, half-amused.

He winked at her and she mock glared at him as she used her teeth to rip a strip of tape.

"We're both now rational adults who should know how to be considerate of each other's sleep patterns."

"Quit complaining and wrap those knuckles," he told her, laughing as she bared her teeth at him. "And limber up really well after. I'm pushing you through a long set this morning."

Elizabeth paused in her taping, glancing up at him. "You mean you're sparring with me? Like, as in real sparring?"
Red stripped down to the skin-tight tee he wore beneath his casual, button-down shirt and began stretching, raising a brow teasingly at her. "Nervous, darling?"

Her blue eyes flashed and he grinned, which made her eyes sparkle even more. "You're the one who should be nervous," came her haughty reply as she tossed the roll of tape to the grass. "I've gotten pretty good! You've even told me yourself."

"Let's just see how you do against an actual human being and not the punching bag."

"I've sparred with you before," she defended, leaning her body over to one side to begin stretching, pale skin of her torso white against the darkness of the trees around them.

"Not like this you haven't," he replied, leaning with her. "I was just teaching you before. Today will be a little different."

Together they leaned the opposite way. He watched as she chewed on her lower lip—something she always did when she was worried. Despite her airy attitude and sarcastic little quips, he knew she was genuinely nervous. He couldn't really blame her. She was used to him directing her. But it was time for her to break out of that expectation. An attacker wouldn't remind her to move her feet, twist her body a certain way to avoid a jab, or advise her on where to jam her fist in a particular area of the body to do the most harm.

Red didn't relish the idea of playing the role of an attacker, but he would do it time and again if it gave her the confidence she needed in her own body so she could defend herself.

"You wanted this, remember?"

He would never forget the moment she had looked up from her meal, asking him—in front of Sam—if he would teach her self-defense. Sam's eyes had darted from Lizzy, to Red, then back to Lizzy again. His mouth had been pressed into the thinnest of lines, and Red certainly couldn't blame him for it. Neither Elizabeth nor Red had told Sam the truth about what had happened between she and Derek, though Red had told Sam that "everything had been taken care of." Sam couldn't prove what that cryptic remark meant, but he suspected. So when Red had agreed to teach her, the look Sam had given him had been one of fierce gratitude.

"Yeah. I know." Her tone had a bite to it and Red smiled to himself. Good. The more riled she became, the less anxious she would be.

After they finished warming their cold muscles with their normal routine, Red gave a nod to her. Elizabeth twisted immediately into the on guard position, hands up, left leg forward, right leg back to angle her liver away from him, just like he had taught her. He gave her no warning—he moved, lightning quick. With a shocked cry she landed hard on the ground, staring up at him with huge eyes.

"Ouch!"

"You didn't block," he reprimanded, reaching out to help her back up. Her nostrils flared in frustration as she gripped his muscular forearm. He hauled her to her feet.

"Again."

She dropped back into the on guard position, hunching to the right so she could properly shield her jaw.

He struck quickly.
She blocked—but just barely. His fist came at her side sharply. She blocked him again, striking out before he could recover completely, clipping his arm.

Adrenaline sang through his body as he sprang away from her. She cockily followed, muscles rippling in her bare legs as she moved.

Then he darted unexpectedly toward her, relishing the feeling of the blood coursing through his veins. She snarled, rising up and twisting her lithe form away from his fists—then lost her balance and fell to her hands and knees, exposing her back to him.

It shone with sweat. He could count the vertebrae of her spine as it arched with each heavy breath she took, the tail end of it disappearing into the waistband of her tiny spandex shorts. It was both endearing and startlingly erotic all at once.

His flesh stirred unexpectedly and he growled low in his throat. Willing his body to fucking relax, he walked around to face her, offering his hand to her once again. "Up," he commanded.

Elizabeth wiped the sweat from her brow, leaving a streak of dirt behind. "I lasted longer that time," she grinned as he pulled her to her feet.

"Next time don't pursue me." He resisted the ridiculous urge to lick his thumb and rub the dirt away. "Get ready."

Elizabeth crouched down in a stance and he came at her almost immediately.

Hissing, she parried his advances, fist actually connecting with his jaw. Her eyes widened in shock and she fell back. "I'm sorry, Red! I'm sorry!"

He stalked toward her, eyes hard. "Don't break your concentration just because you hit me, Lizzy! You wouldn't say 'I'm sorry' to your attacker, would you?"

"No!" she gasped as she blocked his strike.

"Then don't say it to me," he snarled, whirling her around.

Snarling back at him, she thrust her knee at his pelvis but he turned aside just in time so it jabbed him in his hip instead. She howled in pain as their bones connected. Yes, they both definitely would have intense bruises from that.

Before she could retreat, Red grabbed her sides and forced her to the dirt. He hovered over her. Sweat dripped from his brow onto her chest. "What am I always telling you? Move your feet."

"I was," she growled up at him.

"Not fast enough."

She grunted in agreement—or perhaps more likely disagreement—closing her eyes for a moment as she struggled to even out her breathing.

Stifling a groan, Red climbed to his feet, retrieved their water bottles, then came back over to lounge back in the dirt beside her. "Here."

"Thanks." Propping herself up on an elbow, she drank greedily.
He eyed her. "Not too fast. You'll get--"

"A side ache. I know, Red," she sighed, rolling her eyes, but she smiled at him to take the sting from her words.

"Not so bad, right?" he asked after they both had caught their breath enough to hold a conversation that consisted of more than just grunts and two-to-three-word sentences.

"Besides that mountain of a bruise I'll have on my knee?" Liz snorted, then hitched a shoulder. "Yeah. I mean, once I got into the mindset of it all, I didn't feel nervous anymore. I was just...focused."

"The goal is to have those protective instincts kick in immediately if you're ever faced with a situation where you're in danger." He watched as her fingers unconsciously touched the place where the scars of those fucking cigarette burns were. "The more you practice, the easier it will be to slip into that way of thinking."

She nodded, eyes unfocused, tips of her fingers rubbing that spot.

"Lizzy," he murmured.

She blinked, coming back to the here and now, and glanced over at him.

He searched her face. Even with dirt smudged on her brow and her cheeks, even with those wild, dark tendrils of hair--escapees from her ponytail--sticking to her sweaty skin, he couldn't help but notice how lovely a girl she was. Not that the word girl was an accurate description anymore. She was a young woman, now. Eighteen years old, and how she loved to rub his nose into that particular fact every chance she got.

Red knew why. Well, at least he knew part of the reason why. He truly wasn't as dense as she believed him to be. He had begun to realize it after his confrontation with Derek. And her behavior--little things she would do, or say--had confirmed his suspicion that she may have a bit of a crush on him.

It was only natural, his mind had calmly reasoned. After all, he'd been around her for her whole life...he had been there for her when she had needed him and he'd sprung immediately to her defense on more than one occasion. It was only natural that a young woman who was just beginning to bloom sexually would latch on to the one man in her life she liked, who she enjoyed spending time with, who she could trust...a man who wasn't her father, who wasn't a fucking prick-ass, who wasn't some horny teenager from her high school.

He'd be a fucking liar if he didn't admit that the very male part of him, his ego perhaps, preened arrogantly at the knowledge. And that reaction his body had to her earlier? Well, that was bound to happen in the intimate proximity of any half-dressed woman, newly initiated into legal womanhood or otherwise. He couldn't, and wouldn't, fault his body for behaving naturally. But he could and would fault himself for encouraging her in any way.

He loved her. How he loved her! It was a fascinating love that was constantly changing and evolving. But he certainly wouldn't jeopardize her unknown future--not to mention her very life--by allowing mere curiosity to get the better of either of them. She would grow out of her feelings for him soon enough. And when she did, he would still be there to be her support and advocate, to be her friend and confidant, just as he always had been.

"What?" Elizabeth asked warily as the silence between them stretched a little too long.
Red looked away and took a swig from his water bottle. "How are your friends?"

She blinked at him. "My--my friends?"

"Mmm."

She looked at him as if he were insane. "What friends?"

*My point exactly.* He gave her a significant look, and as the expression in her eyes changed, he knew she could sense exactly where this conversation was heading.

She frowned uncomfortably, gaze sliding away from his.

"I wish you would actually tell me more of what is happening in your life sometimes, honey. It gets tiring hearing it secondhand from Sam."

She shrugged. "It's not important."

"Not important?"

"Yeah. I mean, I'm almost done with high school. I plan on going away to college. What's the point anymore?"

"That wasn't how you felt last year. Or the year before that. Or the year before that. And all the years throughout her childhood and teenagehood."

"I thought you didn't like my friends."

"Not all of them were like Derek."

Elizabeth shuddered, and he knew he had hit the truth of it.

"Why don't you really want to be around people anymore, Lizzy?" he asked gently. "Why aren't you dating anyone new? According to Sam, the boys would be lining up outside your house if you'd let them."

She hunched her shoulders, drawing her long legs up to her chest. "You know why."

"Do I?"

"Yeah," she snapped, and he knew he had backed her into a corner. Now the truth would come out.

"Why don't you tell me what I already know, using your own words?"

Liz glared down at her knees. "My judgement is totally screwed up. I didn't see the truth about that--about him and...and I got hurt."

There it was. He was so proud of her for not denying the truth to herself...and for allowing him in so quickly. "So you're going to isolate yourself from everyone because you made one mistake in judgement?"

"It wasn't a small mistake!"

"Did I say it was?" he asked softly.

He heard her take in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. Red could almost see her leashing her
temper as she shook her head. "Isolating yourself from people because you're afraid of getting hurt...physically or emotionally...is not a good way to live, Lizzy," he told her, expression gentle. "I can appreciate you being hesitant to date again, but you are older now, and wiser. Stronger. You're not the same young woman you were two years ago. You don't give yourself enough credit for all you've overcome and learned."

Elizabeth looked up at him, real fear glinting in her blue eyes. "I'm terrified," she whispered. "I'm so terrified of making the same mistake again."

Red's heart went out to her, and he couldn't stop himself from reaching out to trace the curve of her cheek with the back of his finger, tucking a curling strand of sweaty hair back behind her ear. "You can't outsmart life by allowing fear to control your actions, Lizzy. That's no way to live."

"Did you try it?" she asked softly. "When your family died?"

Red went very still. He watched as an embarrassed flush rose in her cheeks, as she bit her lip in shame. "I'm sorry, Red," she breathed. "I shouldn't have.... I'm sorry."

He was silent for a long moment. Then, "I tried to outsmart life by living in anger."

"That anger lead to all kinds of addictions I'm not proud of, Lizzy. I still haven't overcome them all." His grave eyes held hers. "A fine line separates anger from fear. In fact, I'm not all that sure that they are separated." He shook his head at his own musings, and then he gave her a small smile. "Take it from someone who understands you, sweetheart: don't isolate yourself. Don't succumb to fear. You're doing the right thing in learning self-defense. That will help you protect your body. But in order to free yourself from this terror you feel so keenly, you need to be out there," he waved a hand to the house and the town hidden beyond the trees, "living in the world, interacting with people, and, yes, dating...when you're ready to trust a young man again."

"Red--"

"Think on it, Lizzy," he said, tone serious. "It's important. Promise me. Think on it this weekend, and then come back to me and tell me what you've decided to do."

Elizabeth was quiet for a moment before she nodded slowly. "I promise."

The sky was beginning to lighten in the east, its colors turning from a black shivering with silver stars to a sweet purple and a hazy periwinkle blue just at the edge of horizon line, slowly fanning up and outward like a peacock's tail feathers.

Red set aside his water bottle and stood, once more offering his arm to her. "Come on."

She shot a wistful glance at the thermoses of hot coffee as he helped her up.

Red chuckled. "We aren't done yet. But when we are, and you've had your water, I promise you can descend on yours with all of your ardent desire. Now...get ready."

By the time Red flew at her, she was ready for him.

Chapter End Notes
The year is 2003. Red is forty-three years old. Lizzy is now eighteen years old! (finally oh my God lol)

My deepest thanks goes out to DanielDavies1978 and his Beta (they're my betas!) for their advice to make Liz eighteen for this particular chapter. She was going to be seventeen originally, but I was able to play with Red's emotions so much more by aging her to eighteen. Thank you! You both rock.

I'm able to update so much because I'm on Spring Vacation and actually have some free time to myself. It's wonderful!

I appreciate all your comments and kudos. Your support definitely helps me keep going. Thank you!
In the late spring of 2003, when the pleasant days were ending with a faint whisper of heat that meant summer was just around the corner, Elizabeth began receiving her acceptance letters from various colleges in Nebraska and a select few from out of state, including the University of Washington in Seattle. She had agonized over where to continue her education. Should she stay around home in Nebraska where she was obviously most comfortable? Or should she upend her whole life and take a brave plunge into the unknown and attend a college out of state?

Part of her was afraid to take that daring leap. The other part of her, the one she was doing her best to nurture due to Red's most recent advice, saw a chance for adventure and change--the kind of change that would end up benefiting her if she committed her heart to it. And so, after discussing it at length with both Sam and Red throughout the few months she had to make her decision, she finally chose to attend the University of Washington.

At first, campus life was utterly bewildering to Elizabeth. The university was huge--it was like it's own town! It was so filled with constant streams of people everywhere that she felt like she could hardly catch her breath. And there was always the thrumming and vibration of noise: men and women talking, laughing, kissing, dancing, eating, drinking, studying, going to class, playing sports. There were so many florescent lights shining and flashing, trying to grasp her attention and hold it with their pulsating colors. Come here! Go there! Take advantage of Happy Hour from three o'clock to six o'clock! Wednesdays are dance nights at the Union!

She felt small. Awkward. Out of place. And very alone.

During the first six months she keenly missed her two-story home in Nebraska, with its squeaky stairs and its antler decor and its wrap-around porch with the wooden wind-chimes she and Sam had hung. She missed the country with its wide open sky and fields of gold and green. She missed the smells of hay and trail dust. She missed the forest, the creek, the way the wind sighed through the leaves. She missed the crickets chirring in the night. She missed Bronn and the horses. She missed the bur oak tree with the frayed rope swing. She missed the old barn's loft. She missed Terabithia, her childhood sanctuary. She missed being able to see the stars and the Milky Way at night. She desperately missed Sam. His phone calls were like life boats to her.

Liz missed Red too, but that pang of longing wasn't nearly as horrible to bear because whenever he needed to conduct his shipping business on the west coast he would always make an effort to fly out to Washington see her. He'd been the first one to bring her into downtown Seattle. Red had indulged her, taking her to the famous fish markets, to the Space Needle, to a few of his favorite coffee houses and five-star restaurants.

As he had whisked her around the city between her classes and studies over the first few months, she began to realize just how wealthy he really was. Liz had always known he had aided her and Sam financially throughout the years, especially when Sam had been so ill, but she had never guessed just how much money he really had.

As her awareness of the outside world grew, so did her appreciation for all Red had done for her and Sam.

But even with this new understanding of Red adding another layer of complexity to her view of him,
he was still the same as he always had been: worldly, sarcastic, sweet, funny, arrogant, charming, fiery, wry, soulful. Later, during an evening of unplanned self-introspection in the university's library while she was attempting to study for midterms, she became quite certain that his visits those first few months or so had saved her from succumbing to depression brought on by culture shock and homesickness. She was also sure that he had known exactly what he was doing for her, and she loved him all the more for it.

And she did love him. During her first year of college when she was alone with her thoughts, away from her friends, away from the guys who pursued her, away from all other distractions that a young adult found interesting, Elizabeth thought about Red, trying to make sense of her feelings. And every time she reflected, she reached the same conclusion with surety.

She had always loved him...adoring him as a child, becoming infatuated with him when she had been in the middle of her teen years. But she felt like those feelings ran deeper now that she was an adult. Deeper in a more...romantic sense. Wasn't that part of what romantic love was? Feeling attracted to and stimulated physically and emotionally by someone you respected and admired?

Not that she ever did anything with him physically to explore those feelings. Red never once gave her any clear, positive indication that he reciprocated those kinds of affections. He treated her as he always had. Well, maybe sometimes he cursed more in conversation, or he made casual sexual jokes here and there as men did, but he remained the friend to her he always had been.

In many ways, this frustrated her. So when she was to meet him downtown, she dressed a little fancier, wore colors that accentuated her eyes and skin tone in styles that hugged her figure in all the right places. Sometimes he complimented her on her outfits, or on her various wedged shoes she had taken to wearing to give herself more height, or how she had done her hair.

But his hands never strayed to touch her unless it was to affectionately tuck hair behind her ear--something he'd always done ever since she was a little girl. It was pathetic how much she looked forward to that innocent intimacy, or how aware she was of his hands if they happened to press against her back or arm as he escorted her across the street or into a car.

There were brief moments, though, when she thought she saw him glance at her out of the corner of his eye, almost as if he were checking her out but he didn't want her to know, or, if he happened to be tucking that bit of hair behind her ear, she thought that maybe his fingers brushed against her skin more than was quite necessary. Sometimes she caught him watching her and she thought that maybe his fingers brushed against her skin more than was quite necessary. Sometimes she caught him watching her and she'd meet his eyes, gazes lingering a little too long, hers sharp and questioning, his steady and near-unreadable. But any time she'd be about to boldly speak up, he'd smile and beat her to the punch, leading them both back into well-trodden and safe verbal territory.

So she held her tongue and didn't do or say anything that could very well jeopardize the unique and easy camaraderie they shared.

By the time she finished her first year at the university, she was extremely glad she hadn't said or done anything embarrassing because Red began encouraging her to date. It would have been absolutely humiliating for her if she had done or said something where he would've had to reject her. He loved her, she knew that. But it wasn't quite the same kind of love she felt for him, and she was thankful nothing had ever been alluded to out loud.

Elizabeth knew Red had fine points for why she should begin dating again. They'd gone over them plenty of times before. She had even agreed with him, knowing it would be good for her now that she was a little older and wiser and more situated in campus life. But if she were really and truly honest with herself, she would admit that the main reason for agreeing to date was the same reason she had started going out with Derek in high school: she desired Red to see her, really see her, now
as an adult woman. Not that she didn't have her fun and enjoy the company and flattering attentions of young men her age. But she certainly wasn't looking for anything lasting with them.

Liz had confessed that to Red once. She'd been tipsy—her own mistake, though she supposed she could share the blame with Red since he'd been sharing his alcoholic drink with her at dinner even though she was still underage—and her loose tongue had mentioned that she was dating a few different guys but none really tugged at her heartstrings the way a guy made of steady boyfriend material should. Red had studied her silently for a moment before sharing with her that he casually dated women in the same way.

She'd felt two emotions in similar intensity that night: jealousy that he was actually dating women and relief that none of them seemed to be around for the long haul.

Of course, Liz's definition of dating probably differed from Red's. Dating for her meant going out for coffee, lunch, dinner, dancing, or a movie. And maybe, just maybe, driving up to the Lookout in his car to make out. No sex. Not that Derek had scarred her for life in that department. She remembered enjoying the act before...well, before. But she just didn't want to be used, or, to be quite frank, use them. It wouldn't be honest or right, especially since all she was looking for right now was casual fun. The very thought of sex made things too serious for her too fast.

To Red, dating probably meant dinner and then sleeping with whoever he was taking out that night. Of course, this was just speculation on her part. Maybe it was unfair of her. Liz knew if she asked him point-blank he would tell her the truth. But she still remembered that woman's throaty laugh in the background when she'd called Red on her sixteenth birthday and she didn't really want him confirming that he was sleeping around.

The first half of the second year Elizabeth passed at the university was similar to the year before. But now she was in her element and happier. She showed up to her classes (most of the time), she studied dutifully, and she maintained an excellent GPA while trying to figure out what direction she wanted to commit to for her degree. Her social life was consistently full and busy, a whirlwind of going out with her friends into the city to eat, shop, or go clubbing.

She began to cultivate a bit of a reputation in her various circles as being classically beautiful, sweetly warm and yet, at the same time, coldly aloof. It was probably due to the fact that she never stuck with the same guy for more than a few months at a time. Well, she couldn't say that the young men didn't have their warning before she agreed to go out with them.

She called Sam every week on Thursday night to catch up and chat about this and that, and she saw Red about every month or so, give or take a few weeks...though his visits were always spontaneous. When she had once complained that she wished he'd give her more of a warning rather than just showing up or calling at the last minute he'd blithely reminded her that his business was unpredictable and that he very well couldn't help that.

She believed him.

After the Christmas holidays had passed and she was just getting back into the swing of campus life again, she received unexpected and shocking news from Sam: the cancer had returned. He would be going through chemo and radiation treatments again. He assured her not to worry, but she'd never been very good at not worrying about him.

She confided in Red that her worst fear had returned with a vengeance and asked him if she should postpone her studies to go home and care for Sam, or at least stick around home for a while until everything was more stable. Red listened with a sympathetic ear that night, not saying much over the phone, but indicating that Sam would want her to stay in school and that he'd look out for Sam as
best he could while she stayed focused and committed in Washington.

Logically she knew that she couldn't fault Red, or herself, when she received word from the hospital a couple months later that Sam had died abruptly overnight. There hadn't been any signs of organ failure. He was just...gone.

As she flew immediately home for his funeral, numb at heart and grieving for the only father she had ever known, she desperately needed someone to blame for his death. So she blamed the two people closest to him who hadn't been there to stop it from happening: Red...and herself.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was written a little differently than the others because I wanted to show time passing and allude to what's going on rather than by showing it scene by scene. Sometimes our imaginations do a better job of filling in the blanks than words can. I feel like this kind of applies here.

At the end of this chapter, the year is 2006. Lizzy is twenty-one years old. Red is forty-six years old.

Thank you for reading, as always! The next chapter will read more familiarly. :)
Red had first searched the rooms downstairs. Elizabeth hadn't been in any of them. But the light had been left on in the kitchen and the air smelled like her favorite dark roast coffee so he knew she had been there recently.

He'd called her name a couple times but hadn't heard any answer. Then he'd gone upstairs and had searched her room, Sam's, even the bathrooms. But she hadn't been upstairs either.

The truck was still parked in front of the house so he knew she hadn't gone into town. Not that he would have expected her to.

Then he'd thought that she might have taken one of the horses to Terabithia so he'd made purposefully for the barn.

And that's where he had found her.

Once he had spotted both horses quietly eating in their stalls he had almost turned around to search the backyard and garden. But then he had spotted Bronn lying at the foot of the ladder that lead up to the loft.

The tightness of anxiety had eased somewhat in his heart as Red had walked over. He'd knelt down to greet the dog. Bronn's tail had half-heartedly stirred the dust on the floor, but that was all the hello Red had received.

Even poor Bronn was in mourning.

Now Red gazed up at the loft, straining to hear her. God, she was so quiet.

"Lizzy?" he called up to her softly. He heard shifting in the straw but she didn't answer.

That decided him.

He grasped hold of the ladder and began to climb. Christ, it had been years since he'd gone up this ladder...since he'd been up here in this loft.

The loft's two doors were open. Twilight flooded in, softening the colors of the wood and hay, muting them to dusky shades of indigo and lavender. He scanned the area until he found her where he knew she'd be...wedged tightly in the right corner, the perfect vantage point for looking down onto the paddock and lake.

Her pale face was turned away from him, gaze reflecting the stars that were beginning to shiver in the darkening sky. Her knees were red and scratched from crawling over the wooden planks. Pieces of hay clung to her black dress and hair.

The sight was so heartbreakingly endearing, reminding him acutely of her earlier years, that his breath caught painfully in his chest.

"You weren't at the funeral."

But it wasn't a little girl's voice that broke the silence, like he had half-expected to hear. It was a
woman's accusing tone that washed over him, grounding him in the present, a woman who looked at him sharply, eyes gleaming with a turmoil of emotions.

He hesitated, briefly taken aback by the fierce look in her eyes, by the harsh tone of her voice. *Careful, old son.* "I know, Elizabeth," he replied slowly, gently. "I'm sorry. I came as soon as I could."

She shrugged, abruptly looking back out into the twilight, as if his not being there while Sam had been laid in the ground didn't matter to her. But it did. Of course it did. And it mattered to him too. He would have been there if he could have been. But he couldn't have shown his face to a group of people who lived in a gossipy small town, not if he wanted to ensure Lizzy's continued anonymity in this place.

"May I join you?" he asked carefully, sensitive to the waves of anger emanating from her. He took note of her hesitation, trying not to be hurt by it, then she nodded stiffly, shifting over to make room for him. Red crawled to her, then turned, easing down to rest his back against the wall.

They sat in silence for a time while he discreetly looked at her. Her face was strained from grief. There were dark circles under her eyes from exhaustion. Her nose was red, as were what he could glimpse of her eyes, but as far as he could tell she hadn't been weeping. And it was because of this that he knew she was still in a state of anguished shock.

The day had obviously been utterly arduous on her emotionally and she'd had to bear it all alone. He should have been there for her, all else be fucking damned to Hell. But he had convinced himself that because she had such strength burning within her spirit that she could attend the funeral without him. She must if she were to remain safe. And she had. But it had cost her dearly and now they both were paying that price.

Before he could consider the wisdom of his action, he reached out to brush his fingertips against her arm in an attempt to bridge the unnatural void between them.

Elizabeth flinched violently away. "*Don't touch me,*" she snarled.

*Christ, oh, Christ.* He closed his eyes briefly, swallowing past the sudden lump in his throat brought on by that heartrending cry. Then he made himself open his eyes and look at her again. "*Lizzy, I am so, very sorry.*"

"I shouldn't have listened to you," she hissed, eyes gleaming with fury. "You told me to stay in Washington. You told me not to come home. I shouldn't have listened to you!"

How many times had he thought that himself over the last seventy-two hours? Intense guilt struck his heart, harshly squeezing it without a shred of mercy--just like the scathing look in those eyes of hers as she glared at him.

*Yes, hate me, sweetheart. Hate me. Better to hate me than yourself.*

"*I'm so sorry.*" The words seemed highly inappropriate. Completely inadequate. But what more could he say? "*If I had known--*"

"*I should have known better,*" she interrupted with a growl. "*I knew* something was really wrong. That this time it was different for him. Worse. I didn't sleep well after you and I spoke on the phone because...because I think I knew. But I ignored myself because of you. I didn't listen to my own fucking intuition, Red!*"

No, she had listened to him instead, and now she was caught up in her own maelstrom of icy fury.
She felt betrayed by him--he could see that in her face. The logical part of his mind knew that this loathing she felt had to be temporary. She was grieving so bitterly that she desperately needed to lash out at someone--and better him than at herself. If she turned that condemnation inwards on her own soul she would destroy herself. She had almost done it before. Better to throw it all on him so she could be absolved.

But something residing deep within him resisted to cow under her rage. It began to snarl, hackles rising defensively, that part of his soul that was so emotionally strung out and grieving bitterly as well. It relentlessly battered against the inner barriers of his mind until it broke free with a sudden snap, howling with guilt and pain.

"I didn't know! If I had known, do you think I would've told you to stay? Goddamn it, Lizzy!"

The blood drained from her face as she stared at him in shock. It was the first time he had ever raised his voice to her.

"Do you think you are the only one who loved him?" he demanded. "I loved him just as much as you did!" His eyes blazed angrily. "You think I don't have regrets? You think I don't already blame myself?" His face contorted with self-loathing. "I do, Lizzy. Oh, I do. He was my brother. Maybe not of my own flesh and blood--but of my fucking soul! You're not the only one who's grieving!"

It wasn't until she laid a shaking hand against his cheek that he realized he was weeping. As was she. "Red," she sobbed brokenly. "Red."

He gathered her into his arms--or did she grasp ahold of him?--and he buried his face into the sweet curve of her neck and shoulder, holding her tightly. He could feel her tears dripping into his hair, trailing down to mingle with his own.

"I'm--I'm sorry," she gasped, and he pulled back to look at her.

Before she could say another word, he placed a finger to her lips, shaking his head. He didn't want to hear it. Not until she really meant it with her whole heart. But right now it was too much to ask of herself, and of him to ask of her. They both were too far gone in grief to be sensible and anything they would say would only exacerbate their open and seeping soul-wounds.

Red brushed his thumb against her cheek, wiping away the tears even as more came. She leaned into his caress as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, those beautiful eyes of hers gazing up at him.

Time slowed. Something in him stirred, awareness of her sharpening. Wait, a small part of him cautioned, even as she leaned closer, even as his hand roughly cradled the back of her head. Wait, it whispered again, even as his lips traced her brow, even as her hands clutched his shirt.

But he didn't wait, and she didn't stop. Heat flared between them and he was kissing her--or was she kissing him?

Did it even fucking matter?

Intimate warmth suffused him. It was insane to have her pressed up against him like this, insane to thread his fingers through her long hair to keep her face level with his, insane for her to be the one to deepen the kiss that wasn't chaste, that certainly wasn't innocent, with that little pink tongue of hers.

After what felt like a long moment but it could have been mere seconds for all he knew, he finally felt Lizzy let out a shuddering breath and he took advantage of that, pulling back slightly so he could look down at her. He caught a glimpse of her eyes before she glanced away, hiding from him,
flushing uncertainly.

_Fuck. What have I done?_

He didn't have the luxury of time to guiltily berate himself. The next few moments were crucial. Whatever he did after this volatile point would set their course. He had to tread carefully, so very carefully, or he would lose her.

Red ran a hand through her hair and down her back, gently shifting so she could choose to either leave his arms or stay. He held his breath, waiting for her choice.

She stayed.

He slowly sighed. At least he hadn't completely shattered her trust in him.

So he settled them more comfortably back against the wall, keeping one arm loosely around her. He felt the weight of her head against his shoulder and he glanced down at her. Her eyes were closed, but whether she was purposefully hiding from him or whether it was from emotional exhaustion, he didn't know. Maybe it was neither. Maybe it was both.

A new kind of disquiet slithered its way into his grieving soul.

*What have I done?*
Chapter End Notes

The year is 2006. Red is forty-six years old. Lizzy is twenty-one years old.

My Spring Vacation is ending so my updates will probably be going back to once a week or once every couple weeks.

Thank you for reading! Your comments and kudos are life. :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Elizabeth closed her eyes, ducking her head under the shower's hot spray. Then she rubbed her eyes open again, watching as the last of the shampoo and soap suds slid down her body to circle down the drain.

If only it were as easy to wash away her grief...her uncertainty.

Turning around so that the steaming water could pound on her back, she rubbed her temples to try and stave off the prickling of an oncoming headache brought on by weeping and exhaustion. She was stalling in here, she wouldn't deny it. But she didn't want to come out until she had grasped at least some of her bearings. She leaned an arm against the shower's tiled wall, resting her forehead on it.

Red was waiting for her downstairs...he probably had their meal all cooked by now....

"Are you hungry?" His quiet voice had stirred her out of her dozing. Liz had blearily glanced out the loft doors. Twilight had faded into night. How long had they been sitting there?

She'd lifted her head from his shoulder, wincing as she had briefly rubbed her stiff neck. Feeling his eyes intently watching her, she had looked down at her hands clasped tightly in her lap to avoid looking at him. "Not really," she'd answered.

"Me neither," he had admitted. "But we should probably eat something anyway." He'd reached out, fingertips brushing just beneath her chin. Unwillingly, her gaze had flickered uncertainly to his. The look in his eyes had been gentle. "I'll make breakfast for dinner. Eggs. Roasted potatoes. And I know you made some earlier but I'll brew us some fresh coffee." He had offered her a small smile.

"Shower first--you'll feel better. Then we'll eat."

As soon as his fingers had left her skin, her eyes had darted skittishly away from his.

Red had been trying. She'd recognized his efforts then and could appreciate them now. Actually, he'd been quite suave considering the situation, and, damn it, she should have behaved with more poise. Her fist tightened in frustration and she felt her nails bite lightly into her palm. She was twenty-one years old, for God's sake, not some inexperienced teenager. She sure had behaved like one though.

Moaning quietly, she shook her head against her arm in embarrassment.

Suddenly the spray turned icily cold--she'd used up all the hot water. Goosebumps rose on her skin as she hastily clawed at the dial to turn it off. Then she stared numbly at the shower door, torn.

"Get it together, Liz," she finally muttered to herself. *It's not like you slept with him.*

Setting her teeth, she exited the shower and grabbed a towel, rubbing briskly at her skin to dry off as quickly as possible. Crossing her arms over her breasts she went to stand in front of her closet.

Clothes or pajamas? If she wore clothes, he'd know she was feeling uncomfortable and she certainly didn't want that humiliation. But if she wore pajamas--which she had done in his presence countless times before without a second thought--would he now think it was inappropriate? Would he think she was coming on to him?
Would she be coming on to him? Wasn't this the opportunity she'd been desiring since she was sixteen years old?

Not like this, Liz thought. Not with both of them acting out of shared grief.

She had been so angry with him for missing the funeral. Standing there, all alone, at Sam's grave with no one around her who truly knew Sam like she and Red did had been mortifying. As those neighbors and people from town who had come to pay their respects had shaken her hand or had hugged her, she'd met their eyes—each and every pair of eyes—and had dared them with hers to say something about how Sam didn't have real family or friends close enough to him to attend his funeral.

Of course, no one had said anything—no one had even implied such a thought in their behavior or words of condolences. And maybe it had all been in her head, but she'd had to bear the weight of it alone. She'd had to speak to all those people alone. She'd had to throw dirt into Sam's grave alone. She'd had to lay flowers on top of his grave alone. She'd had to come home alone to an empty house as silent as the grave she'd just left behind.

Red should have been there with her, for her. The fact that his flight had gotten in so late had infuriated her. And this particular anger she'd felt had descended on top of the furious resentment she already harbored against him for giving her the wrong advice.

But she wasn't angry anymore. Well, not exactly like she had been. What she now felt coming to the fore was more akin to sharp regret for circumstances that she would never be able to change. She should have listened to her intuition.

While Liz thought that she could perhaps forgive Red in time, she didn't think she could ever forgive herself for ignoring what she had known in her heart...for wanting to trust in Red's advice because it was easier to live in denial than to face the terrifying truth that Sam was dying. His beloved face flashed through her thoughts and her breath caught painfully in her chest, heart aching. God. She couldn't think of Sam right now. She'd fall to pieces and she had to hold it together—at least until she went to bed. Then she could cry herself to sleep. But not yet. Not yet.

Elizabeth forced her anguish to the back of her mind, leashing it tightly there, and brought her thoughts back to the situation at hand. She had to go downstairs soon and face Red before he came up here looking for her. How was she to behave after what had passed between them in the loft? He obviously was trying to get them back on familiar ground—that's what this evening meal was about. Breakfast for dinner was something they'd made with Sam many times before. Not only was the food itself comforting but so was the tradition of it. But how could things go back to the way they were before they'd said those harsh words to one another...before they had kissed?

Liz gazed at her closet, worrying her lower lip as her fingers trailed over her jeans. The last thing she wanted to do was wear anything tight and constrictive.

Damn it.

She raked a shaking hand through her wet hair, wavering momentarily before she finally, defiantly, snatched up her pajama shorts and a camisole. She slipped on underwear, the tank, and then stepped into the shorts, glancing at herself in the mirror.

God, they were so short...what would he think of her?

Growling softly, she rummaged around for a hoodie and found one. It was warm and oversized. Perfect. She shrugged into it and zipped it up. There. A compromise of both comfort and
Then she looked at herself in the mirror again. Frowning, she went closer and touched her lips.

They were swollen.

Flushing, she thought back on that moment between them up in the loft. Neither she nor Red had been in complete control of the situation or even their own feelings, having been spurred on by intense anger and sorrow. Had he wanted to kiss her? Had he instigated it? Or had she kissed him first? She couldn't remember who had been the one to move in, but she remembered wanting it. She recalled leaning into him as his hand had roughly grasped the back of her head, fingers curling tightly in her hair. The way she'd pressed herself against his body--or had he held her to him in that way?--had not been chaste. The memory of his lips bruising hers made her shiver. The kiss hadn't been gentle or soft...but that hadn't been what either of them wanted--needed.

Had Red wanted her, though? He hadn't made a move for anything more after he broke away from her. But he hadn't exactly rejected her either. Had he? He had kept his arm around her, had even allowed her to doze against his shoulder for God knows how long. She'd be lying if she told herself she didn't want him to...well, to want her. That kiss had stirred her numb, grieving heart. Had it stirred his?

A self-deprecating smile ghosted at the corners of her mouth. She knew she wasn't Aphrodite, but he had to feel something for her to kiss her in that way, right? Of course, she could bring it up to him in a bold and direct manner. But the thought of asking him outright with words terrified her. Why else would she consciously, defiantly, choose to wear pajamas that showed so much skin, even with a baggy hoodie falling to the hemline of her shorts? Just like when she had dressed up for him in Seattle, she wanted a reaction from him. She wanted him to acknowledge her as a woman...to acknowledge what was obviously there, tensely shivering, between them.

*You got that acknowledgement tonight, Liz.*

But now she didn't know where they stood with each other. The boundaries that Red had set between them, that she had gone along with for years, were now blurred. Where did they stand? Who exactly were they to each other now?

God, there was only one way to find out how they would move forward from tonight.

Steeling herself, mind and heart, Elizabeth left her bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Lizzy is feeling so conflicted, as you've seen, and her thoughts definitely aren't quite linear. She's grieving and I wanted to show that she's not thinking as clearly as she should be. This wasn't an easy chapter to write, poor thing.

Thank you so much for reading! I appreciate all your comments and kudos :)

________________________
There was something extremely therapeutic about cooking.

As much as Red loved to indulge in fine dining at gourmet restaurants all around the world, he also thoroughly enjoyed rolling up his sleeves and making a mess in whatever kitchen was available to him just as much. He appreciated the dual nature of cooking, both the experimentation and the accuracy. There was a whimsical art to it, and yet at the same time, a precise science that always made the stimulating experience fascinating. It captivated him, holding his unwavering attention so that everything else--his thoughts, his memories, his stresses, the demons that stalked the back of his mind--faded away and all that was left was the direct awareness of whatever was on the stovetop sizzling, bubbling, grilling...or the feeling of the sharp knife under his fingers and how he caressingly persuaded it to finely slice or roughly dice.

There. That was the last potato. The man threw all the diced quarters into a bowl and closely eyeballed the amount of olive oil he poured over them. Then he added salt, pepper, and a tiny bit of minced garlic for flavor.

God, it smelled good in this kitchen.

Humming softly in pleasure, he stuck both hands in the bowl and tossed everything together with his fingers, enjoying the slick feeling of the oil against his skin. It reminded him of the days when he'd been a mischievous boy and would concoct all kinds of weird mixtures using food stuffs from his mother's kitchen. Most times he'd gotten away with his hijinks scott-free but Lord had he gotten the ass-whipping of the fucking year when he'd been caught red-handed playing in the expensive, Grade A maple syrup from Vermont.

Red shook his head at himself, scattering the potatoes onto a sheet pan and then washing his oily hands. He reached out, grabbing the first hand towel his fingers touched to dry them. It was soft pink in color, faded and threadbare from years of use. Little black horses galloped spiritedly beside tiny red hearts all over it, front and back. He gazed down at the relic from Elizabeth's childhood, a finger tracing first one horse, then one heart.

When Lizzy had been little, Sam had had to force her stubborn and resisting self to help him in the kitchen. Grumbling and growling she had grudgingly obeyed him, if only to avoid whatever punishment he'd planned to deal out to her if she hadn't minded her Ps and Qs. But by the time she was fourteen, she had ended up burning so many meals to their various points of inedibility that eventually Sam--exasperatingly, lovingly--gave her up as a lost cause and had put her on dish duty "for all eternity" (which had been a decision she'd been absolutely thrilled with!).

To this day, she still couldn't cook worth a damn.

An affectionate smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he slid the potatoes in the oven.

The girl could make a sandwich--just as long as no one asked her to crisp the bread over the stove. She could heat up soup--from a can. She could boil water and make macaroni and cheese--from a
box. She could grind coffee beans and brew them. But that was about the extent of her relationship with cooking...really, with the kitchen in general.

It was a good thing he'd stopped by the market this afternoon on his way here, knowing he was staying for a few days at the house with her. Who else would make sure she ate? Considering what she was going through mentally, emotionally...she certainly wouldn't think to take care of herself the way she needed to.

It wasn't that she was numb to the world and wasn't in tune with her emotions and thoughts. The trouble was that she felt too much. She'd always been that way, allowing her passionate spirit to eat her up from the inside out while she suffered in silence...unless someone outside of herself put a stop to it. That duty had fallen to Sam for most of her life. But now the responsibility to care for her in that way was completely Red's. Despite his own grief he needed to put her first--something he certainly had not done up in the loft.

The squeaking of the pipes sounded suddenly throughout the house as the shower turned off, startling Red momentarily out of his thoughts. Elizabeth would be coming downstairs soon and he had to know what to say to her before she showed herself.

He took a spoonful of butter and tapped it over the hot saucepan, waiting for it to foam so he could pour the beaten eggs over it.

What would he say to her?

The guilt that he had forcibly leashed to the back of his mind while he'd been cooking abruptly broke free with an ashamed howl, and he closed his eyes, pained, as it overwhelmed his thoughts.

It didn't matter that the kiss they had shared had been, in part, an expression of that strange, fascinating love that was between them--a profound connection that had been tentatively metamorphosing into something different...something more over the last few years. He had done his best to steadily control that metamorphosis, to temper himself and her, until he was sure how best to handle it without damaging their relationship.

And then he'd gone and fucked it all up in one fucking moment.

The kiss, rough from anguish and anger and, yes, lust, shouldn't have happened. Not like that.

Not like that? The man shook his head, scraping the eggs around in the pan with the spatula, scrambling them.

It shouldn't have happened at all. He shouldn't have given in to that temptation, especially not now while both their souls were grieving and desperately searching to feel something other than heartrending sorrow.

Especially not now? Fuck. Who was he trying to fool?

He shouldn't ever put himself in a position to give in to that temptation. He needed to snap the Hell out of it and quit playing with the fire of attraction.

Red bared his teeth in a silent snarl of guilty frustration.

Despite all his precautions, he'd been treading too fine of a line for too long with Lizzy. He should have ended their association years ago when she'd still been young enough to forget him easily...and he her.
For a brief moment, he felt a blast of hot anger for Sam for planting that fucking seed in his mind all those years ago to help her transition from her life as Masha to her new life as Elizabeth. Somehow, that period of time that had only been supposed to last for a few months had multiplied into years...and now here they were.

Then, just as quickly as it had come, the throbbing fury bled out of him.

No. It wasn't Sam's fault.

It was his.

He had made the final decision to stay in Lizzy's life because his feelings of responsibility and affection toward her had blossomed into more.

*I'm sorry, Sam. You didn't fucking deserve that from me. I'm sorry.*

Red couldn't--and wouldn't--regret the years he'd spent with Elizabeth while she'd been growing up. But the complications that had been arising now that she was maturing sexually, emotionally, were undeniably coming to a head, and he, the man who called himself Raymond Reddington, wanted criminal and the keeper of her secret past, couldn't ignore them for much longer.

But he couldn't bend his mind around all of this now.

The oven beeped loudly, imperiously demanding his immediate attention. Red carefully plated the yellow eggs then retrieved the perfectly-roasted potatoes from the rack. He sprinkled parsley and more salt over them before plating them as well.

He needed to focus on helping Lizzy through this difficult time. In order to do that, he had to salvage what he could of their tenuous relationship tonight...but he had to tread so very cautiously.

"It smells good in here." Her voice drifted into the room like a soft breeze.

Quickly masking his emotions, Red turned around, a full, steaming plate in each hand. "Perfect timing," he smiled, trying not to notice how her long, shapely legs disappeared up into the ruffled shorts peeking out just below the hem of her tatty, old sweatshirt.

With care, he set down each plate in their respective places. Then both of them gazed at the head of the table for a moment, at the empty place where Sam had used to sit.

Sorrow that he had managed to keep at bay seeped through his mind. Christ, he couldn't succumb again to his own grief now. As he swiftly locked the anguish away deep in his heart, he glanced at her drawn, sad face, and he knew this was the first time since Sam's death that she'd eaten at the table.

At least she wouldn't have to eat alone.

"Sit down, Lizzy," he requested gently. "I'll get us some coffee."

"Cream and sugar?" she asked somewhat absently as she took her seat.

He obliged her wish before easing down in his chair across from her. Then he slid her mug over to her and she grasped it tightly in both hands, gratefully breathing in its comforting aroma.

"To Sam," Red murmured with feeling, raising his own mug.

"To Sam," she whispered reverently.
He eyed Elizabeth surreptitiously over the rim of his mug as they both took a drink. She still looked exhausted, but there was a slight shine in her eyes that hadn't been there earlier. Perhaps the shower had helped. Hot water and steam did have their way of rejuvenating the body and spirit...at least for a little while.

The man slanted another furtive look at her as she picked up her fork, poking at her food a bit--an endearing habit of hers--before spearing a potato and popping it into her mouth. He watched as she chewed slowly, eyes half-lidded. She probably hadn't realized just how hungry she really was until the flavors had hit her tongue because as soon as she finished swallowing she immediately speared another potato, and then another. Then she sampled the eggs, staying focused on them for a time with single-minded intensity before returning to the potatoes.

It wasn't until she had eaten half of her plate and seemed intent on finishing the rest that Red felt comfortable enough to begin eating his own portion. He hadn't been sure if she would finish it all and he'd been preparing himself for a battle of wills, his stance being that she must finish everything on her plate for her own good.

But when Elizabeth paused, he paused as well, warily eyeing her.

Then she sighed, those lovely blue eyes darting to his. "I'll eat it all, Red. Don't worry."

"I wasn't worried," he murmured before spearing a potato. Perhaps concerned was a better word.

"You looked like you were about ready to force-feed me." She swallowed a forkful of scrambled eggs. "That won't be necessary. I promise."

An eyebrow quirked. He was honestly relieved to hear some of that familiar, dry humor coloring her voice. "You promise, hmm?"

She nodded, now savoring her coffee. "I'm actually hungry enough to eat all of mine--and yours."

As Red generously began pushing his own plate across the table to her, her eyes widened. Then she quickly shook her head, instantly reaching out to push it back over to him. "I was just kidding."

Their fingers brushed accidentally and a startling heat seared up his arm.

Christ.

Their eyes met.

Elizabeth slowly withdrew her hand as she nervously glanced away.

His gaze followed the movement, traveling from her pale fingers poking out of the baggy cuffs up her arm, taking in the way her damp hair cascaded over one slender shoulder bared by the slouchy hoodie, the feathery ends just brushing the tip of her breast.

"I wouldn't eat your dinner," she told him quietly, placing her hand flat on the table.

He could see it trembling slightly.

Fuck. This had to be acknowledged. Now.

"Lizzy."

She bit her lower lip lightly before looking hesitantly up at him.
"What happened earlier in the loft...."

"Don't," she flushed, shaking her head in embarrassment.

"We need to talk about it, sweetheart," Red persisted gently. "I need to tell you how sorry I am."

"You're sorry?" Her eyes glittered peculiarly as she frowned at him.

Careful, old son.... He nodded. "I feel like I...took advantage of you." It wasn't quite the whole truth, but it wasn't quite a lie either. "And I'm sorry for it, Lizzy."

For one shining moment, her eyes were clear and sweetly honest. "You didn't take advantage of me, Red."

Oh, honey, don't do this. He braced his heart, then said, "Yes I did."

He knew this would make her angry. He knew it. But he had to stop this, now, before it developed a life of its own and flew completely out of their reach.

And just like that, the true feelings gleaming in those eyes of hers were doused. Her temper flared, anger now burning there instead. "That would imply you were the only one kissing." A questioning look must have crossed his face because her nostrils flared with impatience. "It takes two, Red."

"You are grieving for Sam," he excused her words and behavior away, praying that she would allow him to--praying that she wouldn't push it. He schooled his eyes to show sympathy. "As am I. We were angry and upset with each other...and all the while keenly feeling the loss of him. We weren't thinking clearly, honey."

He could see how tense she was even from across the table.

Red softened his tone. "When people are in mourning, like we are now.... Well, it's easy for them to engage in something they will later regret. But if the behavior is recognized for what it is, they can always move on from it. Put it...and the regret...behind them."

A shadow of doubt darkened her eyes.

Was she seeing the truth in his words? Would she accept that it had been a mistake and move forward with him?

He fervently hoped so.

Elizabeth didn't reply like he had half-expected her to, but instead returned her attention to her meal, finishing the remaining potatoes just like she had promised she would.

The silence that fell while they ate wasn't uncomfortable--not quite. But neither was it an easy quietude. Red did not dare break the stillness between them as they finished their coffees. He wanted her to contemplate what he'd said while her mind was as unclouded as it could be, considering the circumstances, and reach the same conclusion he had.

His eyes followed her as she stood, clearing her dishes from the table. After a moment, he got up and joined her at the sink with his own plate, fork, and mug.

Together, they fell into their old rhythm from bygone days of her washing and him drying. There was a dishwasher but with so few dishes to clean tonight, even including the pans, it didn't seem worth the effort to run it.
Besides, it was good to busy his hands with manual work.

He was very careful not to touch her again while she handed him things to dry, but he was sharply aware of how close she stood next to him.

Once Red laid the last dish upside down on the towel spread out on the counter, he turned to look at her.

Elizabeth was gazing pensively at him.

Her boldness took him aback, but he stood his ground and met her eyes calmly and unflinchingly.

Then she approached him and laid her hands on his forearms, her touch featherlight. Before he could say or do anything, she leaned closer and kissed his cheek.

His eyes closed of their own volition, fire thrumming through his body.

"You may regret it," she breathed against his ear, "but I don't."

When he opened his eyes, she stood just out of reach. The knowing expression in her gaze was one that he had never seen before. He'd observed it in other, confident women, but never in her...until now.

It roused his heart, and a piece of his soul that had been achingly dormant for so long stirred slightly.

"It's been the longest day. I'm so exhausted, Red."

He found his voice, eyes intent on hers. "Me too, sweetheart."

"I'll see you in the morning?"

"I'll see you in the morning."

As Red watched her walk away from him, he understood that two metamorphoses had just taken place right before his eyes: Lizzy had entered into another phase of womanhood, and their friendship, their relationship, had yet again become something new...something more.
Thank you so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it :) 

Also! I'd be interested in knowing what your favorite chapter is so far and why...I'm curious what resonates with you guys (if you have the time to tell me!).

This is my last update until next week! :) 

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Red,

Went to Terabithia. Took Bronn and Conny. If you want to meet me you'll have to take the stud--don't make that face. You know he likes you.

Lizzy

What had been funny was that Red had made "that face" when he'd read her note. He'd shaken his head, pleased that her sense of dry humor was returning, albeit slowly.

His eyes scanned Terabithia--and there she was right where he knew she'd be, splashing about in the water. "Come on, old son," Red murmured to the stud. "Let's hobble you up next to Conny."

The stallion's ears flicked and he followed Red agreeably to where the snowy white gelding placidly stood, grazing contentedly. Red glanced at Conny, noting that Lizzy had taken his bridle off but had kept the halter on. That meant she wanted to stay here a while.

The stud was only too thrilled to be relieved of his bit and reins. He shook his large head in pleasure and Red rubbed the horse's smooth brow, scratching the spot where the leather had rubbed against his gray fur, just beneath his heavy, gray forelock. The stud snorted his thanks, spraying dusty mucus at the man's chest.

"I can never catch a break with you, can I?" Red snorted back, shaking his head in wry amusement as he unbuttoned his now-gooy black shirt and throwing it over the saddle. If this was the worst the stud wanted to throw his way today, he couldn't really complain. He tugged off his boots and socks and then rolled up his jeans to his knees, wondering just how many times he'd gone through this ritual over the years...and knowing that this would be one of the last times he ever did so.

Bronn woofed a soft greeting from the shade of the trees as Red passed by him to take his usual seat on the rock, sticking his sweaty feet into the cool water.

"I don't see any broken bones or blood. I take it the stud behaved himself?" Lizzy called teasingly as she began swimming toward him.

"He tried to kick me while I was saddling him--but it was a half-hearted attempt at best," he smiled back.

"You should've just ridden bareback out here like I did."

"Are you kidding? Without stirrups to keep me firmly in place? He would've thrown me the moment I clambered onto his back!"

"You don't give yourself enough credit, Red," she rolled her eyes, grinning--no doubt imagining him flying off that feisty stallion and landing in an inglorious heap in the dirt. "You're a good rider."

"Not as good as you."

She blushed a bit at that, running a hand self-consciously through her wet hair--a sweet little nervous
tick she had picked up within the last few days. Those fingers of hers would run absently through her hair whenever a silence would stretch a little too long between them, or if she'd say something to where he'd glance sharply at her out of the corner of his eye, wondering at the implied double meaning behind her words.

Not that she had really said anything truly overt since the day of Sam's funeral. In fact, that moment in the loft and her honest admission to him after dinner hadn't come up at all.

During the first few days, most of their time and energy had been spent in going through the house and Sam's things, organizing one room at a time, deciding on what to keep, toss, and give away. Around five o'clock in the evening each day, Red had encouraged her to stop working and take a shower while he'd made dinner. After they'd finished their meal, Lizzy had taken it upon herself to grind the coffee beans so she could brew a fresh pot of her favorite roast to share between the two of them. Then they had brought their steaming mugs out to the porch and had relaxed on the bench, Bronn dozing at their feet.

And that's when either she'd begun sharing her favorite memories of Sam or Red had dived into his own storytelling about his best friend. The tales he had regaled her with had usually made her laugh, though sometimes they'd made her cry. Red knew that this nightly tradition they had taken up aided both of them with their grieving. Since they had begun it, he had noticed a lessening of her tears during the day as they worked around the house, and he'd noticed the sorrow that had been constricting his own heart was beginning to ease bit by bit.

It was because of their subsiding anguish that Red had begun to take notice of that nervous quirk of hers, of the heat that would suddenly blossom between them when their bodies accidentally brushed lightly against one another, of the undeniable pull he felt toward her that he kept doing his damnedest to squelch under his mental boot heel.

It was difficult. The something in his soul that had stirred slightly that first night was awakening more and more with each touch, accidental or innocent, and each look they shared, charged or not. It snarled quietly at him, pacing back and forth, chewing intermittently on its leash, hating to be restrained when all it wanted was to be released...to explore her.

It certainly wasn't easy to resist, especially since Elizabeth exhibited signs of being receptive to any advance he would make--that endearing tick was one of her unconscious signals.

His attention had been first drawn to it a couple nights ago. They'd both fallen asleep side by side on the bench outside. Red had startled awake to a light weight falling against his shoulder--it had been Lizzy's head. She'd been snoring softly, causing him to smile gently down at her. He would have allowed her to sleep longer against him if the air hadn't had such a chill bite to it.

Reluctantly, he'd called her name.

Stirring, she had stubbornly wrinkled her nose at him.

"Lizzy, you need to go to bed in a bed. Come on," he'd coaxed, stroking a lock of hair behind her ear just as she had opened her eyes.

She had blinked blearily up at him as she'd reoriented herself. Then her eyes had widened slightly as her mind had registered the situation and she had slowly straightened up.

"I think you drooled on me," he'd teased lightly, trying to put her at ease.

His words had had the opposite effect. "Sorry." Flushing, she had reached out to brush at his shirt.
Then--probably after realizing just how intimate that kind of touch seemed--she had snatched her hand away to run it through her hair, glancing up at him through her lashes.

Red hadn't categorized the look she gave him as flirtatious exactly, but there had been a warmth to it that he knew something in his own expression had answered, for her flush turned into a blush, the look in her eyes sharpening in interest. Before either of them could cross over that boundary that teetered on the edge of blurring, he'd physically shifted away from her, standing up. His heart had twisted strangely in his chest as he'd observed her...disappointment? Regret?

Red had then held out his hand to help her up, to take the sting from his putting that necessary distance between them. But as he pulled her to her feet, she had stood closer than was truly required, chest lightly brushing against his arm. He'd been very aware of the heat simmering between them, but before he could do anything, she had squeezed his hand, had murmured a quiet "good night," and had walked away from him.

After that night, Red had made a point to seat them both in the rocking chairs rather than the bench.

Brief moments similar to that had happened between them since that first night, but Lizzy hadn't verbally pushed him to revisit their open-ended conversation. That certainly made it easier for him to clamp down on his own desire and instead grasp hold of the reality of why they shouldn't do anything to jeopardize their relationship...that by his continuing to temper both their passions would ultimately, in the long run, protect her from harm--from any outside forces beyond his immediate control...and, yes, from even himself.

"I thought we'd talk about Sam's will this evening, Lizzy."

She rested her arms on the rock and looked up at him, her expression shuttered.

"I know you don't want to but it's important that you know what's in it. I promised the lawyer I'd go over it with you today." Actually, he'd told the lawyer--who was actually one of his...business associates...whom he and Sam both used--that he'd be the one to inform Elizabeth of her inheritance.

She arched a brow at him. "You can do that?"

"Well, I do have a bit of sway since I would've been your legal guardian if you'd've been underage," he hedged. Luckily she didn't question him, and he felt a slight twinge of guilt for taking advantage of her complete trust in him.

"I'm glad it's you who'll tell me," she said quietly after a moment's hesitation.

Red had known she would be. When he'd suggested for Lizzy to meet with the lawyer, or at least call him if she wasn't mentally prepared yet for seeing another person, she had shut down on him so frighteningly quickly that he hadn't dared to bring it up again--until now.

Knowing what was in the will would make Sam's death a concrete finality for her. Not that she was in denial...but it was as he had observed before: her emotions ran so deeply that reading Sam's will would be extremely difficult for her. It would mean that she would have to move on from her mourning period sooner rather than later. It probably made her feel guilty because she'd most likely think she hadn't grieved enough for him...that it was disrespectful to move on after nearly only one whole week. It probably scared her, too. She'd have to not only tolerate the idea of Sam's passing, she'd have to accept his death and live on in the world without him. She probably felt very alone.

But Red wouldn't abandon her to fend for herself. If she didn't know that by now, he'd soon have to find a way to assuage her fears.
"I can't read it myself yet, Red," she admitted quietly. "I know you have a photographic memory. Can you...would you just tell me what it says? In a nutshell?"

"The house and everything inside it is yours."

He watched as she closed her eyes, resting her chin on her arms.

"As is this property. The horses. He also left you quite a bit of money, Lizzy."

Her pained expression didn't change—not that he had expected it to. She had never been materialistic or greedy. He certainly wasn't surprised when she didn't even ask how much was left to her. He'd counted on that. Her dismissal of the figure—for now, at least—would allow him the wiggle room he desired to make sure the inheritance Sam had indeed left her would never run out.

Not that she needed to know that he, Red, would continue to funnel money her way.

He wasn't sure why he had to be so fucking devious about that, but his self-preserving—self-serving?—instinct was demanding that he keep that information to himself.

"What am I going to do with the house?" Her voice was a broken whisper and tears shone in her eyes. "Oh, Red, what am I going to do?"

Before he could respond, she continued in a rush of anxious, sorrowful words, "I knew this was going to happen. That I'd have to make this—this horrible decision!"

Then she lifted a pale arm, waving it in a emotion to encompass the grove, forest and property beyond. "I love this place more than anywhere else in the world. But...but with Sam gone? With all the memories of him haunting the hallways?" Her voice finally broke, lower lip trembling. "I can't be here all alone! And—and what about school? I'm not done yet. And I wasn't planning to come back to Nebraska after my four years. I'm not sure where I'm headed, but it wasn't back home. Not yet."

Tears trailed down her cheeks, glittering in the fading light of day. Red reached out and gently touched her smooth shoulder.

"I know it's difficult, Lizzy," he murmured, compassion gleaming in his eyes as he gazed down at her. "I know. But listen to me, sweetheart."

She dashed the tears from her face, watery eyes focusing up at him with an effort.

"Sam wouldn't want you feeling guilty about selling this place."

She shook her head in disagreement.

"No, I mean it. Really." Red was adamant. "He would understand the position you're in. He would know that this isn't the place for you right now. He wouldn't want you to abruptly dump your goals and forsake your dreams just to take care of some property. He'd want you to continue your education and to find a career that suits you, even if it takes you far away from here."

By the pensive expression on her face as she studied the rock she clung to, Red knew she was listening. "But...I just feel so guilty. So ungrateful."

"You? Ungrateful?" Red couldn't help the bark of rough laughter, and she glanced up at him, startled. "You are not ungrateful, Lizzy. In fact, I'd say you are quite the opposite."

Her gaze was uncertain, and he couldn't stop himself from reassuringly brushing her hair with the
tips of his fingers. "You've proven your character this weekend. You've put Sam first beyond yourself by cleaning the house, by organizing his things, by separating what needs to be kept, trashed, and given away. I know how difficult all that was for you, honey."

Elizabeth's eyes flickered to his again at his gentle empathy.

"Do those selfless actions seem like the actions of an ungrateful woman?" He shook his head at her, answering his own question. "I think not."

"It still feels wrong," she confided softly.

"Because you're still grieving. You are too hard on yourself, Lizzy. You always have been. Give yourself some time." It would help when she went back to school next week. The separation from this place would give her perspective on the grander picture of her life. "I'll help you when you need me to. You won't have to go it alone."

After a brief moment, she nodded. They both fell silent for a time. Then she ventured, "The animals, Red...."

"Don't worry about the horses or Bronn. I can find someplace for the stud and Conny to live where you can still see them...if you want. We can discuss that. And Bronn can certainly go with you to Washington."

"The dorms don't allow pets."

"Who says you have to stay in the dorms? There are plenty of apartments in Seattle that allow animals." He smiled to see a bit of hopeful light come back into her eyes. "I'll help you with that too."

"Red...." He looked at her and she gave him a genuine smile. It was small, but it was real. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, sweetheart," he smiled back. "Now, why don't you come out of there?" He scooted backwards until he sat on the soft moss and then patted the space next to him. "Let's look at the sky. Ah--there's Polaris." He lifted a hand and pointed to the shining speck of silver.

And just like he had hoped, he had given her the diversion she had needed to distract herself from her grief. Lizzy climbed out of the pond, water streaming in rivulets down her slender body. "Remember when we used to do that all the time when I was a kid? Watch the stars?"

"Mmm. I believe you used to call the activity 'stargazing'...which was rather poetic of you," he teased.

She wrinkled her nose at him as she stooped to whisk her towel up and off the ground. "And Sam would always know exactly where to look for certain constellations."

Red watched furtively as she dried herself briskly off. She had to know what she was doing by bending and shimmying like that.

That part of his soul that was desirous, that he had leashed so tightly within, growled long and low, aroused by the sight.

She cut a fine figure, did his Lizzy.

Red cleared his throat and shifted over to make more room for her. She eased down beside him,
careful not to touch him, but she was close enough to where he could feel the warmth radiating from her.

"I remember Sam gave me a book on constellations."

"I remember it was one of your favorites," he murmured.

"It's still upstairs in my old bookcase," she told him, her expression rather wistful as nostalgic memories drifted through her mind. "But the pages are ripped and the colors are kind of faded."

"It was definitely well-loved."

"Yeah," she smiled, tilting her head back to look up at the darkening sky. "I was fascinated by how nearly each constellation is named after a mythical beast or hero."

"I lost count of how many Greek mythology books I bought you after you devoured the constellation anthology," Red grinned, turning his eyes up to the stars as well.

"You and Sam both! They're all upstairs, Red." Then her expression grew rather impish as she glanced over at him. "And it's because of those books you both got me that I completely aced my Greek mythology course last year."

"Of course you did," he snorted quietly, shaking his head at her affectionately. "I'd be shocked if you hadn't!"

"Knowing all those stories behind the constellations...it made them come alive for me." Her tone was thoughtful. "So many people think of space as bitterly cold. Indifferent. Empty and completely devoid of life. But...."

"But...?" he encouraged her when she fell silent.

"But...." she continued a little hesitantly, "ever since knowing the stories behind the stars, well.... I began to see space as...an ocean. An ocean of poetry. Stories. Of...radiance." She shrugged her bare shoulders self-consciously, running an embarrassed hand through her hair.

He was charmed. "Tell me."

"Well.... I mean, not only do the stars tell all these incredible stories, it's like they themselves are alive, glowing like jewels. Like rubies, sapphires, diamonds...like flecks of gold and silver."

He raised a curious brow at her descriptive, rather lyrical color choices.

"The youngest stars are blue and white," she explained, voice becoming stronger as confidence and enthusiasm overcame embarrassment. "The oldest are yellow, orange, and red. Even though we can't see their colors with our naked eyes, I've seen photos taken by the Hubble." She turned her face to his, hers alight with the simple joy of sharing her sense of wonder with him. "They're glorious, Red. They shimmer and burn with their own vitality. How can can space be a desolate wasteland when there's so much life?"

Christ, she was so beautiful. Her inky hair and black bathing suit blended into the night around them so that the rest of her bared skin seemed to glisten out from the darkness. His gaze traced her narrow face, fey-like in the dusky light of evening.

Then their eyes met. She held his steadily, her own suddenly fierce and unguarded. And all too knowing.
"You don't regret kissing me, do you, Red?"

_Shit._ He had unconsciously revealed too much. "Lizzy--"

"Don't lie to me," she hissed before he could deflect her question entirely. "Why won't you just admit that there's something--something _here_?" She gestured to the empty space between them.

"Because it's wrong!" The words escaped him before he could consider them, and he winced at how insensitive they were. _Fuck._ "We are both grieving--"

"And not in our right minds, yadda, yadda, _whatever_, Red," she interrupted, shaking her head angrily. "That's not quite it and you know it. I know it, too. What is it, really?" she demanded, frustrated. "Is it the age difference? How can you think _that's_ wrong?"

_/That's part of it, baby._ "How can you not?" His eyes flashed heatedly as he leapt behind this excuse-no, this _valid_ reason—to keep the wall up between them. "I am twenty-five years older than you."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You mean to tell me that all the women you've dated—who you've slept with—have been your age?"

At her pointed question, Red immediately surged to his feet to put physical distance between them. "Stop it, Elizabeth!" he ground out, moving away. He wasn't going to do this. Not now. Not _ever._ Not with her.

"No!" She scrabbled upright, stalking after him. "So I'm younger than you. So what? Red? Red! Don't walk away from this." Boldly she reached out, grabbing his arm before he could make it very far.

He whirled around, eyes blazing. Elizabeth gasped and took a startled step back, but he followed, large hands grasping her arms as he pressed his body roughly against hers.

Her heart pounded.

His soul bayed.

"You want me," she whispered in...shock? Declaration? Awe?

He was too busy battling his inner, lustful demons to figure it out. But he wouldn't insult her any longer by trying to deny his desire with words. After being constantly betrayed by his body and mind, he wouldn't make a mockery of the _something_ brimming between them.

They both deserved better than lies.

"You're young yet, Lizzy. You don't know what you want. What you're asking for," he growled softly, his lips running over her brow. He could feel her quivering slightly against him.

She pulled back, eyes flashing angrily up into his at his patronizing arrogance. "I know what I _feel_," she snapped, vexed. "Don't you dare presume to tell me otherwise!"

Red stared down at her. She was so devastatingly gorgeous in that moment, with her glaring eyes dazzling him and her fiery tone rolling over him and the confidence and strength pouring out of her, burning within her, that the leashed prisoner in his mind snapped free with a raging, victorious howl.

His mouth descended on hers and he was kissing her with the passion he'd been denying himself since she was eighteen years old. The boundary between them was not just blurred now—it was
practically non-existent. The wall he'd been painstakingly building to protect her was crumbling down around them—soon it would be in ruins if they didn't stop.

But he couldn't make himself stop. He didn't want to. And neither did she.

His hands released her arms and he gathered her firmly against him. It wasn't until he held her so dizzyingly close that he realized she was just of the right height so she could slide her own arms up and around his shoulders without having to stand on her tiptoes and strain.

Then her teeth briefly and unexpectedly caught his lower lip, lightly suckling, and he growled low in his throat at the sensuality of her tease.

Feeling her arch into him at the rather primal sound, he caught her silken mouth in yet another, harder kiss, his large hands moving down her figure, relishing the feel of the smooth, bare skin of her back, fingers just grazing her ass before trailing up her stomach to hover near her throat.

Goosebumps had risen all over her body and she shivered.

The slight motion was enough to pierce the heady passion whirling between them, to make him come back to himself. He tenderly cupped her face in his palms, easing their kiss to a slower rhythm to where he could mentally claw through the fervent haze of pleasure and gather and breathe one, reluctantly coherent thought: "We shouldn't."

"....I want to."

Red lifted his head just enough to look into her clear blue eyes.

A woman gazed back at him...a woman who may be young, but who knew what she wanted right now. Bold, yes, but certainly not brazen enough to make a further move on him now that the fury of passion had quieted some—but it hadn't deserted her.

Nor had it left him.

Red could read the desire in her sweetly honest eyes, a profound yearning that matched his. He knew by fervently searching her face that she desperately wanted to act on what shivered and ached between them...she was just waiting for him to abandon his reluctance.

A fierce protectiveness welled in his heart, and with it his ardent desire for her, until both intense emotions overcame all cautious uncertainties. The dark, aroused wildness in him crooned in satisfaction as he released his lingering hesitation and surrendered to temptation.

"Come here, sweetheart," he murmured.

Elizabeth slowly knelt down with him on the soft bed of cool moss. Once she had settled herself in front of him, he gravely and silently looked into her guileless face. Then he carefully reached out, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear, hoping the familiar gesture of affection would put her more at ease. His fingers continued to stroke those damp strands until he felt her slowly begin to relax.

She bowed her head slightly, obviously enjoying his tender ministrations, but Red could discern that she was now trembling, both, he assumed, from longing...and from nerves.
"Look at me," he requested gently.

Those lovely eyes fearlessly pierced his.

His fingertips moved from her dark hair to brush against her pronounced collarbones. "How long has it been?"

She flushed self-consciously, knowing exactly what he meant by the question.

Upon seeing her hesitation, he softened his coaxing tone even more. "Ah--truth now, Lizzy."

Dropping her gaze, she murmured, "I haven't been with anyone since Derek."

Her answer surprised him, but he dared not let it show on his face lest she think he was judging her. So, she was inexperienced then...practically a virgin. That prick from her teen years hardly counted as a sexual partner.

Part of him was quite pleased by the fact that she hadn't been with anyone else, although he couldn't help but feel bemused. Over the last couple years, she had dated all those young men and had not bedded them, and yet she would allow him such an intimacy?

Red caressed her cheek, bringing her eyes back to his. "Do you trust me?"

"More than anyone."

Her sincerity moved him and this time he was the one who looked away. His gaze roved over her lithe figure, the fingers of his left hand following their amorous trail while the ones of his right made their way to the back of her neck where her bikini top was tied.

*May I?* his touch asked.

She shifted closer between his thighs in answer, moving her heavy hair out of the way so he could untie the strings easier.

The two triangles slid down her full breasts as he loosened the knot, baring them little by little to the chill air.

Red watched, his blood heating, his flesh stirring even more as his fingers then slid down her spine to deftly pluck at the tie around her back. The silky top fell abruptly into her lap and he swiftly caught her hands in his before she could cross her arms self-consciously over herself.

"Don't," he murmured.

Lizzy let loose a shuddering breath as his eyes took in all that pale, milky skin, her hardening nipples, the old cigarette burns that were like silver tears trailing down her right breast. The tips of his fingers brushed lightly against those scars before both warm palms slid around those sweet curves, holding them.

Then he met her eyes. A charming blush stained her cheeks.

"Beautiful girl." He watched, delighted, as the bright color deepened.

Red's white teeth flashed at her in a smile as he dropped one hand to the green beneath them while he gently wrapped his other arm around her body. Then he shifted, moving her with care down to the ground before closing the space between them, joining her there.
Unhurriedly propping himself up on an elbow, he lowered his face to touch his nose to the sloping curve between her neck and shoulder.

As he inhaled deeply, her pure and clean scent mixed with those of the grove filled his lungs, arousing him further. Unable to help himself, he placed a soft kiss on one pert breast while his other hand slid up her sleek thigh to rest on her flat stomach.

As he felt one of her palms slide up his arm to curl tentatively around his shoulder, he lifted his head to meet her eyes.

She gazed up at him, her expression filled with desirous trepidation.

And it gave him pause.

"It's not too late to stop this," he told her softly, lips dipping down to whisper against her ear. "In fact, if at any point you need me to--"

"Ssshh," she shushed him, her slim hand lifting to cup his cheek before she quickly caught his mouth in a hungry kiss that expressed without a doubt that she was certain and imperiously demanded that he please stop treating her as if she were made of glass.

Oh, Red could oblige her.

And so they explored one another, kissing, tasting, and becoming comfortably acquainted with more than a few of their bodies' secrets as they went.

He learned quickly that if he traced his fingers over her breast just so right before dipping his mouth to gently take her rosy nipple between his lips, she would writhe sinuously beneath him, shivering pants escaping her every time his tongue would flick over that sensitive bud of flesh.

The man also found out that if he suckled the side of her neck just above her threading pulse while teasing her other breast with his fingertips, she would immediately arch her back, a soft sort of purr caressing over him, making him loose a low growl in response, making his body ache with anticipation for their union.

Her bikini bottoms eventually slipped their way off her shapely hips, and his long fingers drifted downwards, deftly and smoothly slipping into her and pleasuring her until she finally snarled quietly at him, yanking impatiently at the belt on his jeans.

"Patience, minxlette," he grinned with an affectionate chuckle, sliding everything off his ass until all he wore was a skin-tight, black undershirt. "It's a virtue, you know. One we should strive for," he teased, hovering over her as he gently positioned himself between her silken thighs.

"I've exercised enough *patience* to last me a lifetime," Elizabeth replied with an impish impertinence as her beautiful eyes met his, her heart suddenly right there, shining brightly in them.

Then in the next moment they were veiled from his regard as she gasped breathlessly, hips rocking slowly with his. He felt one shaking palm hook around the back of his head as he buried his face against her neck, adjusting to the feeling of being with her, around her...in her.

Red had prepared himself for how his thrumming body would react with hers as they languidly moved together, crushing the velvet moss beneath them. Of course it was pleasurable. Of course it was exquisite.

What he *hadn't* been prepared for was the way waves of emotions he hadn't felt in *years* washed
over him, through him, making his heart throb, his thoughts swim.

Astounded, he rolled to hold her above him.

Her sapphire eyes burned iridescently like the stars wheeling overhead as she gazed down at him, her slender hands clenching tightly in his shirt as she sensually edged them both closer and closer and closer....

In that searingly brief moment in time, nothing else existed outside of the two of them.

They were islanded in a stream of stars.
Thank you to my awesome betas for their encouragement and allowing me to bounce ideas off of them for this chapter.

And this point in the story came just in time for Lizzington week on Tumblr! How amazing is that timing? Seriously.

I've borrowed the phrase "islanded in a stream of stars" from the reimagined show Battlestar Galactica. If you haven't watched it, you definitely should!

The year is 2006. Lizzy is twenty-one years old. Red is forty-six years old.

Thank you for reading, as always :) your comments are so appreciated I can't even tell you!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Elizabeth didn't think that she'd ever taken a shower so quickly in her whole life.

As she let the hot spray pound on her body to wash away the sweat, dirt, and bits of moss that stubbornly clung to her, she vigorously scrubbed shampoo into her hair. While those foamy suds slipped from her dripping locks to run down her back, she swiftly lathered her front with bar soap and wondered what time it was.

In her haste to get upstairs she'd forgotten to glance at the grandfather clock in the hallway. Maybe it was around ten o'clock. By the way her tummy rumbled loudly with hunger, she knew it definitely wasn't midnight yet--she was never really hungry after it got to be late at night, even if she hadn't eaten dinner.

Once they had taken care of the horses and had fed Bronn, Red had promised to make them a couple grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner.

Of course, she hadn't quite heard him at first because she'd been much too focused on the way he had been pressing her back against the wall of the barn. His large hands had been on either side of her head and his hips had pushed into hers so that she couldn't move, his lips lightly, teasingly, nipping and tracing hers until she had gasped out a shivery "What?" that had made him laugh. Then he'd given her an amused peck on the tip of her nose before repeating himself a second time.

"With avocado? And bacon?" she had asked hopefully, her expression rather wistful.

"Anything you want," he'd replied, eyes glinting in such a way that she had known he hadn't been referring to just the sandwiches.

God. Even the memory of that gravelly tone of his was enough to make her toes curl with desire.

Liz stuck her head under the spray and slicked the aromatic foam from her hair, giving the dark mass a thorough rinsing before shutting the water off. A giant plume of steam followed her out of the bathroom as she made a beeline toward her dresser.

For the first time, she knew exactly what she wanted to wear for him.

A smile spread across Liz's face and she shivered a little in delight, hands digging through the top drawer, discarding colorful thongs and pairs of patterned panties until she found what she was looking for.

She was happy that she didn't have to mentally and emotionally--even physically--dance around her desire and his reluctant passion anymore.

Why the Hell had they waited so long?

They'd been traversing the blurred boundaries for years, and had been crossing over them intermittently--sometimes inadvertently, sometimes purposefully--for the last half-week. But since he had been so intent on corralling his sensual nature, she had tried to follow his example--kind of--if only to make certain that she wouldn't overstep herself and make things...uncomfortable.
They had already been shuddering on unfamiliar, tentative ground as it was.

But Elizabeth was young and her youth made her impetuous.

Something within her soul that had been on the verge of tearing loose for days had finally snapped its tether when she had seen the intensity in his eyes as he'd looked at her, when she had felt the sexual tension thrumming between them like a stretched rubber band that had been plucked over and over again.

That vibration had been so incredibly tantalizing, so deliciously sensual. And she had known without a doubt he'd felt it too. Why else would he have gazed at her in such a way?

The question "You don't regret kissing me, do you, Red?" had escaped her before she could consider the wisdom of the way she'd worded it and the timing of bringing it up. Not that she needed to be anxious about that now. What mattered was that her question had lead to him finally--finally--acknowledging his feelings for her. Maybe not with words, exactly, but his lips, hands, and body had spoken sweetly enough for him.

He'd been like a cornered predator at first, all vicious snarls and unsheathed, verbal claws--but then.... God, that kiss...and then what followed after.... The way he'd looked at her as he'd peeled the bikini off of her...it was as if she had been the loveliest woman he'd ever seen.

Elizabeth's vanity had preened and she had dared to believe the lie...at least for a little while.

Beautiful girl.

Red had revered her body, admiring, appreciating, and showing her exactly how a man could pleasure a woman while at the same time teaching her about herself by helping her begin to discover her likes, dislikes, what made her snarl with arousal...what made her whimper pleadingly...what made her moan in satiation. She had a feeling he would be able to illuminate the certain...appetites?--she supposed that was the word--she probably didn't even know she possessed.

Liz had known some things about herself because of her times with Derek, but the hormonal lust she'd experienced with him when she'd been a teenager absolutely paled in comparison to the passion she'd experienced with Red tonight.

After playing with her body to the point where she'd thought that she couldn't take it anymore, he had skillfully sent her over the edge. Her release had been blindingly intense. She had muffled her soft cry against his neck, muscles quivering all over as she had bucked against him.

But he certainly hadn't been as quiet as she had been.

Red had come very soon afterward, swiftly pulling out of her body so his essence would spill onto her navel as his loud, hissing groan had torn through the night, ripping the serene silence to shreds. Then he had lain on top of her for a moment, shuddering, his heartbeat hammering in time with hers. As she'd slid her hands up his back, feeling his spine beneath the sweat-dampened shirt he wore, he had gathered himself considerately up on his forearms to free her from some of his weight.

And the look in his eyes when he'd gazed down at her...she had never seen him look at her like that before. Those fleeting emotions had seemed like a torrent of stunned amazement, of quiet wonder, of hesitant disbelief layered with heated ardor and gentle tenderness. She still didn't know what it all meant—or if she was even correct in reading him.

The man was an enigma more often than not.
Liz shivered at the vivid memory as she pulled on the dusky indigo, lace boyshorts that actually revealed more than they hid. The pattern of the lace dipped and whirled evenly around her small hips and ass, the dark triangle of trimmed hair somewhat visible in front. It was the sexiest lingerie she owned, and she wanted to be...well, sexy for him.

Slipping on the matching lace bralette, she braced her hands on her waist and looked at herself in the mirror, resisting the ridiculous urge to put on makeup. Why bother with that? She didn't want to look like a bought and paid for whore...but maybe a little dusting of rouge wouldn't hurt?

_Ugh, stop it, Liz._ she silently chided herself. _He's seen you without makeup plenty of times--tonight, even!_ Most of it had melted away when she'd been swimming, and then the rest had probably come off on Red's lips...on his body....

Flushing, she wiggled into her pajama shorts and the oversized, slouchy hoodie. This getup certainly wasn't chic, but she didn't think parading around the house in her lingerie was the most prudent idea. It was too blatantly wanton--even after what they'd done.

Elizabeth critically eyed herself in the mirror, noticing just how waifish she looked with this particular sweatshirt on. Sudden apprehension washed over her, leaving her rather pale. She had to admit it...she was nervous again, fretful that even after all they'd done, he would reject her, telling her that what they'd done at Terabithia has been a huge mistake and that they shouldn't do anything else like that ever again.

And why might he say it? Well, because she was young, a woman who was just barely out of girlhood and he'd been a man for decades. Would he take one look at her and think of her as a kid again? His best friend’s little girl?

She worried her lower lip as her anxious thoughts chased themselves.

He_ had_ implied earlier he thought the score of years between them was significant enough to be a problem. But now that their passion had cooled, would he allow his head to hold sway over his heart?

The very idea made her afraid and _that_ made her furious.

Snarling, she fiercely tore the hoodie off her body and threw it angrily to the bed.

She'd be damned before she allowed him to keep her at an arm's length again!

Impatiently, she rummaged around in another dresser drawer, finally pulling out a charcoal-gray camisole--it just happened to match up with the shorts she wore.

Elizabeth slipped it on and scrutinized her reflection even more severely. The top was like a second skin. It was so tight that her nipples actually showed through. She bared her teeth at herself in something that wasn't quite a smile.

There. Just let him just try to deny she was a woman _now._

Foregoing the makeup, she instead brushed out her long hair. The shortest strands were already drying and curling haphazardly around her brow and ears. She winced at how it looked, but then berated herself for her vanity.

For God's sake, he'd seen her like this a hundred times before!

Resisting the ridiculous urge to stall here in her old bedroom for stupid reasons like her hair not
looking its best, Liz turned on her heel, slipped out of her room and ghosted down the stairs.

The aroma of freshly-cooked bacon filled the house and her stomach growled demandingly at her. Sticking her head into the dark kitchen, she glanced around, somewhat surprised that Red wasn't there waiting for her. After throwing a curious look behind her, she saw that the light was on in the guest room—his bedroom.

Somewhat hesitantly, Liz glided as quietly as she could to his door. It wasn't shut completely. The opening was just large enough for half her body to fit through, so she peeked inside.

Red stood with his back to her, unfolding an undershirt in his hands. The sight of his muscled thighs and tight ass in those dark green boxer briefs momentarily distracted her. Her mouth went dry and she swallowed thickly, eyes appreciatively traveling up his broad back—and then she inhaled sharply, barely managing to bite back a loud gasp of shock.

The planes of the right side of his back were smooth, rippling with toned muscle. But that starkly contrasted with nearly the entire left side of his upper back. A horrendous, mangled mass of old scar tissue marred him. His skin was rough and knotted like an old, gnarled oak tree. Whorls looped from the top of the upper trapezius and sloped down his shoulder blade.

Oh, Red....

What in God's name would have caused such a grievous injury?

The man shifted and Elizabeth was suddenly aware of him watching her reflection in the mirror that hung in front of them. His intent expression was peculiarly shuttered—not quite blank, but not quite showing any emotion she could easily name either.

She gazed back at him in the mirror, flushing a deep scarlet, wondering why she felt like she'd been caught committing some kind of atrocious crime.

Then after two more heartbeats, he abruptly released her eyes and pulled on the shirt, hiding that horrible injury from sight, before turning around to face her.

They each stood silently for a moment, looking at one another.

She wanted to ask—oh how her curiosity burned within her! But something hard and unyielding in his expression stilled her tongue.

Liz wavered, suddenly quite unsure of her welcome—of him. It was as if a stern stranger stood half-naked before her. But in the very next breath, Red arched a brow at her and dryly asked, "Well? Aren't you going to come in?"

And immediately that weirdly surreal moment was gone. The man she'd known forever was back.

She gave him her best unsure-but-game smile and sidled into the room. That was when she noticed two plates of sandwiches on his bed, which had been turned down to reveal the soft, white sheets and two plumped pillows.

"I thought dinner in bed would be, in a word, sublime," he explained, seeing where she was looking. Her stomach chose that very moment to rumble loudly and Red chuckled. "Have at it, Lizzy. I'm starved too."

She perched primly on the edge of the huge mattress, wondering how on Earth she was going to delicately eat this monster of a sandwich without looking like a pig—or spilling it all over herself.
He seemed to have no such qualms. After easing down onto the bed, he picked up his plate and moved to sit opposite of her, leaning comfortably back against the headboard, one leg casually crossed over the other. Then his teeth began to tear lustily into his sandwich without a care in the world that avocado and globs of bacon grease were oozing out between the slices of bread and dropping onto the white ceramic.

How the Hell could the man make messily devouring a grilled cheese appear so sexy? It just wasn’t fair!

Liz self-consciously bit into hers and she hummed immediately in delight, eyes closing slightly. It was amazing! Everything...the salty cheddar cheese, the fresh avocado, the crispy bacon, and the butter-fried bread...tasted divine.

"This is seriously the best sandwich ever!" she told him after she'd chewed and swallowed about five huge bites. Bacon grease slid down her fingers and she held up one hand to lick it daintily away.

"It tastes so good because you’re probably just really hungry," he replied. His voice had a strange lilt to it, so she turned her head to look at him, sucking lightly on her index finger to get at the remaining bacon grease.

Red was very obviously checking her out. He held his sandwich, momentarily forgotten, in his hand, a shining rivulet of grease running down the inside of his wrist as he stared openly at her. His hungry eyes traveled intently from her finger in her mouth, to her breasts--they lingered there for a span--before moving up to her face again. As she slowly removed her finger, the heat in his gaze vanished and an amused grin broke out across his lips.

"You have avocado on your cheek," he chuckled. Before she could do anything about it herself, he reached out and wiped at the corner of her mouth with his napkin.

His action brought back a memory from her childhood so intense it shocked her to a frozen stillness.

"Wipe your mouth, Lizzy darling. Like this, see? Ah...there's a good girl!"

Her eyes narrowed sharply. Did he see her as an immature girl more than he saw her as a young woman?

Her temper--born out of that resurfacing anxiety--flared.

"I'm not a child, Red." The hard words were out of her mouth before she could swallow them.

An eyebrow slowly rose at her unyielding tone and he carefully pulled his hand away from her. Then he regarded her silently for a moment before responding in a steady voice, "No one said you were, Elizabeth."

She knew he used her full name to prove the point, but it irked her rather than reassured her. Lifting her chin, she quietly reminded, "You did."

He cocked his head slightly in confusion.

"At Terabithia. Earlier," she waved an impatient hand toward the windows.

Comprehension dawned on him and he shook his head. "No, I didn't. I believe I mentioned that there was a rather significant age gap between us," he corrected gently. "But I know you're a woman, Lizzy." His eyes gleamed flirtatiously at her, but she bit her lip self-consciously, still not quite ready to drop it.
She just had to be sure.

"So...you don't have a problem with it anymore?"

"I think we're rather past that now, aren't we?" A purr had crept into his voice and her toes curled despite herself.

"But when you look at me, you don't see me as a little girl...do you?"

To avoid his gaze, she stared stubbornly down at the remnants of her sandwich, doing her best to quell her nerves and appear composed. But she knew she wasn't really succeeding because she could feel his perceptive eyes on her, peering intently past the emotionless wall she was trying to hide behind.

God, she should've known better than to try and conceal her true feelings from him.

He understood her too well. He always had.

Red set his plate down. Reaching out, he took hers away from her and set it aside as well.

"Sweetheart."

Elizabeth met his gaze uncertainly.

His expression was gentle in a very familiar way, but it was also, in a new way, quite sensually masculine. It made her breath catch, and her heart thudded sharply in her chest.

"I will always remember you as you were when you were young," he confided honestly. "How could I not?" His eyes searched hers. "It's not quite fair of you to expect otherwise from me, Lizzy," he softly chided, though not unkindly. "I've watched you grow up."

Her mouth opened to protest but he held up a finger, stopping her before she could speak. "Wait. Let me finish."

She closed her mouth, watching him warily.

His smile was heady. "But when I look at you as I'm looking at you now," the backs of his fingers caressed down her arm, "I see a woman. An intelligent, passionate, vibrant, sweet, utterly ravishing minx who let me have my way with her earlier." His teeth flashed in a quick grin. "Or perhaps it was the other way around?"

Elizabeth blushed at his tease, now more than somewhat mollified. "I don't have enough experience to...umm...'have my way with you,' Red." She slanted a shyly coquettish look at him through her thick lashes.

His fingers slid slowly down her back as his hand fell away from her. The warmly intimate expression in his eyes was going a long way toward easing her disquiet. "Why don't you come over here, then?" he invited suggestively, patting the empty spot beside him.

She ran a hand through her damp hair, admittedly a little nervous. "I guess the only way to get experience is to do it."

Then her eyes widened at her own, unplanned pun as Red gave a bark of appreciative laughter.

As her eyes lifted fleetingly to his, he must have seen her uncertainty whirling with her longing, for his expression softened. "Honestly? That's it exactly, honey."
Liz gazed at him, hesitating.

"I promise I won't laugh at you, if that's what you're worried about...."

She pursed her lips, trying to cover her feelings of insecurity behind the hauter. Was there anything in this world the man couldn't discern about her? "You won't think I'm...silly?"

His eyes were serious. "Hardly 'silly.'"

Steeling herself, Elizabeth scooted closer until she was sitting upright next to him against the headboard.

God, she felt as if she were strung as tightly as a freaking violin string.

Red must've felt her tension because he wrapped an arm reassuringly around her, soothingly rubbing her shoulder before running his fingers slowly through her hair. She closed her eyes briefly, physically and emotionally sinking into his tender caresses and truly enjoying the feeling of sensuality growing between them.

When she was finally relaxed enough to feel her confidence from earlier resurfacing, she lifted her head and glanced up at him.

He gave her an easy smile, though his eyebrow was quirking slightly as if to say, Well?

Accepting his unspoken challenge, she leaned in and kissed him. He tasted of butter and salt from the cheese and bacon, but she found that she didn’t mind in the slightest.

Besides, she probably tasted the same!

He allowed her to lead for a time before he began to give as much as he took.

Their breathing grew heavier. Teeth clicked. Tongues danced.

Her hands wrapped around his body while his lips drifted from hers to fasten on her neck, softly sucking. She growled low in her throat in response to his ardor, left hand accidentally brushing against his groin as she shifted closer.

They both went still at the touch and she spared a glance down. With her heart pounding in her chest, she reached out, this time purposefully brushing her fingers against the bulge straining there. Then she heard Red's sharp intake of breath. Encouraged, she stroked it through the cotton again. And again. And again.

Liz glanced up. His eyes were slitted, his breathing rather ragged.

An impish grin twitched at her lips.

Keeping one hand busy with him, she used her other to shimmy out of her shorts. Then she straddled him, his impressive erection now jutting out of the satin flap to be cradled between the heat of their bodies.

His large palms steadied her before sliding ardently along the lace of her panties. "This is pretty," he murmured admiringly, pulling lightly at the scalloped edge.

"Thank you." She wriggled teasingly down against him and he groaned quietly in delight, obviously enjoying the friction.
His wandering hands found the hem of her camisole. "Are you wearing something underne--ah. You are," he grinned as he peeled it off of her. After tossing the shirt away from them, his hands went to cup her breasts, fingers tracing the indigo lace of the bralette. "Mmm...a matching set. Very nice, honey."

"It is the mark of a lady to have matching lingerie, you know," she told him breathlessly, more than somewhat distracted by the way his thumbs were stroking her through the silky material.

"Is it now?" he chuckled in fond amusement, moving the gossamer cups aside. Then he placed one palm against the middle of her back, fingers spanning her smooth flesh as he pushed her even closer against him so he could give his undivided attention to her breasts.

God, this was what she loved the most. This was what turned her on more than anything else...and he knew it.

Breathy pants and husky moans escaped her lips as her head fell back, her long, dark hair sweeping across his thighs while his mouth suckled her nipples, his tongue whirling and laving them to rigid attention. Her hands clamped down tightly on his shoulders as she writhed wantonly against his hardness, teasing herself--and him.

"Lizzy," he finally rasped in her ear. It wasn't quite a plea. She knew he was too proud to ever plead for anything.

But he was ready.

So was she.

After slipping the wisp of lace down her legs and after removing that particular, dark green obstacle of his as well, she determinedly positioned herself over the large head of his cock and then slowly sank down on top of him, her shuddering sigh answering his aroused but intimately quiet snarl as he was completely enveloped by her warmth.

His firm hands eagerly grasped her narrow hips but, true to his word, he graciously left it up to her to set their pace, to experiment and learn for herself how she liked it.

She moved languorously at first, curiously playing with all the wonderful, physical sensations as she slipped and slid along his thick length.

But then....oh....there....

She closed her eyes tightly, a gasp of longing escaping her as she enthusiastically increased their pace to chase the overwhelmingly enticing sensation she saw in her mind's eye as a glorious, falling star.

Then she felt Red cup her face in his warm hands, and her eyes flickered hazily open to look at him as they swiftly moved and clung together.

Those eyes of his...they were so green and they burned with an inner fire, a need that was more than just wanting to indulge in physical lust, more than just desiring sex.

It was more than anything so basely carnal, and yet at the same time, it really was just as starkly simple.

Mine, his eyes flashed possessively as he thrust.
A shivering sigh escaped her as she pressed her flushed brow to his, moving to take him deep within.

Yours.

The fingertips of one hand traced her cheek just as he caught her lips with his in a searing kiss. His other hand trailed sensuous fire down to her breasts, once again tugging and caressing the rosy buds of her nipples in the way he knew she loved.

The duality of tantalizing sensations in addition to everything else she was feeling physically--emotionally--sent her spiraling down deep within herself to fiercely hover just at the pinnacle, prolonging the pleasure, their connection....

Then she gasped breathily, trembling as she came, but she kept moving her hips because he still needed to find his release....

"....Lizzy!"

There.

Utterly replete, she slumped against him, her body thrumming deliciously in the molten afterglow of their loving.

Red released his tight hold on her waist and wrapped his arms carefully around her, gently cradling her as he fought to catch his own breath as well.

They sat like that for a time while they each recovered--he propped comfortably against the headboard and she lightly straddling his lap, head resting on his shoulder.

"You waited for me," she finally whispered against his neck.

An affectionate chuckle rumbled down deep in his chest as he cleaned them both up. With a flick of his wrist, he tossed the Kleenex on the floor before rewrapping his arms around her. "It is the mark of a gentleman to do his damnedest to see to the woman first, you know," he told her, imitating her tone of voice from earlier.

Elizabeth snorted. "You're not like most men." Well, that she'd heard of, anyway.

"And you, darling girl, are not like most women."

Surprised by the honest sincerity in his voice, she lifted her head to look at him.

He didn't smile, but the expression on his face was openly tender. "And before you ask, yes, I'm quite serious." He stroked a lock of damp hair back behind her ear.

Liz wished he would elaborate but he didn't seem to be inclined to do so for whatever personal reasons he might have, and she wouldn't push him. She would have to be content with taking his word for it.

Wasn't that how it always had been between them? The give and take of trust?

A small smile ghosted at the corners of her lips.

Their relationship may have metamorphosed and spread its wings tonight, but there were aspects that remained the same...and probably always would.

In and amidst all this change, that single truth was a comforting thought.
Thank you for reading! Your comments and kudos are appreciated always! :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Four days later, Elizabeth found herself back at the university, doing her best to assimilate once again into campus life. It certainly wasn't easy and, at first, it was extremely surreal. She missed Sam so much. She felt the loss of him constantly...it was like an ache that wouldn't quite subside, throbbing dully in the back of her mind, down deep in her heart.

Sometimes she could ignore it, especially when she made the effort to apply herself single-mindedly to her studies. But there would be times when Liz would see something that sharply reminded her of him, or she would be walking to class, gazing up at her dorm room ceiling, staring at her laptop screen, reading a library or text book, or even sipping on her coffee, and a poignant memory would suddenly flash before her eyes.

Most times she could leash her agony before the tears would come, but there were moments when she couldn't, and she'd bow her head to hide her face behind her long hair, hoping to God no one would see (or if she were in the dorms, hear) her crying.

She'd taken some of Sam's things with her back to Seattle: a couple of worn, leather-bound books (which stayed in her dorm by her bedside), a picture of the two of them (which also stayed in her dorm), a piece of naturally-shed antler from a stag (which she kept in her purse), one of the smaller wooden wind chimes from the porch (which hung at her window). Bringing these to Washington had been Red's idea.

At first she'd fiercely rebelled against it, demanding to know how in God's name would having things like that around help her through the grieving process? Wouldn't seeing these extremely personal effects make her pain even worse?

It had been very late, two nights before she was to fly back to school. She'd been lying naked in Red's arms, scowling uncertainly at up at the ceiling after voicing her opinion on the matter. She remembered that he'd been silent for a time, probably considering how best to handle her current mood (her moods had become more and more volatile the closer the date of departure had loomed). Then he'd propped himself up on an arm to look down into her face. He'd caught her flashing eyes with his and she'd been unable to look away.

"Trust me," he had said simply. "They will help."

And then she had clamped her mouth shut tightly, embarrassed, ashamed. Out of anyone, he would know best, wouldn't he? Liz's heated reluctance had faded as she'd closed her eyes in acquiescence, and then had kissed him softly in contrition. She'd meant for the kiss to be gentle, and it had been--at first. But then the mood between them had changed yet again and he had slid his large hands down her body with the intent to arouse rather than soothe.

As she had parted her legs to take him deep inside her, she'd perceived that he had probably realized that the small bubble they had existed in for nearly a week and a half--a bubble of packing the house up in boxes during the day, of eating comfort food when they were hungry, of making love when the mood would strike--would soon be popped and they both would have to abruptly--reluctantly--return to the indifferent, real world...she'd go back to college, and he'd go back to traveling for business.

Neither had been keen to broach the subject of what exactly would happen between them once they
left Nebraska. The closest they'd come to discussing it was when she'd offered to stay longer, to aid him in finishing boxing up the house. There were still so many items to go through and pack away. But Red had vetoed that idea and had told her that she should return to school--that she'd been gone a long time already and it wouldn't be right for her to fall so far behind in her classes, especially since he could certainly handle the rest himself if she gave him instructions on what she wanted to keep or give away.

"But it's so much!" she had exclaimed, gesturing around. "How will you be able to--"

"You forget," he'd interrupted her with a smile, "I run a shipping business. I'm quite good at it, Lizzy. I'll bring some of my people in to help finish up--don't worry about it."

Red's points were sound, too solid to argue rationally against no matter how much she wanted to. So Elizabeth resigned herself to the fact that their days together were definitely numbered and had taken advantage of his company as much as she could.

God, she missed him. No. "Miss" was the wrong word. It's meaning was too weak for what she felt. She didn't just miss Red. She yearned for him. That longing was like a sharp knife twisting over and over again in her heart. And it wasn't just the pleasures of the bed she craved, though of course that was part of it...for she was young and her sexuality had been stoked to ardently burn over the last half week and she hungered for his hands, his lips, his body.... But more than that, she desperately yearned for his company: his steady presence and friendship, his witty yet soulful and enlightening conversation.

During that first week back at school on Thursday night, she'd been alone in her dorm room, curled up in bed with her cell phone in her hand, sobbing. By habit, she'd dialed the home number to talk to Sam--which, of course, had been disconnected. The sound of the harsh beeping noises and the robotic voice reminding her of her bitter reality had been too much to bear. Her shaking fingers had then dialed the only other number she knew by heart.

"Hi, Lizzy," Red's voice had come clearly through the other end of line...almost as if he were sitting right there with her.

She'd been weeping so hard that she could barely form words--but she had managed to stutter out his name.

"Lizzy?" His tone had been harsh with sudden concern. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"I--I called Sam. At home. I called him like he--like he was still alive."

"Oh.... Oh, Lizzy. I'm so sorry, honey."

Sniffling, she had clutched the phone to her ear, eyes landing on the photo of her and Sam on her dresser. "I can't stand feeling like this!" she'd snarled desperately, her voice hoarse with anguish. "I--I can't stand this, Red!"

As she had cried to him over the phone, he had softly murmured her name over and over again, crooning soothing nothings in that deep voice of his to try and help ease her sorrow. She couldn't for the life of her remember what they were now, but at the time they had calmed her racing heart and had finally quieted her tears enough to where she could think somewhat coherently again.
"Are you with me, sweetheart?" he had finally asked gently once she had grown quiet.

"Yes," she'd whispered brokenly.

"I know it's hard right now. I know. It will be like this for a while. But, Lizzy, you're strong. You will pull through this trying time. You will."

Closing her eyes, she had tried to take strength from his compellingly fervent promise.

"Do you have the photo someplace where you can see it?"

She'd nodded, then, after belatedly realizing he couldn't see her, she'd murmured an affirmative.

"Good. That's good. Keep it there. It will help more and more as the weeks progress."

"The pain won't stop, will it?" Why she had asked that...God, she still had no idea. She had already known the answer.

"No, baby," he'd replied gently. "The pain won't stop. But with time it will lessen."

Drawing in a deep breath, she had closed her eyes.

"I know your instinct is to bottle it all up within yourself--all your grief, your loneliness, your pain. I know you think that if you corral it and tether it down, you can outsmart hurting." She could almost see him shaking his head. "Don't do it, Lizzy. I can tell you from experience that it doesn't work. Just like a physical wound, this...this soul-wound of yours needs air to heal. So let yourself cry when the tears come. Let yourself think about him, or even talk about him to someone."

"To you?"

"Yes, to me...or to anyone of a sympathetic nature." He paused for a moment, then continued almost hesitantly, "When I...after I lost my wife...my daughter...." His voice grew husky. "I started writing things down about them. Descriptions. Simple poetry." He cleared his throat. "You may want to consider doing that. It may help."

She'd wiped her nose with a Kleenex. "I didn't know you could write poetry, Red."

"Surprising, isn't it?" Liz had heard the small--self-deprecating?--smile in his voice. "I took some creative writing courses at one point in my life. I can write well enough if the topic is...inspiring."

"It's a good idea." She'd balled the tissue up in her hand. "I may just do that."

They both had fallen silent for a moment. Elizabeth had heard him adjusting the phone against his ear and shoulder. She'd closed her eyes, trying to imagine where he was, if he were sitting in a chair or lying down in bed. God, how she had wished he were there with her.

"Are you going to be all right?" he'd asked her softly, bringing her out of her reverie.

"Yeah.... I'll be all right." At least for now. She'd hesitated briefly, then, "Red?"

"What is it, honey?"

Her fingers had tightened around the phone. "I miss you."

"Mmm. I miss you too," he'd replied, a quiet smile coloring his tone.
Elizabeth had desperately wanted to ask when he'd next come to Seattle but uncertainty had stilled her tongue. For one thing, Red was never quite sure of his schedule, and, secondly, she hadn't been sure if she would sound too...clingy? Was that the right word? But would she really come across that way if she asked him? Wasn't it reasonable to ask him when he was coming to see her? Especially after all that had passed between them? Just as she had begun to nervously worry her lower lip, the half-formed question dancing just on the tip of her tongue, he had saved her from having to ask at all.

"When you're on Spring Break, I'll come to Washington and help you narrow down your choices for apartments to rent in the city. Then Bronn can finally come live with you."

Her eyes had lit at his promise. "That sounds really good, Red. How is Bronn?"

"He misses you quite a bit. But he's doing just fine, Lizzy. Eating like a horse! He'll bankrupt me before he leaves for Seattle!"

That had made her genuinely laugh. And after being so encouraged, Red had lead her down avenues of pleasanter emotions, talking for a while longer before each of them--reluctantly, she'd thought--signed off with their traditional, "I'll miss you." But this time when they had said it to each other, there had been a slightly different spectrum of tones shading their voices: his had been dusky, deeper, more thoughtful, and hers had been brighter, softer, breathier...her honest and open heart bared before him.

As the weeks passed, the aching pain caused by Sam's passing became more bearable to live with. Elizabeth started venturing out of the dorms in the evenings to join in social activities around campus. Sensing that she was over the worst of her grief, her various circles of friends began inviting her out into the city again for shopping, dinner, and drinks--but she drew the line at dancing in the various clubs that had once been her favorite weekend night haunts.

"Why?" her roommate Katie demanded one Friday night. "Come on, Liz! Put on that slinky dress of yours--yes, the black one--and let's go! You know who asked if you'd be there?" Her warm, brown eyes glittered mischievously.

Liz looked up from her book, curious despite herself. "Who?"

"Ryan! That's who. Weren't you guys kinda hitting it off before--um...before you had to go home?" Katie cleared her throat uncomfortably, expression briefly sympathetic for Liz's loss before her freckled face broke out into a wide, good-natured grin again. "Well? Weren't you?"

Liz couldn't really blame her for skirting the issue of Sam's passing. Not everyone was capable of talking about things that were deeply personal. Katie was a bit shallow but she was sweet and she always meant well. It was almost impossible to ever be truly upset with her. "Yeah," Liz replied slowly, "I guess we were."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Katie rummaged around in Liz's closet before pulling out the jet black little number she'd mentioned and held it up, dangling it in front of her friend. "It's Friday night," she cajoled. "We are young and sexy. We have dates. Our friends are going. I know you don't really want to sit in here all night and read like you're freaking middle-aged. You love dancing!"

"Uh huh. And I love reading, too."

The other woman flicked her fingers dismissively. "Yeah, I know. But you know what I mean, Liz. You need to come out dancing tonight. Let loose a bit." She fluttered the black dress at her again. "It'll be good for you," she coaxed in a sing-song voice.
Elizabeth smiled patiently as she shrugged a shoulder, Red's handsome face drifting through her mind's eye. "Sorry, Katie. I'm just...I'm not feeling it tonight."

"You haven't 'been feeling it' since you got back. At first I thought that you just needed time. You know what I mean. But you keep passing up nights out at your favorite clubs and now you're actually declining the company of that really hot guy who wants to show you a good time....!" Katie flopped down on Liz's bed. "You know what I think?" she asked rhetorically, voice lowering to a conspiratorial whisper. "I think there's something else going on." Katie's expression turned sly. "Or is it a someone else going on?"

Liz flushed hotly, silently cursing her lack of a poker face.

"I knew it!" Katie crowed. "So invite him along then!"

"Clubbing probably isn't really his thing. And besides, he doesn't live here."

"He doesn't live here?" Her brow puckered. "So...what? He's from Nebraska? I thought you told me all the guys you knew there were douches."

"Not all," Liz laughed. "And yeah, I guess you could say he's from there. Kind of." How strange that she didn't really know where Red was from--that she had never thought to ask. She should bring it up to him during his Spring Break visit.

"You're awfully loyal to this guy, whoever the Hell he is. That's unlike you."

"Are you saying I'm not loyal?" Liz asked, somewhat amused by Katie's bewildered expression.

"Well, I guess what I mean is that you've always dated so casually in the past that this whole sitting-at-home-to-pine-away thing just seems...weird."

"I'm not pining, Katie!"

"Okay, well, you've never liked a guy this much to where you won't go out with anyone else." Katie stared her in puzzlement for a moment--then suddenly her mouth formed a huge, round O. "Oh my God. It's him. You're finally with him, aren't you? Oh my God!"

"Who?"

"Who?" Katie mimicked, shaking her head in exasperation. "As if you don't know--that guy! That old guy you really like who always takes you out into the city when he visits you." She was grinning triumphantly, eyes sparkling.

That old guy. "He isn't that old," Liz growled in Red's defense, wondering how she had figured it out so damned fast!

"Oh come on, Liz. I've seen him from a distance. He's totally old. I never in my life would have pegged you as the type to get an honest to God sugar daddy!"

"Oh God--he's not a freaking sugar daddy, Katie!" Elizabeth exclaimed. "Ugh. How gross! No. There's more to him--to us--than that."

The other woman raised a teasing brow. "Is he rich?"

Liz shrugged, not wanting to commit herself to an answer--she knew how much Red appreciated his privacy. But by doing so, her friend's grin only grew knowingly.
"Does he buy you stuff?"

"Well, yes--"

"And you guys are sleeping together?"

Liz stared up at her defiantly.

"Babe, that's exactly what the definition of a sugar daddy is!"

"We're in a relationship, Katie! Believe me. And it's not a relationship revolving around just shopping and sex."

Katie snorted, holding up her hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Fine. You're in a relationship. But are you guys, like, exclusive or whatever?"

Liz frowned at her. "Of course we are!" But the second the words left her mouth she immediately second-guessed herself. Were they exclusive? They hadn't spoken of it before she had left Nebraska. She hadn't even thought to ask him. In fact...how in the Hell was this relationship supposed to work, with him traveling for business all the time?

"Shit. Ryan's going to be so sad when I tell him the news that your heart's been snatched away by another man," Katie sighed dramatically. "He probably won't believe me!"

The fleeting conversation with her roommate that night had tunneled an opening for doubt to slither into Elizabeth's mind. Where did she and Red stand with one another?

When they had been in Nebraska, grieving for Sam and finding solace in each other while ardently exploring their metamorphosed relationship, Liz had known exactly where she had stood with him. But now? With thousands upon thousands of miles between them? And only speaking on the phone once a week, sometimes twice if they were lucky? And not once during all those phone calls bringing up their time in Nebraska? Elizabeth hadn't brought it up because he hadn't. She wondered at herself, and what she discovered wasn't pretty.

The truth of the matter was, down underneath it all, she was frightened. The anxiety and fear of abandonment that had been lying dormant since she and Red had been together that first night surged to the surface again, feeding the ugly coil of doubt that lurked in her mind. Liz realized that she hadn't brought up their relationship with him because she instinctively knew that if she avoided the subject entirely then they both could continue on living in this sort of limbo-like plane of existence, neither confirming nor denying the state of affairs between them--and, therefore, she would be able to avoid getting hurt.

After that realization hit her like a sack of freaking bricks, she discerned that she was also angry with Red for being so ambiguous about it all. The doubts that were slithering just within the inner barriers of her mind began casting shadows on all the memories she embraced during the darkest hours of the night, when she was lying alone in bed, awake but unable to sleep. Had she just imagined that deep connection she had felt with him? Had she behaved too rashly? Had he only made love to her to humor her? To humor himself? Had she misjudged him so badly? Then, after awarding legitimacy to these questions by even formulating them, Liz furiously berated herself for doing so. What she'd felt--what she had seen in him--couldn't all be imagined.

Could it?

When Red called a week before Spring Break to rather brusquely inform her that he wouldn't be able to come to Seattle like he had planned to, poison began dripping from the fangs of those horrible
"Why?" she demanded, making her voice hard to mask the crushing disappointment—and sudden anxiety—she felt.

"My schedule won't allow for it. I'm truly sorry, Lizzy." When she didn't deign to reply, Red continued, "A couple of my employees will be flying in that week though. They can help you with your apartment. Once you choose, they can move your things from your dorm to your new place. They can give me the address and I can have everything you want from the house mailed to you while the rest goes in storage—"

"No thanks," she rudely cut him off. She could sense his shocked stillness on the other end of the line. "I can handle it myself. I don't need your people helping me."

"Lizzy," Red sighed, "I know you're upset that I can't come. But you need to accept the help I'm offering. Bronn will be flying in with them, after all."

She bristled at his condescending tone. "Why don't you just bring him when you see me next? Whenever the Hell that will be?"

"Because he's not my dog," he snapped at her, obviously tired of her snarly attitude. "I can't keep taking care of him for you. I travel so much—"

"Okay, fine," she shot back angrily, interrupting him again. "I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you for so long!"

"Lizzy! Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"You know what."

Liz heard him take in a long, deep breath. His next words were quieter, tone more controlled. "I never said you were an inconvenience."

"It was implied," she muttered, glaring up at ceiling.

Red didn't rise to her bait and instead purposefully deflected. "It's not that I don't want to see you, honey."

She wasn't stupid. She knew what he was doing. He was trying to take back control of the conversation—move them into safer territory. Well, two could play at that freaking game.

"I was asked to go dancing last week."

The slight pause told her that he was taken aback by her abrupt change in topic. "Oh?"

"Yeah. One of the guys I was dating was there."

"Did you...have fun?" His tone seemed casual. Maybe a little too casual. Good. She wanted him to be jealous. She wanted to stir *something* in that heart of his!

"I didn't go."

"Why not?" While she was trying to quickly think of an answer that would keep the conversation going the way *she* wanted, he added quietly, "You should have."

She blinked, stunned. "What?"
Red cleared his throat. "You should have gone dancing."

"But...Ryan was going to be there. And, like, hoards of other guys."

"So?"

"So...don't you even know what goes on in clubs, Red?"

"Yes," he drawled, somewhat dryly. "I know what goes on in clubs."

She sat up, dark hair tumbling about her shoulders from the jerky movement. "Are you telling me," she began slowly, haltingly, "that you want other men to dance up on me?"

Two heartbeats passed. Three. Then, "I'm saying you should probably see men your own age."

Her heart felt like it was being squeezed tightly in a vice. "What?"

She heard him sigh, shifting the phone to his other shoulder. "Lizzy, I obviously don't live in Seattle. I--" He hesitated, then plowed on, "I've thought a lot about this over the last month and a half. I think it would be best for you if you kept dating other men your age. Find out what you want in a relationship."

Was he rejecting her? Was her fear actually becoming realized? Her hands began to shake--whether it was from anger or fright, or both, she wasn't certain. "I know what I want," she told him tightly. "I told you before. At Terabithia. Remember?"

"You may think you know what you want, but you don't, sweetheart. Not really."

"How dare you!" she hissed, lividly, her temper flaring at his patronizing tone and burning away some of the cold numbness that was creeping into her mind, her heart.

"For you, I dare a great deal." His vehement tone sounded pained but she was too incensed with him to think much of it.

"So you're telling me that what we shared in Nebraska was nothing real?" Her voice had risen, harsh and grating. "That you were just using my body?"

"Elizabeth--"

"Are you telling me that you don't want me?"

"What I want doesn't fucking matter!"

"Of course it does!" she snarled at him, hot tears burning just behind her eyes. "That's apparently all that matters! It's all about you! I've already told you how I feel. You're the one who's pushing me away!"

"I'm not doing this to hurt you, Lizzy!"

Her brittle laugh was very bitter, highlighting just how precariously she hovered between fury and despondency. "You're unbelievable, you know that? I can't.... I can't believe you, Red." Her rasping voice broke on his name.

"Lizzy...."

But before he could finish his thought, Elizabeth forced her phone away from her ear, furiously
snapping it shut with a loud click. She stared numbly down at it, those hot tears she'd managed to keep at bay finally welling in her eyes. Her heart felt so heavy. It seemed like it was falling inside of her, tearing painfully through her.

Had all this really just happened?

Suddenly the phone's black screen lit up--she could just make out the glowing number, hazy through her tears. Then a split second later it began to vibrate demandingly in her hand.

He was calling back.

With each insistent vibration, piece after piece of her heart splintered off until it felt like those falling shards of herself were cutting her up inside, leaving a roiling, irate, wretched mess behind. Her fist tightened around the incessantly vibrating phone.

God. She couldn't take this!

A raw, pained sob tore itself from her throat as she hurled the phone away from her. It slammed into the opposite wall, the screen shattering. As it fell to the floor with a thud, it gave one final shudder before going completely silent.

*It's broken*, Liz thought miserably to herself, but whether she referred to her phone or to *them*...she didn't really know.

Chapter End Notes

My poor darlings....

And before anyone asks, no, this isn't the thing that drives them apart! ;) We still have more chapters ahead before that moment in this story.

Thank you for reading and for your support, as always :)
"What do you fucking mean you couldn't get the fucking number, Baz?" Red barked into the phone.

"Just what I said, Red," the other man replied calmly. "The damn AT&T worker asked Elizabeth if she wanted to use her old number and she said no. Neither of them said the new number out loud. I was listening, trust me."

Red growled in frustration.

"You know," Baz said slyly, "you could always just fly out here and ask her for her number."

"Fuck off," the other man snarled, jaw clenching as he quickly thought through all the various moves he could make in getting Elizabeth's new fucking cell phone number. It was like a damn chess game. He could call Jules and have her use her fancy technological equipment that he didn't understand at all (well, fuck, that's why he paid her--so he didn't have to understand it). But he had her working on another project right now and to move her--even for something as simple as this--would affect too many other pieces on the chessboard. He could call Greg and get the same job done, sure, but he was out of the country and therefore useless.

Shit.

Baz chuckled boldly, unphased by his employer's ire. He knew it wasn't really directed at him, anyway. "What's my next move?"

"Just slip back into your normal routine. Watch her. If anything unusual happens--"

"I'll call you. Got it, boss."

"And if you happen to hear her repeat that fucking number to someone--"

"For instance, to another man?"

Red swallowed a hiss, refusing to continue to outwardly show that the other man's joshing was yanking his damn chain. "Just text it to me, will you?"

"And if I don't hear her repeat it?"

"Then I guess I'll be coming to fucking Seattle sooner rather than later, won't I?" He could hear Baz's guffaw even as he jammed his thumb into the End button.

Fucking Baz. Oh yes, the younger man had a grand old time razzing Red about how it was his damn fault that Elizabeth broke her phone in fit of temper over the status of their relationship. Red hadn't breathed a word, but the few people closest to him in his protective circle had quickly figured out what had passed between himself and Lizzy during their stay in Nebraska...and what had passed between them two days ago.

Fuck.

Red sighed, rubbing his brow as he headed to the liquor cabinet to pour himself a glass of scotch. He swirled the amber liquid, watching the lamplight play with its color, shading it from a dark auburn to
the lightest of golds. As always, the look of it, the taste of it in his mouth soothed him somewhat.

*Alcoholic.*

Yes, he acknowledged to himself. He probably always would be--to a degree. Drinking relaxed him, helped him take the sharp edges of his raw emotions off. And he definitely needed to be calm and centered at this moment in time. Red eased down into his chair before taking another swig. During the first few weeks after he'd arrived back home from Nebraska, he'd often wondered what had given him away once he'd caught the few people he kept around him slanting him sidelong glances and hiding smiles (or smirks) behind their hands. He had always made sure he'd been as alone as he could be whenever he had spoken with Lizzy on the phone. And he'd made sure to try and ratchet down the sensual purr that would sometimes creep into his voice (when he wasn't thinking) whenever he did speak to her--or spoke about her. Obviously his efforts had been in vain.

Christ, that girl.

That glorious, volatile, imperious minx.

Red took another drink, expression pained, wishing to God that he had chosen his words with more care that night. But he had discovered--too late--that she was able to rile his temper in a way that no one else could, verbally pushing and shoving him until he snapped. Obviously he had the same effect on her. He'd been stunned speechless when she had actually hung up on him. Then that shock had morphed into fury when the rest of his calls had gone straight to her voicemail. Of course, he hadn't known at the time that she had smashed her phone to literal bits. Once he'd received word of that particular incident, he had waited--as patiently as possible--for her to buy a new phone and call him back. An entire day had passed them by and she *still* had not called him. It was purposeful. She was punishing him, he knew that. But how the fuck could he make her see that what he was doing was for her own good if they didn't speak over the Goddamned phone?

That girl.

That gorgeous, fiery, dazzling pain in the ass.

He closed his eyes, involuntarily envisioning how she might have looked the night they had fought. He could just see her hissing at him, those beautiful eyes of hers flashing, fist clenching around her cell phone as she sat cross-legged on her bed, long, smooth legs pale against the dark comforter, breasts straining against the ribbed tank she wore as she took in a deep breath to snarl at him....

His penis twitched and he growled softly. Christ. Where was his fucking self-control?

Red *had* been truthful that night when he'd said that he wasn't trying to hurt her, directly implying that he was looking out for her like he always had and always would. For the last month and a half he had berated himself and had questioned every action he had committed with Lizzy. Conflicting emotions had warred within him, the two main ones being--simply put--throbbing guilt for taking her into his bed and aching desire for wanting to keep her there. She had stirred a previously dormant passion in him that had been breathtakingly beautiful. Addictive. Honest and all too revealing. Unnerving.

Red quickly shied away from that particular train of thought.

And so he had maintained a physical--and to some extent, an emotional--distance to attempt to temper their passions...and definitely restrain himself until he could figure out how best to proceed with her. Red shifted uncomfortably in his chair. Christ. He had purposefully stayed away from her for this very reason! If just thinking about her could turn him on, how could he have controlled
himself and have kept them on a more platonic footing if he had seen her in person? Despite what she might think due to the causal facade he had adopted, it certainly hadn't been easy on him to stay parted from her.

But his efforts to mitigate the emotional and sexual tension had come at a price. Red had hurt her deeply. And what was worse was that he'd known he had been upsetting her when he had kept her at a distance and hadn't made the effort to come see her before Spring Break. Lizzy had handled herself quite admirably, following along with his plan of platonicity--at first. But he had known she wouldn't play that game for long because there hadn't been an end in sight. And she wanted an end--he'd known that much about her and should have had a better plan in mind for when her imperious will had finally made its appearance. She'd had too much pride to continue the charade, which was why she had taunted him with the clubbing comment. She'd tried to mask it, but Red knew she had been crestfallen when he'd broken his promise. The thing about Elizabeth was that any time she felt sadness, or felt emotionally threatened in any way, she tended to turn immediately to anger, thinking it would make her strong. So she had turned that flaring temper onto him, letting him know by her tone just how devastated she really was. And then....

Intense guilt washed over him.

Christ, he shouldn't have made love to her. He shouldn't have. A part of him had hoped that once she had resettled into college life, she'd be lured back into dating young men her age like she had used to...that she would realize that she didn't really want him. That she'd admit to herself that he'd been there for convenience, to help fill an emotional void as she coped with the devastating loss of Sam.

Had that made him a coward, hoping she'd do his dirty work for him so he wouldn't have to cut those physical and highly-emotional ties?

Maybe it had.

And yes, that part of him may have wanted her to be the one to initiate their return to what their relationship had been before. But there was another part of him that resentfully stalked stiff-legged within the inner barriers of his mind, snarling viciously at him to pursue her and take her, because, damn it, he desired her. Yearned for her.

Loved her.

Fuck.

Red threw back more alcohol, wincing as it burned down his throat.

He didn't deserve to love Elizabeth as a man loves a woman. He had done so many horrible, ghastly things in his adult life. He had committed unforgivable sins. He was plagued by multitudes of demons...haunted by the ghosts of those he'd killed, hunted mercilessly by his addictions, and all of the agonizingly painful memories that shadowed each and every devil lurked just behind his conscious mind. If he gave any one of those impurities marring his soul any attention whatsoever, most--if not all of them--would sense his weakness and lunge ferociously at him all at once, attempting to tear him asunder.

He was damaged. Hell-bound. A miscreant and eater of others' sins, like Elizabeth's. And that was yet another reason for trying to create a distance between them. How could he be what she deserved if he couldn't be wholly and completely honest with her? Not that he had ever quite lied to her outright, but throughout her whole life he had lied through omission. She had no idea who he truly was, what he knew about her and her past life as Masha Rostova. If he had capitulated to his own intense yearning to persist in exploring their evolving relationship as she continued to grow out of the
protective sphere childhood and young adulthood had afforded her, his enemies--and her mother's--would certainly find her through tracking him. How could he, in good conscience, submit her to the possibility of being hunted down like an animal for the sake of his own physical and emotional needs? The very thought was unconscionable. He knew that.

And yet nearly every late night when he was alone in the dark, his thoughts would turn to Lizzy. He would torture himself with memories of how it had felt to lie with her. Sometimes he could almost taste her sweet flesh, smell her clean scent, feel the brush of her soft hair against his chest, feel her nails lightly biting into his arms, feel her thrusting and sliding over his cock as she moved on top of him, completely lost in her own guileless pleasure. There had been a few times over the last month when his fantasizing had become so real that he had actually allowed himself physical release using only his thoughts of her and his hands, rationalizing that he did it to ultimately stave off his sexual longing so he could think clearly and make decisions that weren't tainted by lust. The fact that he had almost been swayed by his own desires multiple times was beyond shameful. He didn't deserve to be loved by such an honest and vibrant soul.

That girl.

His darling Lizzy.

She deserved so much more than what he could give her. But he could still provide her his protection. And he would, always. Of course, having her cell phone number on file would certainly make that part of his responsibility easier, in case there was an emergency and he had to swiftly get a hold of her, or she him. Red scowled down at his empty glass. He would give Baz a few more days to try and overhear it. He would give Elizabeth a few more days to call him back. If neither of those things happened, then Red would probably have to confront her himself.

And knowing his stubborn Lizzy as well as he did, that "probably" could very well turn into a "definitely."

So be it.

Chapter End Notes

It was interesting.... For such a short chapter, this one was both extremely difficult to write and yet the words poured out of me. I chalk it up to Red telling me exactly how he was feeling but he was speaking too damn fast for my mind and fingers to keep up. What you see now was jumbled in a completely different order at first. It was a hot mess of emotions. And so I had to sit there and rework the order of his thoughts and feelings until they flowed into something cohesive.

The chapter was going to be much longer but I've decided to split it into two :) I wanted this chapter to remain completely focused on the inner workings of Red's mind. The next chapter will have the action, but will remain in Red's POV.

Happy Saturday!

Thank you for reading, as always :)
"She's been in there for at least an hour," Baz told Red, gesturing to the nightclub across the street.

It was pouring rain, naturally. It was nearly always raining in Seattle. The golden lights of the Aston Manor's sign shone brightly against the dark sky. Even from here Red could hear the steady beat of the music emanating from inside.

"Is she alone?" Red asked.

Before taking a cab from his hotel to meet Baz here, Red had debated with himself about whether or not he should even come to the club to confront Lizzy. The rational part of his mind knew it was folly to be here--that he was playing with a fire that should be doused rather than stoked. But the other, conceited and pridefully masculine part of him wanted her to know that she couldn't be rid of him so easily. Sure, she could decide to continue to punish him by stringing him along and not calling him for days on end that had finally turned into a full week--but that didn't mean he couldn't find her. And he very much wanted her to be aware of that.

"Are you kidding? She hardly goes anywhere alone. No. She's with a large group of friends." Baz eyed his employer over the rim of his coffee thermos. "Seemed like everyone in her group was paired off. She went in with a date."

Red glanced at the younger man sharply. Baz met his fierce stare with a carefully blank one of his own. "So." He gestured casually to the building again. "I'm assuming you're going in?"

"Why do you say that?"

"Well...." Baz cleared his throat. "You're sure as Hell not dressed up for me."

Dressed up? For him, this was actually dressing down.

Red spared a quick look down at himself. Designer jet black jeans hugged his legs, a designer button-down shirt that he'd cuffed up his muscular forearms framed his broad form, polished leather shoes encased his feet, a gold Rolex watch sparkled at his left wrist, a subtle hint of cologne had been lightly applied to his neck.

Well, yes, he supposed his attire could be considered an epitome of masculine chic--for the club scene, anyway. However, Red rather thought that his outfit was understated and tasteful. There was nothing in fashion, men's or women's, that irritated him more than opulent gaudiness for the sake of displaying wealth.

He met the other man's eyes, baring his teeth in a lazy smile that made Baz's impudence slide back into respectful wariness. "Think they'll throw me out for wearing this getup?"

The question was rather rhetorical but Baz answered anyway. "No."

"Then I'm going in." Red clapped the man on his shoulder, white teeth flashing in the night.

Then he turned on his heel and sauntered across the street, remorselessly bypassing the long line of people waiting to get inside. All Red had to do was flash that thick wad of green under the bouncer's
nose while engaging the man in a brief yet deliciously believable story, deviously concocted out of outrageous half-truths--and he was inside, home free.

The first thing he did was head to the counter and order a drink. He threw it back, relishing the taste (even if it was of a cheaper fare than he normally preferred) and began scan the large room, taking stock of his new territory. For nightclubs, this one certainly wasn't as seedy as some others he had been to all across the globe over the years. In fact, it was rather upscale--for a club. He certainly didn't prefer to spend time in them, no matter how highly they rated on his private scale, but he had needed to frequent them in the past in order to conduct certain...business meetings and transactions. So he knew how to blend right into the surroundings.

His attire tonight? Well, that was part of his camouflage, as was the haughty, bored expression he'd adopted. It tended to keep women from pawing at him and other men from seeing him as a rival for the attentions of those women.

Red took his time looking around this little corner of the club. His senses began to expand as he immersed himself in the smoky, buzzing atmosphere. Slowly his eyes began to adjust to the dim, flickering lighting; his ears began to pick out other noises besides the heavy beat of the electronic dance music--stilettos clicking on the floor, shrieks of laughter, glasses clinking on the bar's counter; he breathed in and tasted in the back of his throat the various, clashing smells of cheap and pricey colognes, perfumes--and, of course, the salty tang of sweat.

She wasn't over here.

After generously laying a few bills on the counter for the bartender, he got up and began to prowl the floor. Despite the mask of contemptuous indifference he wore, he still had a few dancing women look his way, eyes curious. It made their dates' hackles rise, but the warning glances he shot their way made them back off warily. He wasn't here for their women. He was here for one woman, and one woman only. And when he found her....

Well, he didn't quite know what he would say yet. A wry smile curved his lips. He was fairly certain the words would come once she started snarling at him.

Red slipped through and around the dancing couples, eyes intently focused as he inconspicuously searched for her--

--and, suddenly, there she was.

Red ceased moving, momentarily stunned.

Christ, she was the most beautiful creature in this entire fucking room.

Most women in this place were dressed to tantalize and seduce the average, lusty male. They wore short slinky outfits a size or two too small. Their cleavage, ample or not, tended to be so squished in their cheap dresses that a wrong movement at the wrong time would send one or both breasts to popping loose. Their makeup generally tended to run on the clownish side, the heavy powders and creams hiding their natural beauty behind what they felt men wanted to see--painted dolls.

But Lizzy....

Jesus fucking Christ.

Lizzy was their complete contrast.

A woman didn't have to be half-clothed to be seductive. Elizabeth was the visible, breathing, and
obviously tangible proof of this universal truth.

She was an elegant beauty, a shining diamond in a club full of rouges...and looked utterly ravishing in that sultry, jet-black frock. It was short, to be sure, but it didn't follow the cliche of women's nightclubwear by fitting her body like a second skin. In fact, it was rather blousy on top, riding high on her neckline only to slide carelessly off to one side, exposing a creamy shoulder. The sleeves stretched down her arms, growing tighter as they reached her wrists. The dress became less drapey the closer it flowed down to her ass and the tops of her thighs. The silky material did hug her snugly in those places, accentuating those round, toned curves.

Red’s mouth went dry, flesh stirring of its own volition as his eyes raked up her slender body to her face. Whatever she'd done with her makeup had only enhanced the natural beauty of her sharp cheekbones and those huge blue eyes of hers. They were half-closed at the moment and she was leaning sensually back against her date, who had his hands on her hips, his own gyrating roughly against her ass as they moved to the heavy beat of the music.

An intensely jealous snarl welled within Red at the sight of another man touching his Lizzy in such an erotic way. That wildly possessive part of his soul threw back its jaws and howled furiously as the man's hands stroked from her sides down, down, down to grasp her upper thighs, thumbs scant centimeters away from....

Red's nostrils flared and before he quite knew what he was doing he was stalking over to them, oblivious to the couples who whirled out of his way. Luckily the current song had just come to an end and there was a brief, relatively quiet lull while the DJs switched out. He had to take advantage of it while he could--and quickly.

Plastering a savage smile on his face, he drawled, "Mind if I cut in?"

Lizzy's eyes snapped wide open and she stared at him in complete and utter shock. "Red?"

Heartened by the fact that she didn't fly into a tempestuous rage at the mere sight of him, he gave her an intimately warm smile. "Hi, sweetheart." The endearment slipped suggestively passed his lips before he could rethink the wisdom of using it.

Christ, he had missed her. His eyes caressed hers for the briefest of seconds before they darted to the man standing behind her. Then they hardened intimidatingly and his smile turned into...something else. And it definitely wasn't friendly.

Red waited silently, idly wondering if dance etiquette existed at all within the millennial generation while he continued to stare at the other man who was obviously loathe to give her up. Not that Red could blame him, really, but he was losing his fucking patience. He didn't fly all the way to Seattle to get into a pissing contest with a man half his age.

When the silence began to stretch just a tad too long and Red began to flash his canines menacingly, Elizabeth took control of the situation. With a composed smile, she slipped easily out of her date’s grasp. "It's all right, Ryan. I actually need to talk to him." She flicked her fingers in Red's direction before she reached out to briefly touch the other man's arm. "I'll see you later."

Red was impressed with her tone--it was reassuringly light and upbeat, but firm enough to where Ryan couldn't argue with her or he'd come off as a total asshole.

The young man shot a nasty glance at Red, who absorbed it and fired a smug look back at him. Ryan set his jaw venemously and the older man blatantly observed it for a moment. Then Red disdainfully turned his shoulder to him, sending an arrogant message that declared he was physically and
mentally dismissing him as someone unimportant and, therefore, unthreatening. Setting his hand to the small of Lizzy's back, he gently propelled her away from that particular section of the dance floor.

"What the Hell was that?"

"That was me asking you to dance." He couldn't quite keep the sensual purr from coloring his tone.

They stopped walking when they reached a small square of free space far away from the prying eyes and ears of her friends, and she turned to look up at him. Her expression was almost unreadable in the hazy light, but by the way she raised a brow in exasperated disbelief, he knew she was well aware of exactly what that masculine display had all been about.

"In a manner of speaking," he amended.

Had it been prudent of him to come into the club and steal her away from her date? Probably not. Had it been wise of him to put them in this position with so many unspoken issues still throbbing between them? Absolutely not. But now he had to erase the mental image of that Ryan character putting his fucking paws and scent all over Elizabeth. And the only way for Red to do that was to immediately reclaim her.

The steady beat of the bass line, which hadn't really gone away, suddenly got louder and louder as the new DJ took over. A few cheers went up as a woman's provocative voice began echoing inside the room:

"I'm going backwards through time at the speed of light
I'm yours, you're mine, two satellites
Not alone
No, we're not alone"

They both began to unconsciously undulate to the music. Red eyed her, watching for her reaction as he stepped closer. "Dance with me." It wasn't quite a question, but it wasn't quite a demand either. What had possessed him to say it? You're digging a deeper hole for yourself--and for her, Reddington, the rational part of his brain warned. But the heady pulse of music was sweeping all sense away. He gazed down at her, admiring the way the sweaty tendrils of her baby hairs were curling softly against her brow. Christ, she was such a beautiful girl.

Her lovely eyes flickered uncertainly as she began to worry her lower lip. That endearing tick that she had unconsciously cultivated as a little girl charmed him, and he waited patiently, silently, as she thought it over. With those three words and the way he'd said them, he had actually given her all the power to deny him. Would she?

"A freeze-frame of your eye in the strobe light
Sweat dripping down from your brow, hold tight
Don't let go
Don't you let me go"

Lizzy's eyes finally met his, her own lit with the fire of defiant acceptance. Despite her imperious stare, her hands nervously fidgeted as he slowly and somewhat warily turned her around.

He briefly wondered if she would suddenly lash out angrily at him--physically or even verbally. But when she didn't resist his touch, he lightly set his large hands on her narrow hips and began to move against her slowly, languidly, with controlled finesse. If any other man his age had been seen dancing like he was dancing now, that man might have looked...out of place, even silly. But Red
exuded confidence dancing in this way. He owned it. And his relaxed assertiveness was beginning to rub off on her. She began to ease into the rhythm with him, hips and upper body swaying.

"And I never was smart with love
I let the bad ones in and the good ones go
But I'm gonna love you like I've never been hurt before
I'm gonna love you like I'm indestructible
Your love is ultra magnetic and it's taking over
This is hardcore
And I'm indestructible"

"What the Hell are you doing here, Red?"

Ah, there was the heated snarl. A tiny smile curved his lips. "Looking for you," he deflected, mouth close to her ear. "I came by your new apartment but your neighbor--a chatty young woman who called herself Lauren--said you'd gone out clubbing. I didn't really feel like waiting outside in the rain for your return so...I came here."

She stiffened slightly under his hands. "You know that's not what I meant."

Yes, he did know that.

"Hands up in the air like we don't care
We're shooting deep into space
And the lasers split the dark
Cut right through the dark"

"I came to Seattle because I couldn't get ahold of you by phone." He rubbed his thumbs in circles over her hipbones. "At first I figured you were angry with me and didn't want to talk. But I became concerned when I called and heard a robot tell me your line had either been disconnected or was outside the coverage area. Then a week passed and I still hadn't heard a peep out of you so I flew here to get your new number from you." Beads of sweat began to drip down his sideburns as their bodies surged together. "I'm assuming you have a new phone?"

"I'm still mad at you," she growled, leaning her head back against him.

"I'm still mad at you, too," he replied dryly against her neck as the waves of sound gripped him by the spine, moving his body as if it were a puppet on strings of bass, vocals, and electronica.

From her sudden silence, it seemed as if his words had taken her aback--but it was hard to tell with her turned away from him like she was.

"It's just us, we ignore the crowd dancing
Fall to the floor
Beats in my heart
Put your hands on my heart"

"You could have called me back," he continued when she didn't reply. "Or at least texted me." His mouth brushed against the pulse beating rapidly in the hollow between her neck and bare shoulder.

"I didn't want to talk to you," she breathed, that small, round ass of hers suddenly rubbing against his crotch as she vibrated with the bass line.

That sexually intimate touch nearly sent him through the fucking roof. The friction was unbelievably exquisite. He snarled quietly, now fully aroused, one hand tracing up her arm to place itself over her
"And I never was smart with love  
I let the bad ones in and the good ones go  
But I'm gonna love you like I've never been hurt before  
I'm gonna love you like I'm indestructible  
Your love is ultra magnetic and it's taking over  
This is hardcore"

Her breasts were heaving just under his left hand, hips now writhing completely in time with his. Christ, she felt so amazingly good. It was exhilarating. She was exhilarating. A soft noise—a moan?—escaped her, but it was so low that at first he thought he had only imagined it. But when the slender, slightly shaking fingers of one of her hands caressed over the back of his that was still pressed against her heart, he realized that he hadn't imagined it.

His soul thrilled at the knowledge and he nuzzled the back of her bared neck, deeply inhaling her scent. His stimulated body felt like it was made of elastic as they danced together—all, of course, except for the white hot erection straining against his jeans. He was as hard as fucking granite. When was the last time he'd been this physically intoxicated dancing with a woman?

"Ooh and I'm gonna love you  
Like I've never been hurt before  
I'm gonna love you like I'm indestructible  
Your love is ultra magnetic and it's taking over  
This is hardcore  
And I'm indestructible"

What the fuck are you doing, Reddington? He ignored that damned whisper warning him that he shouldn't be doing this—-that he hadn't come to Seattle to establish this kind of rapport with her...that he had, in fact, come to Seattle to establish the exact opposite. But Red mentally locked that admonition down deep in his heart.

In this very moment, he didn't fucking care what the moral high ground was. All he cared about was that whatever this was shivering between them, writhing through them, connecting and weaving them together in a complicated knot, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to encourage. His lips nipped and suckled gently at her neck as his palms slid down her thighs, fingertips possessively curling just under the hemline of her dress, erasing all scent and memory of the other man who'd tried to stake a fucking claim on her.

"And I never was smart with love  
I let the bad ones in and the good ones go  
But I'm gonna love you like I've never been hurt before  
I'm gonna love you like I'm indestructible  
Your love is ultra magnetic and it's taking over  
This is hardcore"

"Ooh and I'm gonna love you  
Like I've never been hurt before  
I'm gonna love you like I'm indestructible  
Your love is ultra magnetic and it's taking over  
This is hardcore  
And I'm indestructible"
"Fine." Her belated response was breathy, tremulous from both anger and her own lust. "We'll get it all out in the fucking open tonight."

"Language," he muttered in her ear.

"If I'm old enough to dance with you like this, I'm old enough to say 'fuck,'" Lizzy snarled at him, arching indignantely away from his touch.

Her aggravated reply caused a chuckle to ripple sensually through him as he brought her unresisting body back against his.

She immediately spun around to face him, defiantly gleaming eyes at odds with the way her body smoothly wheeled and melded into his. "You're laughing at me."

"Not at you, darling."

Sweat glistened on her face. Long, wispy tendrils of hair had escaped the loose twist at the back of her head to frame her cheeks. Reaching out, he stroked one of those damp, stubbornly curling locks behind her ear.

"You're absolutely right, you know. You're obviously old enough to do many things."

She flushed at his highly suggestive tone, expression pleased, irritated, and confused all at once.

_Rein it in, old son_, he warned himself, watching as those conflicting emotions played out over her face. They were like a misting of cold water over the situation, slightly cooling the reeling passion between them. _Rein it in. Don't do or say anything else that can cause more harm than good._

As the song ended, the room echoing briefly with just the bass as the DJ chose another song to blast, Red forced himself to still his hips, though his sensitized body still quivered with the inviting beat and his own arousal. He kept his hands loosely draped on her hips as she followed his example.

"Will your friends miss you if you come back to my hotel room tonight?"

The look she gave him was piercingly sharp.

"To talk," he clarified. "Just to talk, Lizzy."

"Well," she began slowly, "Ryan won't be too pleased."

"Well," she began slowly, "Ryan won't be too pleased."

He waited, stilling his tongue and body completely. It was very important for her to know that whatever happened now would happen because _she_ chose it...and that he hadn't influenced her in any verbal or physical way.

As the silence stretched tautly between them, she slanted him a frustrated look. Keeping his mouth firmly shut, he raised a querying brow.

"Fine," she spat, vexed. "I'll come back with you. To talk."

Red permitted himself a small, victorious smile. Without another word, he formally offered her his arm. Discomfited, she hesitantly took it. Her hand was a gentle weight on his forearm as he lead her away from the floor's throng of milling and dancing people and out into the cold, rainy night.
Chapter End Notes

The year is 2006. Red is forty-six years old. Lizzy is twenty-one years old.

I've been looking forward to writing this chapter since the idea for *Sine Qua Non* came into my mind over a month ago. The image of Red and Lizzy provocatively dancing in a club was one of the very first vivid scenes I saw in my head. I was listening to Spotify at the time and Robyn's *Indestructible* came up (it's been one of my favorite dance-y songs for years) and I knew that *that* song had to be the one they danced to. So from the time I published *SQN* to this weekend, the clubbing idea had been sitting there in my imagination, percolating for weeks as the timeline began to flesh itself out.

*Indestructible* wasn't released by Robyn until 2010. However, since this is an AU, I'm taking some liberties with timelines :)

I hope you enjoyed reading this particular chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it!

Thank you for your support :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"Hold on, Lizzy--don't get out yet."

To stay her movements, Red brushed his fingers over the top of her hand that was braced against the seat of the cab--she had just been getting ready to open the car door and jump out. He glanced out his window, waited for one lone car to pass them on the hotel's turnabout, then leapt out into the pouring rain. He jogged swiftly around the back of the cab, jerked her door open and helped--well, more like hauled--her out.

Rain fell in stinging sheets from the sky. She gave a soft cry of shock, half-laughing despite herself as a gust of wind swept a torrent of cold water across her body.

"Come here!" Red called gruffly over the thunder, pulling her roughly against him to try and shield her from the deluge as they made a mad dash for the hotel's awning.

"I'm soaking wet!" she gasped once they reached cover, raking her nails through her dripping hair which was already unraveling heavily from its twist at the back of her head.

"You and me both," Red grimaced, slicking water from his face. His shoes squelched as he moved and he groaned unhappily. "Fuck--these are leather!" Then he shot a fierce, affronted scowl up at the sky, as if he actually believed that the heavens had decided to storm down on him and ruin his shoes on purpose.

Before she could stop herself, Liz snorted at how funny he looked, silently cursing nature for ravaging his expensive footwear. What vanity!

Hearing her, Red caught her eyes before she could look away, his own sparkling in wry, self-deprecating mirth--he knew he'd been caught and didn't give a damn. That's how comfortable he was with her.

And that intimate look they shared made her instantly recall why she was really here with him downtown, at this hotel, at one-thirty on an early--very early--Saturday morning. Her own smile faded and she glanced away from him, folding her arms over her chest as much for protection against her conflicted feelings as to stave off the chill from the rain.

"Come on, Lizzy," he said softly--disappointedly?--touching his fingertips lightly to her back to guide her inside. "Let's get upstairs where it's dry."

Red walked them relatively quickly through the expansive lobby, keeping his hand against the small of her back. Was this a show of earnest possession carried over from earlier tonight? (She'd known exactly what Red and Ryan had been doing. All they'd been missing from that territorial display was a freaking ruler to physically measure whose dick was bigger!) Or was he just politely guiding her along? It was hard to tell...but maybe--just maybe--it was a bit of both.

She wasn't all that sure she minded either way, which made her wonder at herself.

Pushing that thought aside, she focused in on their surroundings. Just from glancing around, she could tell this was definitely a five-star establishment. It had marble floors, vaulted ceilings, and elaborate architecture. Rushing water cascaded and splashed in a massive fountain located in the very
middle of the lobby, its roar echoing all around her. Groups of plush chairs and leather couches were
sprinkled throughout the sprawling room--there was even a comfy little nook tucked away off to the
side with a wood-burning fireplace. Warmth radiated invitingly from the glowing embers.

"I have one in my room. I'll light it for you." Red must have seen the wistful look in her eyes as they
passed it.

"I haven't enjoyed a fire since Christmas," she remarked softly. Since the last time she'd seen Sam.

"I know." His tone was gently sympathetic--he knew exactly what she was thinking.

Liz continued to look around, surprised by how many people were up and about in the middle of the
night. She tried to adopt his nonchalant attitude as they drew closer to the elevators, but she felt
extremely self-conscious as they made their squelching and dripping way there. Were people staring
at them? She felt like they were. They probably thought Red was taking her back to his room to
sleep with her. Why else would a young woman be with a man his age at this time of the freaking
night?

Flushing, Liz all but dove into the elevator once the doors opened, quickly jamming her fingers into
the button so they'd hurry up and close so that people would stop staring at her. Judging her.

"You know...you only need to press it once, honey," Red teased gently. "They're not going to close
any faster if you keep clicking that button over and over and over again."

Her flush deepened and she glared at him. "What floor are you, Red?"

"I'll do it." His arm brushed lightly against her as he pulled an ornate brass key out of his back pocket
and inserted it into the slot above the numbers. He gave it a gentle turn and the elevator began its
high climb. After pocketing his key, Red gave her a lazy smile, then crossed his arms over his chest
and leaned comfortably back against the elevator wall.

Liz stayed where she was near the corner, nervously gathering her wet hair in her hands, pulling it
over her shoulder to comb it with her fingers. It was really to give her something to do--something to
distract her from the weighty silence growing between them.

She tried not to--she really did--but she couldn't help but notice out of the corner of her eye just
how...well, how great he looked.

"Great," Liz? She winced at herself. How lame. She might as well admit it--he looked sexy.

In the club, she hadn't really been focused on what he was wearing. All her senses had been
inundated with the pulsating energy of the bass line and the swift beat and soaring vocals of the
music. She'd been steeped in her own throbbing sensuality, too intent on what her body was telling
her--too aware of his sexuality--to notice outward appearances beyond the intense look in his eyes
and feel of his body.

Well, now she noticed. Especially with the rain water plastering his finely cut clothing to him like it
was another layer of skin. Swallowing thickly, her eyes darted away from his chest and bare
forearms...to mistakenly look into his face.

Red's smile twitched just ever so slightly--and she knew he knew she'd been checking him out.

Flushing, she raised her chin slightly, defiantly, blue eyes flashing. She'd be damned if he was going
to make her feel like a gawky teenager again! But her reaction only seemed to amuse him further and
that made her jaw tighten in irritation.
So what if he caught her looking at him? He knew he was handsome. And if he knew it, of course women would know it too. Just because she appreciated his masculinity didn't mean that she was going to fall into bed with him. It didn't mean that she wasn't still angry with him for breaking up with her over the Goddamned phone!

The elevator suddenly chimed brightly, bringing her abruptly out of that train of thought. They'd reached the very top. Liz had expected to see an entire floor of rooms once she stepped across the threshold. What met her eyes instead was an empty landing and only one door ahead of them. "Where are we?" she asked, momentarily setting aside her aggravation for the sake of slaking her curiosity.

"The penthouse suite." His tone was matter-of-fact, not at all conceited like she would have probably expected from a man of such extravagant and worldly tastes. It made her mentally give pause to slightly readjust her perception of his character.

Red slid the key into the lock and pushed the heavy door open. "After you."

If she had thought the lobby was beautiful, it truly didn't hold a candle to the surprisingly comfortable luxury of this suite of rooms. The lobby now seemed sterile compared to this place.

God, how many rooms were there?

The suite stretched back and out on all sides. Liz carefully stepped in, heels loudly clicking on the hardwood floor as she inquisitively eyed her surroundings. Even though the front rooms were decorated sumptuously, what with their polished wooden furniture, leather chairs and sofas with plush pillows and soft throw blankets beckoning invitingly for her to come over and stroke them, and an eclectic—but not overbearing—mix of decor consisting of antique glassware, sculptures, pottery, and hanging art, the suite actually felt like a home...a retreat to seek out, a haven for souls who desired respite from their insanely busy schedules.

"Is this where you stay all the time when you come to Seattle?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder at him. He had never brought her back to any hotel before in all the times he had visited her over the last couple years. She wouldn't be surprised if he had stayed here every single time. It was wonderful.

He was taking off his shoes and gestured for her to do the same. "Actually, yes. It's mine."

"You own it?" Her eyes widened and she looked around again. No wonder it felt like a home—it was! "I didn't even know you could own a hotel room." Even if it was a penthouse suite.

"The owner of this establishment and I came to an...ah...an understanding a few years ago," he smiled. "You like it?"

"Oh yes!" The enthusiastic confirmation burst out of her as she walked further into the room, soaking wet shoes dangling from her fingers. Her eyes fell admiringly on the huge fireplace. A stack of wood was piled high inside of it already, waiting to be lit. "Sometimes I forget how rich you are."

"Do you?" He was amused with her again.

"Well, yeah," she replied, a little defensively. "I mean, when I look at you I don't think about all that stuff, I just...I see you."

Their eyes met. Held. His gently smoldered with an intimacy she hadn't seen since he'd had her between the sheets of his bed back in Nebraska.
A blush slowly crept up her neck to color her cheeks and she bit her lower lip lightly, tearing her gaze away from his first.

God, why did she always feel so *fragile* whenever he looked at her like that? Even after that shit he pulled on her over the phone--even after dancing tonight...perhaps especially after dancing with him tonight. It was confusing. Unnerving!

"Can I use your bathroom?" she managed to ask huskily before he could break the silence first.

He might have brought her here to talk, but now that they were completely alone in his place without any distractions, she wanted to be the one to lead the conversation. But first she had to get her thoughts in order and she couldn't very well do that with him looking at her, making her feel so incredibly vulnerable.

"Oh I'm sorry, Lizzy--I should've offered that to you immediately." He shook his head at himself and gestured to her right. "Go past this little nest here by the TV, and then go down the hall. It dead ends into the guest room. The bathroom attached should have everything you need. There are plenty of towels you can dry yourself off with. There's also a blow dryer for your hair if you want to use it. There's even a robe or two in the closet, I think."

Yeah, like she'd run around his penthouse wearing a *robe*.

"Thanks, Red." Not knowing what else to do with them, she set her shoes down by the fireplace and tried not to bolt out of the room. She didn't think she managed that very gracefully.

Shit.

"Pull it together, Liz," she grumbled to herself, pushing the door to the guest room open. Her eyes widened appreciatively at the sight that greeted her. It was huge! God, if this was just the guest room, what on Earth was the master bedroom like? This bed could fit at least four people in it with some room to spare! She trailed her fingers across the goose-down comforter, resisting the sudden urge to throw herself into the covers and mountain of pillows and just stay buried there all night. It would be so much easier than talking to Red about what had happened a week ago.

She had been so shocked to see him tonight. When she had heard his voice, she hadn't quite believed it at first--she'd had to open her eyes to confirm that he really was standing in front of her--at a nightclub, of all places! She'd been so pleased and embarrassed at the same time--pleased (and flattered) that he was there for her, and embarrassed that...well...she was actually happy to see him despite what he had done to her, and...second...that he'd seen her bumping and grinding with another man. Would he think her shallow? Loose? Slutty? Did it even matter? Hadn't he encouraged her to do it? Besides, he'd broken up with her anyway so why should he really care if she had decided to dance with Ryan?

Ryan's dancing had been nothing compared to Red's.

Flushing, she went into the spacious, marble bathroom to take care of business. After washing and drying her hands--and drying her body off with a warm, fluffy towel--she stood in front of the mirror to study herself. God, she looked like a bedraggled kitten--all matted hair and pale faced, and--was that a love bite on her neck?

Liz leaned over the counter, inspecting the left side. Yes, it was. But it didn't hurt. In fact, it probably wouldn't bruise much at all.

Her heart flipped giddily a bit in her chest. Was there anything Red *couldn't* do skillfully? Her mind
turned to the way he'd danced with her. Never in her life had she been touched like that on the dance floor. Never had she been so...so aroused from just dancing.

Not that they had just been dancing.

It had almost been a kind of foreplay. Their closeness, the heat, the sweat, the way their hips had thrust together, the way his large hands had grasped her, the way she'd trembled...how she'd felt his erection rock hard against her ass...then again against her inner thigh as she'd turned around to dance with him face to face....

Her hands were shaking. Liz opened and closed her fingers, impatiently shaking them out before rummaging around in the cabinet drawer for a brush. Ah. There it was. She winced as she pulled it through her knotted locks--she shouldn't have put so much hairspray in. But luckily her hair wasn't as drenched as she'd thought. If it had been any wetter, it would be a sticky mess right now!

As she worked on making herself more presentable, she tried to plan out what she wanted to say to him. But her thoughts were a jumble and they kept meandering back to how he'd been with her tonight.

She had seen a side to him she had never observed before...an aggressively possessive side. Actually, she took that back. She had seen that side of him before--when he'd scared the shit out of Derek for her sake. She'd caught a glimpse of his feral savagery that night. It hadn't frightened her. Tonight, that wild possessiveness had resurfaced and she still hadn't been afraid of him. In fact, something deep in her own soul had recognized it, for it existed in her as well--and she had liked it.

Red had definitely not wanted her dancing with Ryan. He had made that quite plain to her, to Ryan, and to anyone else watching what had unfolded between the three of them on the dance floor.

Could he still have romantic feelings for her?

Idiot. Naturally he did. After that one dance they shared? It was obvious.

Was it though? Any man could get aroused dancing like that.

But it hadn't just been their bodies involved in the dance. She had felt more than just physically seduced. He must have felt that intimate pull too--that fire. He must have! It was the same feeling that had flared between them before, in Nebraska.

Liz ground her teeth, glaring at her reflection. She wouldn't let him deny it to her--to himself. She wouldn't dare let him!

Resolutely she finished spiffing herself up as best as she could with what limited resources she had at her disposal in here. Her drying hair was a dark mass tumbling down her back, crackling with static from all the brushing. It couldn't be helped. Trying not to feel so self-conscious about her less-than-polished appearance, she exited the bathroom--then paused by the closet and stared at the two robes hanging there.

Yeah, right.

Her dress may be damp and cold, but there was absolutely no way she'd wear that robe in front of him, no matter how thick and comfy and warm it was. Not with how things currently stood between them. Shaking her head at herself, she steeled her heart and left the bedroom.

By the time Liz cautiously emerged from the other side of the suite, Red was already lounging on the sofa across from the glowing fire he'd promised her. She enviously observed that he had changed out
of his wet clothes into blue jeans and a casual button-down shirt.

Hearing her light footfalls on the floor behind him, he stood and turned around. In his hand he held a drink which she recognized very well: coffee liqueur and vodka swirled with heavy white cream.

"A White Russian?"

Red smiled at the surprise in her voice. "It's your favorite late night alcoholic drink, isn't it?" He gently shook it at her. The ice clinked against the sides of the glass. "Take it, Lizzy. I made myself one too."

As she complied with a halting "thank you," she was very careful not to touch him.

When he settled back down on the sofa, she was closely aware of his eyes following her as she edged away from him to step back around the coffee table to the fireplace, purposefully putting physical distance between them.

It would be easier for her to get her words out this way...without the distraction of his close proximity.

Liz eased down in front of the fire on the slab of cement that stuck out in front of it, spine straight, crossing one long leg primly over the other.

A silence stretched between them, broken only by the crackling and popping of the fire, by the creaking of leather as Red shifted on the couch, by the ice moving in their glasses as they savored their drinks. The White Russian tasted delicious. It was smooth and bitter on her tongue--just the way she preferred it. Whatever coffee liqueur he'd used was incredible. She would have to sneak a peek in the kitchen before she left to see what brand he used.

Or she could just ask him.

But that would give him the impression that all was well between them right now. All was not well. And he knew it, too.

Despite being close to the jumping flames, Liz shivered--but whether it was from feeling chilled from the dampness of her dress and from sipping on an iced drink, or whether it was from the anticipation of the hard conversation that was looming...she didn't know.

"Your dress should dry fairly quickly if you stay there long enough, but...." Red reached down and pulled a throw blanket out from under him, offering it to her solicitously. He must have seen her shiver.

Setting her White Russian down next to her, she accepted the blanket and wrapped it snugly around her bare legs. The soft warmth felt so good around her, as did the hot fire flickering at her back. She let out a quiet sigh, disguising it as a quick puff of breath, very much wishing they both were sitting here together under vastly different circumstances.

"I probably should've given you something else to drink, Lizzy. Something without ice."

She glanced at him over the rim of her glass. "How did you know my favorite drink is a White Russian? I've never told you that."

"You're a coffee fiend, honey." The affectionate smile that ghosted at the corners of his mouth was knowing. "I would've made you straight up coffee by itself but...well, I had a feeling we both might need something a bit...stronger."
Liz eyed him warily. "Are you planning on fighting with me, Red?"

"Are you?"

She ground her teeth. "I asked you first."

"I think we should try to speak calmly and rationally, like civilized people."

"Are you saying I'm not calm? Or rational?" Her eyes flashed up at him. "Or civilized?"

"I'm saying that you tend to get riled when the conversation heads in a direction you're scared of."

"Scared of?" she snarled.

"Mmm."

"I'm not scared of you."

A brow rose. "Are you not?"

"No!"

He took a slow sip of his drink before casually flinging one arm over the top of the sofa. "Then why didn't you come over here and sit next to me just now?"

Liz glared at him. "Because I don't want to get burned!"

"You're the one sitting by an actual fire, Lizzy."

"And I'm saying that you--you cause worse hurts! Like--like breaking up with me over the damn phone last week. That was a pretty low thing to do, you know that?" Her voice wavered slightly as her old feelings of embarrassment, anger, and pain welled up, seeking an immediate outlet. "It's an unspoken rule: don't break up with a girl over the phone! Everyone knows that!"

"I didn't break up with you."

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. "You're kidding me, right? You told me 'I think you should date other men'--weren't you even listening to yourself that night?"

Red rubbed the back of his neck, looking extremely uncomfortable. "Lizzy... You need to be in a relationship with someone in order to break up with them."

Her heart felt like it was being squeezed by a taloned fist. "What exactly are you saying, Red? Are you saying we weren't in a relationship?"

He gazed silently at her, confirming without words that that was exactly what he was implying.

Her temper snapped and burned throughout her like a wildfire, white hot and uncontrollable. "Of all the fucking ridiculous things I've ever heard!" she exploded. "For God's sake, Red! Then what the Hell were we in Nebraska last month? Huh? What was I then? A fuck buddy?"

"Lizzy!"

"But that's what you're saying! If we weren't in a--a relationship, then we were just hooking up! Does that sound accurate to you, Red?" Her tone was laden with biting sarcasm. "Were we just hooking up? To fuck just for fucking's sake?"
"Stop using that word," he snarled at her, rising to his feet.

Liz threw the blanket off of her legs and scrambled hastily upright. "Fuck!" she snarled defiantly back at him. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!"

He growled fiercely at her, expression furious.

Well, fine! That was just fine. At least now he wasn't adopting that infuriatingly calm and condescending manner--as if he were so much more worldly than her. They were now on an even footing with both their fiery tempers running rampant.

"You didn't answer my fucking question, Red. Was that all I was to you? A casual lay?" She lividly spat the words out as if they were the ugliest things in the world.

His drawn expression was terrible, deeply pained as his eyes flashed with--longing? Despair? "Yes."

Her laugh was bitter--and a bit wild. "You're lying."

He jerked as if she had actually struck him.

Seeing that, she immediately pursued her advantage, stalking him, preying on his weakness.

"You are lying," she said again, each and every word succinct and precise. "You don't believe that." She came closer, previous notions of keeping physical distance between them completely forgotten. "I don't believe that."

"Believe it." His voice was low and tight.

"Like Hell! After the way you danced with me?" She shook her head, completely bewildered. "It's like you're two different people ever since I came back to school! You bounce back and forth from one personality to the other. It's totally beyond the bounds of confusing."

She glared up at him, her temper warring with her perplexity.

"I know you feel it between us. I know you do! I saw it in your eyes--in Nebraska. I know I did. I know you want...you want this," she gestured to the space between them, but it wasn't empty, oh no. On the contrary, it was positively vibrating with brimming sensuality. "But it's like you want to rewrite history. Why?"

Red had the wary and dangerous look of a hunted animal. He was backed into a tight corner with nowhere to run and he, being a dominant male accustomed to freedom and controlling every situation he was in, certainly wasn't used to this.

His eyes gleamed warningly as she came even nearer.

"What are you so afraid of?"

She was so close to him now that she could feel the heat of his body--and was suddenly highly cognizant of the waves of desperation rolling off of him. Their eyes met.

"Are you afraid of me?"

"No," he rasped. "Not of you. It's how I feel about you that rattles me, Lizzy."

She stared at him, shocked by his admission. "I don't...I don't understand. Why?"
"Why?"

His smile of utter self-loathing made her shudder. What could he have possibly done to deserve such harsh judgement from himself?

"There are a million and one reasons why we shouldn't--" He snapped his mouth shut, as if he had forgotten it was she to whom he spoke. Then his expression hardened. "I'm too old for you, Lizzy."

"That excuse again?" she scowled at him. "Age doesn't matter! I asked you that before. In Nebraska, remember? I asked you if it would be a problem. You said no!"

"Twenty-five years...it's a fairly large gap."

"So? I know you've been with women younger than you--probably not much older than me. You told me about a couple of them yourself, so you can't deny it! Why is it okay for you to be with them but not with me?"

A torrent of emotions flooded Red's agitated eyes, swirling and disconcertingly mixing together too swiftly for her to understand, or even to just pick out one to latch on to...to use as a launching pad to try and make sense of what she saw in him.

In that moment, he seemed to struggle with himself in a very real way that she had never seen him do before in all her years of knowing him.

It was fascinating.

Unsettling.

Then he finally said, "I don't want to hurt you, baby."

"You already have."

As the words escaped her, she realized, perhaps for the first time in her life, Red wasn't quite this larger-than-life figure that she had always made him out to be ever since she'd been a little girl. As she searched his torn expression, she recognized the simple humanity in him.

He was a man--a man who was special to her, to be sure, but in many ways, a man like any other. One who could make mistakes and who struggled with the consequences of those mistakes. One who had flaws and who could second-guess himself until he drove himself to the breaking point.

One who didn't always know what was best for himself...or for her.

"So your point is moot, Red. And if you can't think of a better excuse than that..." Liz bravely closed the space between them and kissed him hard on the mouth.

Shock held Red immobile for the briefest of moments as her lips moved against his.

Fuck, Lizzy. What are you doing?

But she didn't let up. She was determined to have her way. Insistent. And he was weak. Despite everything he'd said, despite the excuses he'd tried to use, despite attempting to drive away her passion with hurtful words and half-truths--to ultimately do right by her--he still desired her.

Hungered for her.

With an incensed snarl he grasped her arms, pulling her tightly against his body. When she melted
unresistingly into him, that wildly possessive part of his soul howled triumphantly, urging him to take her, claim her, for she wanted him.

Furious with himself for succumbing to temptation but unable--and unwilling--to stop, he bore her back against the sofa, hands roughly grabbing her, caressing her. His mouth trailed fire down her bare shoulder--and he hissed in frustration as the silky material of her dress barred the path to her breasts.

Growling, his fingers found the zipper and he yanked it down, down, down her spine until he felt the gossamer lace of her thong. Then that hand slid around to pull insistently at the front of her dress until her soft, full breasts were bared.

Exhaling heavily, he buried his face between the sweet curve of her neck and shoulder, kissing her there, teeth scraping against the delicate flesh while his fingers brushed adroitly over a pert nipple.

When he leaned back to readjust himself between her legs, he caught a glimpse of her face. The trepidation in those luminous eyes shocked him to his core--and brought him to a screeching halt.

Panting, reorienting himself through the haze of lust, he gazed down at her, grounding himself in her blue depths.

Her face was very pale, her lips were very swollen, and her breathing shuddered as she stared up at him.

Oh, God. What was he doing?

"Not like this," he snarled quietly as he pushed himself up and off of her body.

Christ, how he fucking loathed himself. How could he do that to her? How could he violate her honesty and sweet vibrancy--her trust in him--with his own frustrated rage? How dare he take it out on her, as if she were just a body to be used and discarded, when she meant so much more to him than that?

He fucking didn't deserve her.

But before he could move off of her completely, her fingers reached out and imperiously grasped his shirt.

"No, Red. No."

He went very still, eyes intently searching hers.

"I swore to myself in the bathroom earlier that I wouldn't let you ignore what's between us." Lizzy's wry smile was older than her years in her young face. "So don't start ignoring it now."

"You deserve better," he told her gruffly.

She shrugged a smooth shoulder, dismissing his concern. "What I'm interested in is right here." Then her eyes flashed up into his. "And I'm not afraid of you."

"Are you not?" Red asked quietly, echoing their conversation from earlier.

"No."

"You deserve...more."
"Then give me more. Do."

He wavered, knowing that if he took her into his bed now, there really would be no going back to any state of platonicity for either of them. But if he were truly honest with himself, hadn't he already crossed that line when he had purposefully gone to the nightclub to find her? And hadn't she crossed it when she had agreed to dance with him?

As he looked down into her eyes, she gave him her best unsure-but-game smile.

And that right there was his undoing.

*You will rue the day*, whispered a warning from deep down in his soul.

Red ignored it and bent his head to kiss her.
Chapter End Notes

I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Lizzy demanded to speak for most of it, but then Red just came out of nowhere and took over.
I let him :)

Thank you for reading and for your kudos and comments! I appreciate every single one.

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Involved

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Lizzy."

"Mmm."

Ah, so she was awake—if only just. It had been difficult to tell since her head was resting on his chest in such a way that he could only see the tangled mass of her dark hair.

Red shifted, pushing himself up just a little more against the mound of goose-down pillows behind him. She considerately lifted herself slightly so he could get comfortable again, brushing her lips slowly and sensually over his as she moved. Once he was settled she immediately nested back down into him without missing a beat, rubbing her cheek gently against his chest as she relaxed, body languidly melding to his.

His heart tripped lightly at that sweet little nuzzle.

Christ.

His gaze traced her lithe form curling around his, admiring the way her long hair draped over her shoulder, the way her spine curved around and down to the smooth swell of her ass. Unable to resist, he ran his fingertips down her vertebrae, smiling to himself in satisfaction as he felt goosebumps rise on her body, rolling after his touch like waves.

"I have a question, honey."

"Mmm?"

"You have a new phone number, right?" His fingers artfully trailed back up her spine to bury themselves in the long hair at the base of her neck, smile widening slightly as he felt her shiver against him.

"Mmhmm."

A span of a heartbeat passed. Then two. Then three.

"Are you really going to make me beg?" Red finally growled into the stretching silence.

Snorting softly, Lizzy turned to fold her arms over his chest, propping her chin up on her wrists so she could look at him. "You never beg for anything." Her eyes glittered in amusement. "It's not in your nature."

Well, that certainly was true. He had been told by countless individuals throughout the years that he had an abundance of arrogant pride—that he suffered from chronic and incurable cases of conceit and hubris.

Red personally preferred to think of himself as just...well, as just very self-confident—but to each his own perception, as they said.

He scowled at her, half-seriously.
She wrinkled her nose impishly at him.

With a low, rumbling growl he suddenly and quickly rolled her over. A gasp of breathless surprise escaped her and he then was pinning her down with the weight of his hips. Before she could move even an inch, his lips tauntingly caressed hers without actually kissing her--teasingly lingering.

"Why won't you just give it to me?" he breathed against her mouth.

"I did 'just give it to you,'" she breathed back.

"That you did," he chuckled at her coy retort, pulling back to look at her. "But I'm talking about your number, Lizzy." Which she knew very well.

He traced a hand down her side, expecting to feel her pliancy and usual, fervent responsiveness to his touch. What he felt instead was a slight--very slight--tenseness of her muscles...just enough unusual rigidity to give him pause. Red's expression sharpened as he looked down into her face.

She met his eyes for the briefest of moments before she closed her own, biting the corner of her lower lip. She was actually hiding from him. And as he regarded her shuttered expression, the reason for why she would do so dawned on him.

Despite everything that had been thrown out into the open and had been admitted to tonight, despite the fact that he had abandoned his well-laid plans to convince her that they should try to return to their former platonic relationship and had instead done the exact opposite, surrendering to his yearning and near-overwhelming desire for her...Elizabeth still wasn't convinced of his real intentions. She had already learned the harsh lesson--and from him of all fucking people--that just because a man had lain with her didn't mean he would stay committed to her. Red viciously cursed himself for damaging her the way he had--for warping a part of her innocence into guarded suspicion.

Fuck.

"Lizzy."

She winced at his gruff tone, eyes cautiously fluttering open--but she refused to look up at him.

Fuck. He wasn't angry with her. He was angry with himself and that irritation had bled into his voice. He reached out and gently caressed her cheek to take the sting from the way he'd said her name. "Look at me, sweetheart."

Her wary eyes finally, although hesitantly, flickered to his. He had expected to observe a cool, withdrawn look. Instead, her gaze was alight with a defiant fire.

"You're avoiding me. Why?" Though he was certain he was correct in reading her. He knew her very well, his Lizzy.

"Oh, Red...." Her piercing expression was gravely earnest as she confirmed his intuitive reading of her thoughts. "What are we going to do?"

That was the question, wasn't it?

Carefully he moved off of her, but kept one hand flat against the smooth skin just below her navel. Propping himself up on his other arm, he looked down at her.

Red had seriously meant it when he'd told her earlier that she deserved better than a man like him--
deserved more than what he was able to offer her. She desperately wanted to be in a normal, committed relationship. And why shouldn't she? He couldn't fault her for that desire. How could he?

Fuck, even he.... Red mentally kicked that thought away from him before it finished forming.

That kind of future wasn't in the cards for him. He had played that bright and beautifully rewarding hand, once. But he wouldn't be able to again.

How could he--being the man he was--possibly give Elizabeth the ideal she deserved? Logically, it just couldn't be done. He was constantly moving around countries and continents, building his vast...business...empire, operating outside the law without remorse but not without his own code of morality to accomplish what had to be done with the least amount of bloodshed.

Contrary to his enemies' and the FBI's popular perception of him, he actually abhorred killing. But at times it was unavoidable, especially considering the various dens of wolves and thieves he operated in. Kill or be killed, as the saying went--and every decision he made lead to his survival, and thus to the survival of those he watched over.

Elizabeth, of course, knew nothing about any of this--she knew nothing about him...who he really was and what he really did for a living.

And this was exactly what he meant! She didn't deserve a man who compartmentalized his life because his very survival depended on his ability to do so. Unless...well, unless she could fragment her life, becoming one person while she was with him and remaining another while he was gone.

He might thrive living that way--he had no other alternative and so he embraced it tightly, passionately, like a man embraces his lover.

But Lizzy?

He sincerely doubted she could flourish living in such a fractured way. Oh, she might be able to adapt...for a time. But would it be the right thing--the noble thing--for him to do, to make her carve up her life into distinctive pieces like that?

To make her more like him?

Absolutely not.

But what other fucking option did he have in order to keep her in his life the way they both yearned for?

Leave her, common sense whispered. Let her live her own life. Remain in the background where you belong...where you should have stayed seventeen years ago.

That feral part of his soul coldly narrowed its eyes and warily rose up on its haunches, growling furiously at that murmur of sense. Red's nostrils flared and his fingers tightened possessively over her smooth, taut skin.

Being with her in this way could very well get her killed. Then your whole life for the last seventeen years will have been for naught. Your family's murder, everything you've gone through and have willingly shouldered...all that you have sacrificed...would mean absolutely nothing! Do you really want her blood on your hands?

Red's heart twisted agonizingly in his chest at the very thought as he stared down into her beautiful, questioning eyes...as his covetous fingers caressed down to gently cup her sex.
Do you want her blood to drown your fucking soul?

No!

His eyes bore down into hers as he caressed her, heart and mind getting lost in the sensual blue flames flickering enticingly there. With a savage roar, the fury residing down deep within him immediately lunged at that hissing, floating whisper of sense, ruthlessly ripping it to shreds and strewing its bloody remains to all the corners of his mind. Wherever they landed, they soaked into the back of his thoughts—not gone, but now diluted. Weakened and unable to sway him.

Suddenly he felt her fingers tightly grip his wrist, nails piercing his skin.

Red blinked, immediately and completely brought back to the physical present.

She was writhing in pleasure, spine arching, pelvis thrusting against him.

Jesus. He didn't even remember slipping his fingers inside her to stroke her into arousal.

And he was so fucking hard it hurt.

Red moved closer, drawn to her like a moth to the flame.

He wouldn't allow that horror he feared to become a reality. Not ever. He withdrew his fingers and Lizzy whimpered from the abrupt loss of the heat and pleasure, her hazy eyes opening to search for his. He captured her gaze as he sheathed himself inside of her, intently watching as her mewl turned into a fierce and hungry snarl.

Snarling back, he thrusted, completely captivated by her ardently passionate response. He held her eyes for as long as he could, fascinated by the way her lashes fluttered with each long stroke he made. But when she finally closed them, losing herself in sensation, he buried his face against her neck, deeply breathing in her scent, knowing the decision to be her lover despite the dangerous risks he would be imposing on her was selfishly despicable. It was unconscionable that he actually possessed the audacity to place himself and his desire for companionship, sex, friendship...solace...before what was best for her—and her very safety.

This decision would painfully brand yet another black mark on his arrogant, already-damned soul.

But as their bodies moved together, rapturously gripping, clinging, melding, he vowed vehemently to himself that bearing this particular, bleeding mark would be worth it. He would wrangle, finagle, domineer, and most certainly kill anything or anyone who posed the slightest threat to her. He would take all necessary measures and use all means at his disposal to make it so that she remained as safe as she had been for the last seventeen years of her life. If anyone could do this, he could.

And he would.

Elizabeth’s breathing was escalating and her moans were sounding closer and closer together, rising in pitch--she was coming.

"That's it, honey," he sighed in her ear, feeling her tighten deliciously around him. "Come on...."

Perhaps it was pathetic of him to rationalize his resolve this way. It was certainly deplorable.

A savage smile curved his lips as she finally gave a shuddering cry, her hands clutching at him as she found her release.
But he was long passed the point of being able to walk away from her and all she gave him—not just her body, but her honest, engaging friendship that was devoid of any ulterior motives...such a rare thing to have in this volatile and unpredictably violent life of his.

Their bond was unique. Special. And he would not relinquish this one, purely beautiful relationship in his life.

Her slight gasp brought his focus back to her. She was moving for him, urging him on. Not that he needed much urging, per se...his body knew exactly what it wanted. But her sweetness in trying to assist him was just so Goddamned endearing.

An affectionate chuckle escaped him and he swiftly caught her lips in a heated kiss. Then he was swelling, the pressure was building, blindingly intense...ah...fuck.... Red pulled out just as he came, growling low in his throat as the waves of pleasure crashed against his senses.

He rested on top of her for a time while their pounding hearts slowed, the sweat drying on their bare, cooling skin. Then, with a soft groan, Red lifted himself up from her and flung an arm out, hand straining for the tissues. Shit. The nightstand was too far away!

Elizabeth stifled a laugh as he snarled in frustration--this bed was too fucking big! He needed to downsize. After managing to snatch some Kleenex in his fist, he moved to clean them both up as thoroughly as he could—for the second time tonight.

He could feel her eyes fixing intently on him as he finished up. "That...didn't quite answer my question," she finally told him pertly, voice still slightly husky from the afterglow of loving.

"I have a thought, honey. But...you may not like it."

The woman’s brow puckered slightly as she waited expectantly.

He rested back against his arm so he could comfortably look down at her. "You know I'm always traveling for business, hardly in the same place for more than a week or so at a time."

"And you are still in school...and will most likely stay in Seattle for a couple more years? Perhaps then move on to grad school or something?"

"Ah. Before you start hissing at me--leash that temper of yours and hear me out." Her nostrils flared in frustration but, surprisingly, she obeyed.
"Just because we can't be steady doesn't mean we can't be...involved."

She frowned up at him.

Mistaking her expression for one of confusion, he began to explain, "Involved, as in--"

"I know what involved means, Red," she interrupted impatiently, rolling her eyes.

"Then you know what I'm saying is that when I come to Seattle to visit you every month or so, we can continue to see each other. Like this." He gently placed a hand on her navel. Not wanting to sound like a completely arrogant prick, he added, "If you'll still have me."

"I want you."

There it was--her heart was in her eyes again. The sight of it made his own heartbeat quicken.

He dropped a soft, lingering kiss down on her lips. "There's something you need to do though if we're going to be...involved."

Her expression was shadowed, leery. "What?"

Here came the difficult part he knew she wouldn't like. And to be quite frank, he didn't like it either. But this stipulation would absolve him from some of that wretched guilt bleeding out within the inner barriers of his mind. With his index finger, he lightly traced patterns on the soft skin just between her breasts--but whether he did it to soothe himself or to attempt to soothe her, he didn't know.

"I want you to keep seeing other men."

As he'd expected, Lizzy stiffened under his touch. "What?"

He stilled his hand, regarding her patiently. "You heard me."

She scowled at him. "I don't want to see anyone else."

"I think it's important that you don't entirely write off other men just for me."

"Why the Hell not?"

"Because it wouldn't be right--or fair--of me to expect that from a young beauty like you."

"Don't try to flatter me," she growled, eyes flashing. "It's not going to work!"

"I'm not trying to beguile you, darling," Red told her dryly. "I'm being quite honest. You're twenty-one years old--soon to be twenty-two. You're a beautiful girl attending one of the best colleges on the west coast. You should immerse yourself in that experience and not hang around on the sidelines because you're waiting for me to show up."

"And I have to agree to this?"

"Mmm."

Her expression turned sly. "How will you even know if I'm 'immersing myself in the college experience'? How will you know I'm not lying to you if you ask me?"

He bared his teeth at her in a smile that made her eyes widen fractionally. "Because you've never lied to me and you're not going to start now."
"You're pretty presumptuous, you know that?"

"So I've been told."

"Well, you are! About me, about how this will work between us...." She glared up at him. "I'm honestly shocked that you would even suggest it. I mean, you got on Ryan's case pretty hard tonight."

"Him?" Red snorted dismissively. "He's not worth your trouble, Lizzy."

"Yeah. I know," she sighed.

He glanced sharply at her, somewhat surprised that she had agreed with him so quickly. Well, she was an intelligent girl. She knew what she was worth.

"What if I really don't meet anyone I want to go out with, Red?"

"You will," came his wry response.

She frowned.

"Come now, Lizzy. It's not such a bad thing to go out on dates. You've been doing it for almost two full years anyway. And in so doing, you've learned a lot about yourself and other people, haven't you?"

She shrugged a smooth shoulder noncommittally.

"I'll take that as a yes. You'll be doing the same exact thing."

"But...." Her lovely eyes entreated him. "It's different now, Red." She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, about to speak again and bare her emotions to him--but he placed a finger over her lips, quickly stopping her from saying what he instinctively knew she wanted to admit.

"It's no use arguing with me about it," he told her, making his voice firm as he stole that fleeting, piercingly vulnerable moment now purposefully lost to them both. "This is important. You need to promise me."

Lizzy's eyes sparked defiantly up at him but he held his ground. It was, without a doubt, beneath him to take advantage of her this way.

Carefully he removed his finger from her mouth, watching as conflicting thoughts passed over her face.

But this required stipulation gave his conscience the out he desperately needed. It actually appeared to put a little bit of the responsibility of their relationship onto her: if she dated other men and still wanted to see him despite it all, then, well, he had tried, hadn't he?

It was honestly contemptible to deceptively manipulate her this way. But this requirement she had to willingly agree to was a vital element aiding in his rationalization of becoming her lover.

As the silence between them stretched, Red arched an expectant brow at her.

"Fine," she finally snapped.

His soul bayed triumphantly and he permitted himself a small, tight smile. "Fine?" he pushed, making doubly sure that she wasn't just being agreeable to get him off her back.
"Did I stutter?" The offended look in her fierce eyes was so achingly familiar and he was instantly reminded of how she'd get riled up into a fit of pique when she'd been a mischievous little girl caught doing something wrong, and he'd had to ask her the same question twice (sometimes three times!) to make sure she'd been telling the truth.

Her body might have changed from a girl's to a woman's, just like her mind, but many of her charming mannerisms hadn't changed--and hopefully never would.

Unable to stop himself, he chortled down into her indignant face as the fond memories washed over him.

"It's not funny, Red!"

"Oh, I whole-heartedly disagree with you there, minxlette. Sometimes it's very funny when you free that darling temper of yours."

Lizzy glowered up at him, and, grinning, he dipped his head to kiss that moue of irritation away. She resisted slightly at first, but as his lips played with hers and as his fingers traced teasingly down her body, she slowly began to relax, anger giving way to languid ardency.

"Oh, and Lizzy?"

"Mmm?"

"I'll be needing that new phone number of yours."

She laughed against his lips, arms coming up and around to hold him tightly.
I hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. :) 

Thank you for reading, and for your kudos and comments. You guys are the reason I update regularly. I appreciate your support!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This
gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Interlude III

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

-This is Lizzy. My number should be at the top of your screen.-

Elizabeth stared down at her phone, chewing lightly on her lower lip, wondering why the Hell, even after everything they’d established within the last half-day, she actually felt a little nervous. Had she texted him too soon? Hell, he’d just left in his cab from her duplex after dropping her off not more than fifteen minutes ago! Would it appear as if she were too...clingy? Needy?

But he had told her not to forget to text him her new number before he’d released her body from his tight hold. If he did tease her, she’d throw that fact right back in his face!

After passing most of Saturday in bed, catching up on the sleep they’d willingly pushed away for most of the night and very early hours of the morning, they had finally stirred to wakefulness around one o’clock in the afternoon. Red had informed her that he actually had a flight to catch back to the east coast in the early evening and that he’d drop her off at her duplex before he left. So he’d poked and prodded her until, grumbling, she’d grudgingly rolled out of his bed. While she had imperiously taken over his master bathroom (which she would categorize as more a spa than a normal bathroom, what with its heated lights, a long mirror that spanned an entire wall, a basket of various organic soaps and scented shampoos and conditioners to choose from to bathe with, a cupboard filled with fluffy towels, a massive jet black marble shower with two soft water jet streams with adjustable pressure, and a matching bathtub that was really more of a bubbling jacuzzi that could probably fit about six adults comfortably inside) to wash away the sweat and feeling of languor left over from their loving, Red had fixed them a couple of sandwiches and had somehow wrangled a bellhop or some other hotel employee to run down the street to one of many touristy shops and purchase clothing for her to wear home.

She’d had no idea how he’d managed to do that, though Liz was fairly certain money had probably changed hands. Or maybe Red was just so wealthy that anyone working at the hotel jumped to do his bidding--she had no idea. But once her initially shy embarrassment over Red buying her clothes had worn off, she had definitely appreciated his thoughtfulness--and had even tried to insist on paying him back, but he’d dismissively waved her off. Her clubbing dress was certainly not appropriate to wear out and about in the middle of the city on a Saturday afternoon, and she’d been touched that he’d known that...and had intuited that she would feel extremely self-conscious and uncomfortable if she were seen by other people in risqué clothing obviously worn the night before.

"I gave him a list of your sizes and specified 'casual wear for a woman in her twenties,'” Red had grinned, holding out the bag to her. "So since I didn't pick any of it out, I take absolutely no responsibility for what articles of clothing are in here."

Him? Meaning a man had shopped for her? Oh, God.

Flushing, Liz had upended the bag over the corner of his bed. Bracing herself for the worst fashion faux pas, she had peered down into the pile of colors. She’d been give a plain bra, simple cotton panties, a pair of flip flops, frayed denim cutoffs, and a charcoal gray hoodie that had the phrase "Sleepless in Seattle" scrawled across the front with the famous skyline etched in white behind it. Her cheeks had puffed out in relief. It could have definitely been much, much worse!

"Well, whoever went shopping for me didn't do too badly," she had remarked dryly, carelessly
dropping the towel to the floor so she could start dressing. She had been well aware of the fact that Red had been intently watching her—and her vanity had preened under his admiring gaze. Blushing, she had boldly met his eyes as she’d pulled on the shorts up and over her hips. He had stepped closer then, warm fingers reaching out to help zip and button them for her.

"I do like these," he had murmured against her ear, large hands coming around to rest lightly against her ass, fingertips just brushing the skin right beneath the frayed denim.

"Typical man," she had snorted, shivering at his touch despite herself. "You only like them because they’re so short!"

"Your legs and derrière look splendid in them, Lizzy."

Ducking her head, she had shoved half-heartedly at his chest, both pleased and a little flustered by his casual flirting.

Her phone vibrated suddenly in her hand and Liz blinked herself out of the memory, looking down. A smile slowly curved her lips as she read his teasing words.

-Don't go changing your number on me again, Lizzy. I can't be using up all my frequent-flyer miles to keep chasing you down all around the city.-

-I won't. Just so long as you don't break up with me again!-

Before she knew it, her fingers had typed the flirtatious message and had pressed Send. She winced slightly, running her hand unconsciously through her hair. Maybe she should’ve waited a bit longer to text him back. Now he would definitely know she was sitting by her phone, eagerly awaiting his response. Well, the man could read into people and situations differently than most. And he was sort of old-fashioned. Hopefully he wouldn’t find her behavior pathetic, but, rather, would find it...charming--like he obviously had when they had said their goodbyes on her porch.

The sun had broken through the layers of gray clouds streaking across the sky, making the water droplets that had been stubbornly clinging to the leaves of the trees and the blades of grass around them sparkle cheekily. As Red had solicitously guided her away from the running cab and up the short driveway to the steps and her front door, she had deeply breathed in the fresh air. How she loved the smell of the world after a thunderstorm!

The various potted plants that bloomed on her porch had conveniently hidden them from the view of the driver. After sneaking her key from its hiding spot in the foliage of one of the hanging baskets, she had turned around to face him, suddenly quite reluctant to say goodbye. Red's eyes had been half-shaded by his sunglasses, but she had seen them glinting affectionately at her through the amber lenses. She had hesitated for a brief moment before stepping in close to hug him. "I'll miss you."

She had felt Red's smile as he'd pressed his lips against her brow. "I'll miss you, too," he had intoned traditionally, leaning back slightly to look at her. And while his gravelly voice had held familiar tenderness, it had also vibrated with something stimulatingly deeper. The resonant sound had made her toes curl and her heart trip lightly in her chest. God, she really hadn't wanted him to leave. The long distance part of this...involvement... wasn’t going to be an easy thing to bear. Already the next month seemed so very long, the days and weeks stretching out endlessly before them. Observing her gloomy expression, Red had caressed a lock of hair behind her ear. "Remember, it only feels long. It's not so long, sweetheart."

He'd used to say those exact words to her when she'd been a little girl, upset (and usually crying!) when he had been about to leave Nebraska. Embarrassed that he had been gently teasing her because
he could read her so damn well, her eyes had flashed defiantly up into his. "I'm not going to just sit around and pine away for you," she'd told him haughtily, trying to hide her melancholy behind feigned pride.

Red had chuckled, gathering her close against him again. "Of course you won't. That was part of our deal, remember?"

She had huffed a soft growl at him and that had made him rumble with laughter. Before she could writhe indignantantly out of his arms, he had caught her lips in a passionate kiss that had torn the breath and petulant retort directly from her lungs.

Impertinent minx,- her phone buzzed, bringing her out of her reverie. Liz snorted down at his response, imagining his voice drawling the words. Apparently he did still find her charming. Well, good. Smiling, she tossed her phone on the sofa and went to the sliding backyard door to let Bronn in.

"Liz! Oh my God where the Hell have you been all day? I texted you, like, a zillion times!"

"I know, Katie," Liz laughed, digging her fingers into Bronn's fur as she leaned back against the sofa's cushions. "That's why I'm calling! I didn't have my phone with me at all and I just got in a bit ago. I figured it'd be easier to explain by talking to you than texting 'a zillion times' back."

"Well? So spill it! You were with him all day, weren't you?"

"With who?"

"With who?" Katie mimicked, exasperated. "Are you kidding me, Liz? Your sugar daddy! I mean, that was him at the club last night, right?"

Liz rolled her eyes, scratching Bronn's ears. "For the last time, he's not my sugar daddy, Katie. And...yeah," she smiled, shivering a little as flashes of the night before tumbled through her mind. "We were together."

"So are you guys, like, dating again?"

After she and Red had argued over the phone last week, Liz had confided in her roommate some of the situation while she'd been packing up her dorm to move just outside of downtown Seattle. "Yes." Liz couldn't help the sensual lilt that crept into her voice. "I guess you could say that."

"I'm glad you guys worked it out. Hey--remember how I told you he was old?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Yeah."

"Well, I totally take it back. I mean, well, he is old, Liz. He's old enough to be our dad. But I get it. I completely get what you see in him."

Her nostrils flared, grip on her phone tightening slightly. "What?"

"Don't get all bristly on me. I wouldn't dare dream of even attempting to go after him--or any man like that. He's yours, and friends don't go out with friends' boyfriends. Besides, even if I got drunk and decided to prance around buck-naked in front of him I doubt he'd even notice. He obviously only has eyes for you."

"What makes you say that?"
"We all saw how he...um...well, how he chased poor Ryan off. And then we kinda saw how he danced with you. Liz, it was like you guys were having sex on the dance floor."

"You're being overly dramatic!" she scoffed, waving a hand dismissively even though Katie couldn't see it.

"Honest to God, I'm not! We all thought so. Well, us girls, anyway. The guys didn't want to talk about it. Ryan looked positively murderous."

Liz felt a pang of guilt at that. "I'm sorry about Ryan."

Katie snorted wryly. "I'm sure you are not. I think we all would've chosen your man over any of the guys with us--if we'd had the choice," she finished quickly, hearing her friend's sharp hiss of breath.

Your man. Liz liked the sound of that very much.

"Is he good in bed?"

"Katie!"

"Sorry, Liz!" she laughed. "You can't really blame me for being curious, can you? I would assume he'd have to be since you were gone, like, all night and all day today."

Blushing, Liz switched her phone to her other ear. "That's none of your business," she finally growled into the expectantly waiting silence.

"Fine, fine. Keep your secrets. But you know...your tone gives it all away," she teased.

"Katie."

"Yeah?"

Liz cleared her throat, quickly changing the subject. "You know how you're interning at that really nice salon downtown near the boutiques?"

"Yep!"

"Well, what would you say to practicing on my hair?"

"You want to change up your hair?" She was agog. "Has Hell frozen over? Are there freaking pigs flying in the freaking sky right now?"

Liz snorted at her friend's dramatics, grinning. "Well? Will you?"

"God yes! I've been wanting to since forever!" Her tone became coy. "You want to change it up for him, huh?"

"So?" she asked defensively.

"No! I think it's great! If he's making you feel good about yourself, then that's awesome. Do I sense a shopping trip to Victoria's Secret coming up soon as well?"

"Maybe!"

"I'm totally in, babe. Now, tell me what you're thinking about for your hair. If you're feeling really adventurous, I've been learning how to do lowlights...."
And so Elizabeth, feeling very *adult* in her newfound intimacy with Red, feeling quite dynamically sexy, daring, empowered, and enlivened, allowed Katie to give her a brand new hairstyle the following weekend and then she immediately threw herself into new physical activities when she wasn't in class or studying. She began resolutely jogging in the mornings with Bronn, committed herself to yoga classes on Tuesday and Thursday evenings, and enthusiastically joined a hip-hop dance class in the city that met every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evening. All these energetic activities not only made her feel amazing in body and mind, but they also helped stave off her longing for Red. She missed him terribly but she tried not to dwell too much on that fact. She'd drive herself insane if she did.

Luckily Liz was able to speak with him regularly on the phone twice a week, sometimes three times if his schedule allowed for it. These calls, like Sam's had once been, were like lifeboats to her. Many nights he had her laughing--or snarling huffily--into the early hours of the morning. Once--actually a few times, if she were being completely honest--she'd fallen asleep while talking to him. Each time that had happened she had woken to an amused text from him, teasingly asking her if he really bored her *that* much. The tête-à-têtes that followed over text were always engaging. There were times, though, that when they spoke he seemed distracted, and when she would abruptly confront him about it or try to gently pry, he'd masterfully deflect and smoothly ask her questions about her day. When this happened she just figured he was tired of talking or even thinking about business (since he was always so busy with it) so she quickly learned to read the signs when he wasn't in the mood to talk and then she took it upon herself chatter on enough for the both of them. This seemed to both divert and please him so she didn't mind all that much when he wouldn't always share the details of his days with her.

Her social life still consisted of her going out around the city like she had before with her various circles of friends, but she didn't go out clubbing as much as she had used to. Liz hadn't written that particular social activity off entirely though, mostly because of the deal she'd made with Red. When she thought about it, the clubbing environment was actually perfect: she could meet and dance with men without having to commit to any of them.

Of course, that didn't stop them from vying for her attention, trying to persuade her to commit to them. But word got around (probably thanks to Katie and the girls) that Liz was seeing an older man so if any young buck wanted to try his luck with Elizabeth Scott, whether they wanted to take her out for drinks or dancing, they'd better tread carefully and prepare themselves for disappointment. Sure, she might go out with them, even permit them some physical intimacy, but she never went as far as they wanted her to go. Liz was surprised that they didn't just give her up as a lost cause. She supposed the reason why they didn't was because they were more attracted to the idea of her, to the allure of conquest, than to her as a woman. And that suited her just fine. She could continue to play the game. So her previous reputation, the one where she was known to be warmly intimate and yet coolly aloof at the same time, remained intact and thrived under her nurturing care.

When school let out for summer break in late May, Red was finally able to escape his busy schedule and come back to Seattle to visit her. When Liz received his last minute text the afternoon before the day he was supposed to meet her at one of his favorite cafés for lunch, she hightailed it to the shops to splurge on a new outfit and new lingerie. She knew she exhibited all the cliché signs of an infatuated girl, but...what the Hell--it couldn't be helped. And his reaction when he saw her walk up to the table he'd claimed outside on the café's patio was completely worth the credit card debt.

Liz’s cheeky smile ghosted knowingly at the corners of her mouth as Red's eyes appreciatively trailed inch by inch up her body: from the posh black leather ankle boots to the midnight blue True Religion skinny jeans that tightly hugged her toned legs, then they travelled further up to the garnet-colored V-neck sweater that clung flatteringingly to her figure to finally rest on her face. Her new hairstyle was swept to the side, falling in varied layers to frame her cheeks and neck, the longest tumbling down
her breasts and back. When she'd gone to the salon, she had insisted to Katie that the length be kept, but the wavy layers added an extra, attractive bounce that had been missing before, and the new color—well, that was just for the sake of fun! Dark red lowlights had been subtly added to her natural, chocolate-brown locks, creating—she thought—a rather chic spectrum of colors.

Apparently Red shared her opinion. His tongue worked its way soundlessly around the inside of his mouth as he slowly took off his sunglasses, rising from his chair to greet her.

"Well?" she asked archly, twisting for him on the heels of her boots, tossing her hair sassily over her shoulder as she glanced back at him. She braced her hands against the orange and white stitched U's on her back pockets, purposefully drawing his attention to her ass before swiveling back around to face him. "What do you think?"

"Get over here, minxlette," he growled, expression both fondly amused and fiercely desirous all at once as he embraced her.

"You didn't answer my question," she laughed breathily, pressing her lips playfully to his cheek. Before she could blithely pull away to sit down across from him, Red deftly caught her mouth in a quick, hard kiss—then he released her. "You're quite becoming, Lizzy, as you well know."

She met his lingering stare and grinned impishly at him. "Can I have a cheeseburger?"

"You can have whatever you want," he drawled, tone just short of suggestive. When her eyes darted to his, he quirked a knowing brow at her. She blushed, already thinking ahead to when he'd take her back to his penthouse suite to hang out—oh, who was she kidding?

She couldn't wait to fall into bed with him.

And fall into bed they did, quite literally. They had barely undressed one another before she was suddenly sinking down into the thick feather comforter of his bed under the hard weight of his body, purring throatily as he snarled his way to a shockingly swift release. Their coupling had been frenzied, passionate—and had, for the first time, left her frustrated and yearning. Red had savagely cursed himself out loud even as his fingers began tugging and stroking her flesh, apologetically making it up to her by taunting and teasing her body until she crested with a sensually feral snarl of her own.

Over the next couple days, Liz and Red remained together, taking advantage of what precious little time was available to them before the demands of the real world infiltrated their consciences. Red insisted on taking her shopping for a small bundle of clothes to keep at his place so she wouldn't have to wear the same thing twice if she decided to spend the night.

"Why can't I just bring stuff over from my apartment?" she asked, pursing her lips. "I do have lots of clothes already, you know!"

"Why go through the hassle of driving all that way—twice—and packing and unpacking when we can just buy what we need right here?" he chuckled, grabbing her elbow and escorting her into one of the department stores lining the street.

As Liz looked around at all the cute designer jeans and pretty blouses, she decided his argument made sense. "Okay.... But, just a few things, Red."

Well, as it turned out, her definition of "a few things" and his definition were quite different. Liz ended up with two full shopping bags full of pants, shorts, blouses, lacy undergarments, shoes, and even a couple of dresses. Flushing a bright red, Liz hung back while the chipper cashier rang them
up. Her eyes widened as the girl brightly informed Red of exactly how much he owed— including tax and the fee to have everything delivered to his suite.

"Don't look so mortified, Lizzy!" he chided as they left. "These are all supposed to last a long time, right? Money well spent, in my opinion."

A simple "thank you" didn't seem like enough, so Elizabeth linked her fingers with his and pulled him off to the side of the walkway, edging away from all the bustling people—and then kissed him full on the mouth. His hands carefully wrapped around her arms, giving them a light squeeze as her lips slid off of his. She gave him a shy smile, trying to tell him with her expression that it wasn't just the gift of the clothing that meant a lot to her... it was what his gift signified—that what they were doing was real. The look in his eyes was tender as he pressed his lips affectionately to her brow. Then he wrapped his arm around her waist and guided them back into the flow of pedestrian traffic.

And so Liz found herself thoroughly and unabashedly enjoying the "honeymoon phase" of their budding relationship. Over the early summer, she began learning how to read Red even better than she had used to—intuitively picking up on his moods and discerning facial ticks and observing habits she had never noticed before, like the way his eyelids would strain ever so slightly when he was angry or worried, or how he would rub his finger around the lip of his glass when he was completely lost in thought, or how a lingering smile bestowed on her late at night was really him asking her if she was in the mood and willing... little things like that, and so much more, became very apparent to her the more they saw of each other.

But the sweet honeymoon phases of budding relationships don't last forever. And theirs inevitably would have to end sooner than most....

Chapter End Notes

Cue incoming angsty times ahead! ;)

Thank you all for reading and for your kudos and comments. You are the reason I update :)
Outrage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

God, she was so tired. Her butt was incredibly sore and the muscles in her calves and thighs felt like freaking rubber. No, not rubber. Rubber could be stiff and strong and her legs definitely didn't feel like those two things right now. No, a more accurate comparison would be...Jell-O.

Yes. Her legs felt like Jell-O.

Elizabeth's new dance routine was killing her slowly. She loved hip-hop--there was just something about the swift, pounding beat, the throbbing swell of the bass line, the pulsation of blood rushing in her veins as she fiercely rose to the challenge of timing the sharp movements of her body to the vibrations of the music--but, God, could it wipe her out! She stifled a groan as she climbed the steps of the dance studio up and out to the main street, merging smoothly with the Friday night crowds.

Neon lights of the endless line of restaurants, clubs, and bars flashed invitingly. People laughed, beer bottles clinked, TVs blared, and music thrummed all around her--the night life of the city was in full swing.

The vibrant energy that bounced and rippled in crescendoing waves against her body and mind was healing. She could feel the fatigue fleeing her consciousness and her body as she fully embraced the irresistible lure of liveliness whirling around her. Liz smiled to herself, eyes bright with the joy of being young, exhilarated, and spiritedly alive amidst the buzzing ambience of the city. She shivered happily, tucking her hands in the front pocket of her hoodie as she waited with a hoard of other people to cross the street.

Red had asked her once when she had fallen in love with Seattle. They'd been standing on the veranda that sprawled outwards from the huge sliding glass doors of his penthouse suite, enjoying a rare, clear summer night together. She had smiled and had leaned against the wall, resting her arms on top of it as she had gazed admiringly around at the city.

"It came on so gradually, Red--I hardly know! It's like I just woke up one day and was just...completely infatuated. The electrifying energy of it all...." she had waved her hand at the glittering buildings around them, "it just grabbed me and wouldn't let me go." She had felt him watching her intently. "It's strange for me to remember that I used to hate it. I used to wonder if I'd made a huge mistake going to school here...so far from home."

"I know," he'd murmured, bracing his hands against the top of the wall as his eyes had followed the line of hers. "Moving from the country to this place certainly wasn't easy on you."

"It was the worst. Terrifying." Liz had shaken her head, remembering the horrible culture shock and homesickness she had painfully endured. Then she had turned her head to smile at him. "But your visits helped so much. You knew what you were doing when you came to see me all those times...when I first started school. Didn't you?"

"I know what it's like to adapt to a new environment, alone...with no one to turn to. I didn't want the transition to be any harder on you than it absolutely had to be, Lizzy."

Her expression had turned curiously sharp. "When did you have to go through that, Red?"

He'd been quiet for a time, looking meditatively out at the city. It had been hard to tell in the dark, but
his expression had seemed...pained. Then he'd abruptly laughed quietly to himself. It had been a twisted laugh, resonating with bitterness. Red had then shaken his head before turning his full attention on her. The expression in his eyes had been strained. "Those memories aren't worth reliving by me telling you the stories, honey. They're over and done with now."

She had silently studied his face for a moment, sensing a vulnerability she had only observed a handful of times before trembling just beneath his armored, caustic defense of feigned indifference. It had intrigued her. "You don't like to talk about your past." Her voice had been unusually soft, questioning him even as she stated the fact.

"Surely you can understand why?" There had been a jagged edge to his tone that hadn't been there a moment ago--a warning? Don't pry too closely, it had firmly cautioned her.

But Liz hadn't wanted to heed that warning. In the years before, as she had matured from girl to woman, she had always considerately avoided speaking to him in detail about what she knew to be an extremely painful past out of her respect for him. But they hadn't been romantically involved then and now their relationship was different...it was more. That night she had suddenly desired to connect with him on an unfamiliar yet deeper level, to make contact with and understand his inquietude. She had met his wary eyes before bravely saying, "Because of...who you lost."

He had looked away from her then, expression darkening--it was sorrowful, wounded, and...guilty?

Not understanding the array of conflicting emotions she had seen shadowing his eyes, she had eased closer to him. "When I called you that one night, crying, because I'd called Sam...forgetting that he died...." She had cleared her throat. "You told me that the only way to start really healing was to talk about him whenever I could...to someone who would understand." She'd laid a hand on his forearm. God, his muscles had felt so tight. "Why don't you ever talk about them, Red?" It was plain to her that he still needed to--the waves of grief rolling off of him were a testament to that.

"Because there's nothing to say." His tight voice had been raw with anguish--and heated with the beginnings of anger.

Unwilling to drop the subject, to abandon her pursuit of connecting with him on a deeper psychological level, she had murmured quietly, "I don't think you're being entirely truthful."

He'd rounded on her then, eyes fever-bright with the horrific memory that would always haunt his thoughts, but they had also burned with a chilling fury--directed towards her. Shocked, Liz had unconsciously taken a startled step back away from him. "I can't talk about them with anyone--especially not with you, Lizzy," he had snarled vehemently at her.

"Why?" she had snarled back defensively, hurt, bewildered, and utterly disconcerted by the rage and shame clearly written on his face.

Before she had known what was happening, Red had swiftly pinned her up against the veranda's wall, hands splayed on either side of her. Then he'd caught her lips in a probing kiss that had rendered her completely speechless and shaking in the close circle his arms. "Because," he had breathed hoarsely, "you are life. You are like that damn city below us: pulsing with vitality, radiating pure and unadulterated vivacity." His lips had trailed along her jaw to linger near her ear. "When I'm with you, all I want is to feel that spirited brilliance." His teeth had caught at the sensitive skin just below her earlobe as his hard body had pushed into hers. "I want dive into it. Claim it. Possess it. I want it to fucking consume me so I don't feel the aching desolation their deaths have left inside of me."
Wordlessly, Liz had stared up at him with wide, stunned eyes. She hadn't felt fear, exactly--she had never been afraid of him. But Red must have seen something--distress, perhaps--in her expression that had cautioned him, for he had made the visible effort to rein in that icy fury spiraling through him, to gentle his touch and words. "That's why I won't discuss them with you. Death lives inside me, Lizzy. It's a vacuum of...." He had shaken his head, as if words alone could not describe what kind of dark horror existed within him. Maybe they really couldn't. "But, when I'm with you...." His voice had trailed off, palm cupping her cheek, eyes fiercely entreating her to understand so he wouldn't have to explain further.

And, as her unsettled thoughts had reeled with both astonishment from his open confession and her own desire for him not to be angry with her, Liz hadn't made him.

The jostling of another person brushing past her abruptly brought her out of the memory. She scowled after the guy--he hadn't even apologized!

Then she heard very familiar laugh.

Red's laugh.

It couldn't be.... Liz pivoted around, ears straining to pick it up again, eyes scanning the crowds of people walking and the restaurant patrons. Maybe she had imagined it. She had just been thinking about him, after all. Sometimes the mind could play tricks--it had happened before. Shaking her head at herself, Liz turned around and began to walk forward again.

Wait! There is was again! That was his laugh--she'd recognize his gravelly tone anywhere. But...how could it be? He wasn't due to be back in the city for another few weeks at least!

Maybe he'd come back early--and was laughing at her because she'd walked right passed him and hadn't seen him!

Her hopeful heart skipping excitedly, she stopped walking and braced her body against the trunk of a large tree growing along the sidewalk. She looked at the chic restaurant patio in front of her, at all the people dressed up in their finest, searching for his familiar face.

A smile lit her eyes and curved her lips--there he was!

But....wait.

Who was that sitting across from him?

Was that a....

It was a woman.

A devastatingly beautiful mature woman.

What the Hell? Liz's heart constricted agonizingly in her chest as her shocked gaze took in every single detail--the way the woman leaned forward to provocatively murmur something to Red, the way his eyes flickered to her ample bosom displayed so brazenly, the way she laughed deeply, throatily, the way he reached out to caress her hand that was outstretched on the table, the way he smiled at her in a very knowing and sensual way--God, he knew her.

Jealousy tore through her, whipping her emotions up into an outraged frenzy so swiftly that she immediately felt light-headed. Bracing her shaking hand against the tree, she stared at Red in dismay, tumultuous thoughts chasing each other in furious confusion. Was this why he had wanted her to
date other men--because he was dating other women?

Images of him lying naked in bed with that woman flashed through Elizabeth's mind--of his mouth sucking at her flesh, of his body thrusting over hers, sweat streaming down his arching spine as he growled, losing himself in pleasure....

Oh, God.

And here she had thought that what he'd said to her on the veranda that night had been true--that he needed her. That she was unlike any other woman he'd ever been with. That she was special.

She'd been an idiot to believe him and actually give herself such important airs.

Who the Hell did she think she was?

How could she had been so stupidly naive?

So fucking blind?

Her betrayed heart dropped like a stone to the pit of her stomach as Red lifted that woman's hand in his and brushed his lips against her knuckles. Then--for some reason Liz couldn't possibly begin to fathom--his eyes shifted from the woman and landed on her.

Time slowed. The blood drained from her face. She could hear her heartbeat thundering loudly in her ears. Red's eyes widened almost imperceptibly in shock as they stared at one another. Was that guilt smearing across his face? She hoped to God it was! A burning rage unlike anything she had ever felt before in her entire life swelled within her, baring its fangs, throwing back its jaws to lustily howl in pain and impassioned fury.

Liz blinked and time rapidly sped up, abruptly tossing her back into the jarring here and now. The indifferent world exploded--it was irreparably fractured, its pieces falling around her--through her--like shards of glass that slashed into her mind and heart. His green eyes were reflected in every Goddamn fragment. With a shuddering gasp, she angrily whirled away from him and stormed back the way she had come, completely oblivious to everything and everyone around her.

Stupid, naive girl!

She couldn't see--she was ruptured, blind! And all she could hear--all that she was truly aware of--was that outraged something savagely keening down deep inside of her, violently drowning out all other sounds, ferociously howling and howling and howling....

Chapter End Notes

I know it's a short chapter but I wanted you guys to have something this weekend :) (the next is already in progress....!)

Thank you for reading! Your kudos and comments and support always make my day.
"I thought you told me she was at fucking dance class tonight," Red barked irately into the phone.

"She was, boss. She didn't follow her usual routine when she left." Baz's tone turned dry. "But do you always expect her to behave predictably?"

No. But it sure would have been convenient if she had tonight! Ignoring the other man's question, Red focused on the more pertinent issue. "Where the fuck is she right now?"

"She's getting wasted in a bar."

Guilt seized Red's heart and squeezed until he rasped, "Which one?"

"You can't go marching over there, Red," Baz evaded. "I know you want to appease her so you can keep fucking her--"

Red fiercely snarled a sharp warning at the younger man, who hastily changed his impertinent tone to one that was more acceptable for his employer's current mood.

"--but if you were to--"

"I know," Red cut him off. He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, trying to control his roiling temper. "I know." Lizzy would wonder how he had found her so quickly and that would bring up a whole slew of other questions that could not be asked, and definitely should not be answered. He already had fucking enough to deal with. "If I can get her to tell me where she is, I'll need you to don the persona of cabby again and drive us back to my place."

"Not hers?" Baz dared to ask curiously.

"With all those fucking neighbors of hers watching? No."

"All right, Red. But...she might not tell you. She looked fairly pissed off when she went in an hour and a half ago."

*Fairly pissed off. If that wasn't the fucking understatement of the fucking year.... "That's my concern, not yours," Red ground out. "Keep an eye on her. Let me know immediately if she leaves." Then he snapped his phone shut with a resounding click.*

Fuck.

His fist tightened around it as he wrestled with his guilt and fury. Normally he managed any and all of his business affairs outside of the state of Washington so that he could keep his life compartmentalized as cleanly as possible. But when Maddie had contacted him, explaining that she'd like to meet with him in Seattle to discuss using his shipping services after she had...obtained...a certain, incredibly valuable piece of art that currently hung in one of the city's many galleries, well...he hadn't insisted on meeting her elsewhere. The woman could be extremely volatile, turbulent moods changing as swiftly as the wind could--and he wanted to remain in her good graces. Besides, it was always a wonderful thing when Madeline Pratt owed *him* a favor. It was an opportunity not to be missed.
So he'd played nice, politely meeting with her at her specified location, then had wooed her by wining and dining her, and had cajoled and flattered her prideful ego until he'd made sure the details of their bargain were airtight, possessing absolutely no wriggle room for any of her wily ways that he was already intimately acquainted with. What would have bolstered negotiations, though, was if he could have brought her back to a fancy hotel room somewhere in the city for a torrid night of steamy sex. It put her in a fabulous mood every time and always aided in solidifying their deal.

But that plan had been shot straight to Hell when he'd caught Lizzy--of all six-hundred thousand fucking people living in this city--staring at him from across the sidewalk. The desperate pain and sparking fury in those beautiful blue eyes of hers had literally stolen his breath before she had whirled away, losing herself in the masses of people heading downtown. That horrible look she had shot at him had coldly torn away his building desire to fuck Madeline, leaving his pulsating lust shredded to pieces. And yet, to his surprise, those curling tendrils hadn't left him but had lingered, burning within him...though now they weren't smoldering for Maddie.

And so he'd had to shove everything--his shock, his aggravation, his shame, his growing impatience and aching desire--to the back of his mind while he had stayed tethered to the table with Madeline. Being such a cunning vixen, she had immediately observed the change in him even though he had smoothly tried to cover his lapse in their conversation. She had even glanced over her shoulder to see what on earth could have possibly caused him of all people to lose his handle on the heady game of words they'd been indulging in. Luckily Lizzy had been gone by then--but only by a split-second. Afterwards, Red had done his absolute best to divert and distract Madeline and his efforts had indeed paid off to the benefit of each of them.

But not without a price.

His fucking patience was worn down, nearly paper thin--so fine that it was almost non-existent. Naturally, this set his explosive temper on a cruelly jagged edge. If someone even glanced at him the wrong way he was liable to go off on them without any remorse whatsoever.

With how intensely mercurial he was feeling right now, he knew it certainly was not the time to go after Lizzy. She needed to sober up and cool off--as did he! But he couldn't bear the thought of her miserably drinking alone in a bar, furiously upset with him to the point where she actually had to lose herself in the mind-numbing effects of hard liquor. Was that his fucking ego influencing his thoughts? Or was it genuine concern for her?

Was it both?

Fuck it.

His fingers jammed into the buttons on his cell, dialing her number.

As expected, his call rang twice and then went straight to her voicemail. "Hey, this is Liz! I can't answer my phone right now but leave me a message and I'll....!" Her silvery laugh suddenly and unexpectedly pealed out, as if someone had distracted her while she'd been recording. ".....I'll call you back. Bye!" she managed to gasp, her pretty laugh chiming again right before the sound of the beep.

Red hung up, his slight smile painfully strained. Christ, she really did have the sweetest laugh. Shaking his head, he called back. When she failed to pick up yet again, he immediately called once more, jaw now determinedly set.

Pick up, damnit!

To his surprise, she actually answered just after he sent that growling thought out into the ether.
“What?” Elizabeth demanded in a heated snarl.

The white-hot rage shivering in her voice gave him slight pause. He had to tread very carefully with her right now--but he had to be firmly direct as well. "We need to talk, Lizzy."

She snorted. "You think?"

"Where are you?"

"Out."

Red clenched his jaw, reining in his temper that teetered right on the razor sharp peak of his control. "Where?"

"I don't know if I'm ready to talk to you," she snapped. Then she hiccuped. "I think I'm drunk."

"Sounds like it," he drawled.

She hissed angrily at him.

Well, at least she hadn't hung up on him! He took that fact as a good sign. "Where are you, Lizzy?" he asked again, mentally stomping down on his own ire so he could focus on gleaning that important bit of information from her.

He actually could feel her hesitation radiating through the phone. Red surmised that a part of her probably did want to talk to him, despite how furious--and inebriated--she was. Perhaps she wanted to talk to him because she was intoxicated. Alcohol had its way of impeding coherent and logical thought. Would it be right of him to knowingly take advantage of her unusual lapse in judgement? Absolutely not. But his ardent desire to see her and explain away--or excuse--what she had observed between him and Madeline was too overpowering for him to just ignore.

Red purposefully allowed the silence to stretch out between them, refusing to speak again until she answered his question--or until she decided to hang up on him. It grew tauter and tauter, like a rubber band being pulled until it was close to snapping. He knew she was very uncomfortable. He could sense her anxious embarrassment acutely. Part of him wanted to ease her disquiet--but his own pride held him back from doing so.

Another hiccup. "Red?"

"Mmm?"

"You're really quiet--I thought you hung up on me."

"You haven't answered my question," he reminded her, schooling his voice to a calm patience he certainly didn't feel.

She snarled testily at him.

Red ground his teeth, forcing himself to be quiet again, waiting her out. He could tell she was absolutely infuriated with him for verbally backing her into a corner. Idly, he wondered why it didn't occur to her that she could just hang up on him so she wouldn't have to answer his question.

Most likely she hadn't thought of it because she was half-lost in the buzzing haze of the alcohol. She'd have a fucking devil of a hangover tomorrow if she'd had as much to drink as he assumed she had.
"Fine!" she muttered irritably, probably more to herself than to him since it sounded like she had reached some kind of internal decision. "I'm at Some Random Bar."

He knew exactly where that was. "I'll be there soon," he told her just as the line went dead. Red bared his teeth at the black screen of his phone--she'd hung up on him after all!

That girl.

That rankling, beautiful, exasperating girl!

Swallowing his vexation, Red hailed a cab, mentally steeling and preparing himself for how he was going to deal with a tempestuous, boozed up Lizzy. He supposed there really wasn't a truly efficient way to anticipate what he was walking into. Oh, he could certainly guess how she would behave, but there were a number of paths this particular encounter could take. It was impossible to know what tact to use with her until he was physically in her presence, looking into her eyes, hearing her voice.

A tight smile ghosted at the corners of Red's mouth. It was a very good thing that he excelled at improvisation.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to IamSophia for giving me the idea to make "the woman" Madeline Pratt :)

Some Random Bar is an actual bar in Seattle. I've never been to it, but the reviews on Yelp are stellar lol

I'm splitting this particular event into smaller chapters for you guys--I believe it reads better this way.

Thank you for all your kudos, comments, and support, as always :)
A Baiting Altercation

Chapter Notes

As Red crossed the threshold of Some Random Bar--and what a diverting name that was!--he made the conscious effort to firmly set aside his own lingering frustration and anger so he could deal directly with Lizzy's. This conversation they would have was pivotal in how they would move forward and he would not allow his judgement to be clouded by those emotions. His eyes searched for and almost immediately found her. She was sitting at the corner table by the window, staring numbly at the tall drink in front of her as she turned it around and around with her fingers. Sensing his approach, she glanced up, her dazed expression sharpening into a scowl.

Christ, even completely inebriated and wearing a simple hoodie and leggings she was a beauty. The glazed, fiery expression on her face only served to add to her allure and Red felt his body quicken despite himself.

"Lizzy." He couldn't quite keep the low, sexual throb from his voice as he slid onto the bench across from her.

"I'm so mad at you I could scream," she hissed furiously at him.

"I would advise not doing so in here."

"I said I could scream--not that I was going to." Her blue eyes flashed with an icy fire up into his and he swiftly caught her gaze, holding it steadily with his own. A flush slowly rose up her neck to color her cheeks as they stared intently at one another.

"I thought you didn't like beer," he finally said quietly, inclining his head to her drink.

"I hate it," she grumbled, nervously breaking their eye contact and wrinkling her nose at the sweating glass cupped between her hands. "It's really gross."

The faintest of amused smiles flickered at the corners of his mouth. "Then why did you order it?"

"Because...." She pursed her lips, making the obviously difficult effort to think back to an hour ago. "It kinda sounded good at the time." Then she grimaced. "I shouldn't have listened to the bartender."

"How many have you had, Lizzy?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, irritated by his prying question. "Enough to get hammered, I guess." Then she frowned at him, tilting her head slightly to the side. "Everything is really bright in here. You have a halo around your head."

Red gazed back at her. Lovely girl. The observation was highly inappropriate considering the awkwardly tense situation they found themselves in, but he wouldn't dismiss the thought away or try to deny his desire for her. He longed to reach out and touch his fingers to her pale hands, soft cheek, dark tumble of hair--anything--but resolutely restrained the impulse. Any caress of his certainly wouldn't be welcomed right now.

"My mind feels fuzzy," she was saying grumpily. "Like I'm swimming in a sea of cotton balls."

"That'll happen when you drink too much," he told her, tone just familiarly wry enough that she shot
him a scathing look.

"I'm not an idiot--I know that, Red. But I only had to drink so much because of you."

The terrible guilt that he'd managed to keep at bay surged forth in a rough tidal wave within him at her words, momentarily sweeping away everything save the knowledge of how royally he had fucked up. Christ, was that feeling of failure fucking excruciating! He should have insisted on meeting Madeline somewhere else, damn the consequences--and any shit she would have pulled on him for not accommodating her--to the bowels of Hell. He'd been careless for the sake of convenience, for the sake of greed, and his two lives had collided harshly into one another due to his complete and utter lapse in judgement.

And now Lizzy was the one suffering because of that jarring impact caused by his inexcusable mistake.

Fuck.

He closed his eyes briefly, shoring up his mental defenses against the onslaught of fury--directed at himself--and shame. His furious pride howled, rushing to the forefront of his mind to fortify his heart, snarling at him to say something to her. But instead of facing her accusation directly, Red found himself deflecting their conversation to a vein that was as natural to him as breathing--the vein of advising her, guiding her, like he had for most of her life. "Drinking to cover up any intense emotion is a tempting path to take," he heard himself saying. "But if you start following it...it's a slippery slope all the way down. It's a dangerous habit to cultivate, honey."

"Don't you 'honey' me," she snarled. "And I didn't ask for your fucking advice. I'm mad at you, remember?"

His mental hackles rose sharply at her tone. "Oh, believe me, Lizzy--I am well aware of how you feel about me right now." The bitterly sarcastic remark escaped him before he could clamp it down and swallow it. Fuck, Reddington, what the Hell are you doing?

She slanted him a dirty look. "I think you're laughing at me--even though you're not laughing. I think you're doing it in your head." Her hands tightened around her glass, squeezing it until the whites of her knuckles showed. Then she lifted her chin, eyes piercing his. "I don't think you're taking me seriously, Red. I'm really very angry with you."

He knew she was. Of course she was! Her fury was apparent in the very way she held herself, in her eyes, in her voice. He knew down to the fucking marrow of his bones just how much he had hurt her. Perhaps that was why his ego had adopted that particularly sardonic tone--because he could still hardly believe that he had caused that blazing maelstrom spiraling in her eyes, that he had dealt such a painful blow to her heart that she had desperately turned to liquor to patch the gaping wound.

He was supposed to fucking protect and cherish that sweet purity of hers--not harm it. He had grievously failed in that as well.

And now she was looking at him as if he were almost a complete stranger to her--as if he hadn't played with her when she'd been a little girl, as if he hadn't soothed her physical and psychological hurts, as if he hadn't been her companion and confidant throughout her teenage years, as if he hadn't seen her through the worst of her grief when Sam had died, as if he hadn't shared her bed over the last five months. Red had to somehow bridge the glacial rift that was spreading out between them with every single breath she took.

"At the risk of sounding cliché...." His eyes searched her icily resentful ones. "I can explain what
you saw this evening."

She snorted into her glass as she took another drink. "You're right." A sneering moue of disgust crossed her face, but whether that twisted expression was due to the taste of the beer or him, he wasn't quite sure. "That was totally cliché. That's--that's what all the douchebag cheating guys say to the girls in the freaking movies, Red."

_Douchebag cheating guys._ It would've been funny if it didn't hurt so damn much. "Is that how you see me, Lizzy?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," she muttered, refusing to look at him. "I can't...I can't believe.... Who is she?" Her hands were trembling despite her biting tone. "Is she your lover, Red?"

Lizzy looked so very young just then--the way she was shakily trailing beads of water around on the glass so she could avoid his eyes, the way she anxiously bit her lower lip, the way her heated voice trembled slightly...how she had made the mistake of becoming too drunk to be in complete control of her emotions or to know what exactly she was revealing to him through her behavior.

His darling girl who deserved better.

But he wouldn't give her up, and so he had to level with her.

"You deserve truth from me, honey." He allowed himself the endearment despite her current aversion to such intimacy. "But before I...before you and I talk, here's what I think we should do."

Her eyes narrowed and she dared a quick glance up at him. "What?" she asked suspiciously.

He held her gaze unflinchingly. "I think we should wait to discuss this until you're sober."

"You just want more time to come up with your lame excuses."

God, was she sharp--but only half-right. Yes, he needed to get his thoughts in order, but he'd be damned if he took advantage of her intoxicated state to try and have an open and honest discussion with her--well, as open and honest as he could be, considering all the detailed facts. How could they speak rationally to each other when she was only operating on amplified levels of emotion due to the effects of all the alcohol she had consumed?

He gentled his tone. "Tell me, Lizzy.... How do you expect to have a real conversation with me when you're too drunk to understand what is really being said?"

"Are you calling me stupid?" she hissed.

"No." He spoke clearly, firmly, deliberately leaning closer so she would hear every word correctly. "I'm saying that you're too liquored up to converse productively with me right now."

She glowered fiercely at him.

"Surely you can see that I have a point?" he asked, making his voice softly entreating.

Her nostrils flared impatiently and she tossed her head as if she were some high-strung, wild creature, long hair flinging back over her shoulders.

"I'll take that as a 'Yes, Red, that does make a lot of sense.'"

"You're super arrogant," she proclaimed, irked. "You know that?"
His eyes glinted knowingly at her.

"And conceited."

She was trying to provoke him and he refused to play to her goading. He did, however, give her a tight smile. "But I'm right, aren't I?"

The way she defiantly--reluctantly--huffed at him was confirmation enough that she agreed. He didn't need to wring any more than that from her to know she discerned the sense in what he proposed.

"Now, we could wait here, in this bar, for you to sober up. On these wretchedly disagreeable benches. With nosy strangers all around us trying to listen in on our private conversation." He watched as she glanced around self-consciously. "Or...."

Her eyes flicked to his when he didn't finish his thought right away. "Or....?" she prompted impatiently.

"Or you could come home with me."

"What," she scoffed, "so you can seduce me?"

"No, Lizzy." His tone was controlled, even. "So we both can be someplace we're comfortable at so we can speak candidly with each other."

Her brow puckered and he allowed a silent minute to go by before he shrugged a nonchalant shoulder. "Or not. And I can meet you someplace else tomorrow."

As he expected, she rose haughtily to his baiting. "You think I'm afraid?"

He raised a brow at her. "I never said that."

"I'm not afraid of you!"

"So you've said."

With a contemptuous snarl she rose to her feet, bracing her hands on her hips. He gazed calmly up into her gleaming eyes, tilting his head ever so slightly to the side as he waited patiently for her decision. Lizzy bared her teeth at him before she whirled away and stalked unsteadily down the aisle. "You're paying for the cab!" she snapped over her shoulder.

Red followed after her, a small smile playing at his lips.

Chapter End Notes

I very much appreciated the feedback left on my last chapter and I hope you all enjoyed this one! :) more will follow after the season finale on Thursday--Lizzington is alive and well here!

Thank you always for your kudos, comments, and support <3
A Note From The Author

I've been approached a few times now over social media and have been asked if I'll be continuing *Sine Qua Non* in light of the events "revealed" in the finale.

The answer is YES I will continue this story. Lizzington lives. Our ship is sailing on a stormy sea but she has not gone down.

Stay strong and true, Lizzington hearts. Remember what we have seen with our eyes for four seasons now. Keep remembering.
Reprehensible Behavior

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thump. Thump. Thump.

What the Hell was that?

Elizabeth slitted her eyes open and she groaned, immediately regretting the impulsive decision. God—that agonizing cacophony was in her head! She snapped her eyes shut, welcoming the blissful darkness. But those horribly raw thumping sounds didn't cease. In fact, they were getting louder! And not only was the noise excruciating, but now it felt like two hammers were actually pounding relentlessly on both sides of her temples, doing their damnedest to split her skull apart as quickly as possible.

God. She really shouldn't have had all of that freaking beer.

Then the reason for why she'd gotten drunk in the first place smashed over her memory like she'd been clouted with a sledgehammer.

That masculine, dark-haired, green-eyed, infuriatingly arrogant reason.

Her eyes flew open and she groaned again as the warm yellow light from the bedside lamp flooded her vision. Blinking blearily up at the unfamiliar ceiling, she slowly, painfully, began to gather her bearings. She was in Red's suite, but she was tucked into the guest bed. When had she....

Oh, right.

She'd asked--no, not asked--she had told Red that she was going to use the bathroom. The guest room's bathroom. There had been no way in Hell that she'd been about to use his and single-handedly pave the way for him to conveniently trap her in his bedroom. Hearing her underlying message loud and clear, he had left her alone to do what she had needed to do—not only use his facilities and brush her teeth with as much minty toothpaste as she could pile onto the bristles, but to try and reinforce her battered mind and strengthen her wounded thoughts so she would be able to meet him head-on in rational and intelligent conversation.

But then Liz had taken one exhausted look at that sumptuous guest bed, with it's inviting goose-down comforter and soft, fuzzy blankets and plush mountains of pillows...and, actually, she couldn't recall doing anything else after that. Obviously she must have collapsed into the silken pile of luxury and had instantly fallen asleep.

Then Red must have eventually come in to check on her--and in seeing her sprawled out, completely dead to the world, he must have tucked her in like he had done a hundred times before.

Scowling, she sat up. Her sore head screeched indignantly at her, but she wasn't just going to lie in bed all night when there were important issues to be discussed! Besides, how could she possibly go back to sleep with her pulse trying to stubbornly drill its way into her brain? Wincing, she threw the covers off of her body and stood unsteadily. Her nostrils flared as she took in the scent of beer. God--her clothing reeked of it! Growling quietly to herself, disgusted that she'd have to face him smelling ripely sour, she happened to glance over at the armchair by the door...and abruptly stopped growling.

A fresh change of clothes was folded neatly on the cushion--everything from lacy undergarments to a
pair of comfy socks.

He knew her so well. Normally that didn't bother her. Tonight though.... It rankled. She didn't want to wear clothes he'd bought her. But...she really didn't want to smell like the bar anymore either.

To Hell with it!

Liz bared her teeth defiantly as she stripped all her odorous clothes off, angrily throwing them in the hamper, and then donned the fresh ones. The sweatshirt was so new that it was still delightfully fuzzy inside. She loved that. After zipping it up, she wrapped her arms briefly around herself, unashamed to take a moment of pleasure in the cozy feeling. Then she pulled on her wide leg denims and studied herself in the full-length mirror that stood against the opposite wall. Her eyes were bloodshot--that couldn't be helped. But despite that... She ran her hands through her hair and down her sides to rest them on her waist. She looked pretty damn good.

....For being hungover.

Wincing, she scrubbed at face, massaging her aching temples. She desperately needed aspirin. And a big glass water. Her throat suddenly felt very dry--like coarse sandpaper. And that's what got her moving to open the door and bravely venture out. God, she was so nervous. But why should she feel anxiety though? She certainly hadn't done anything wrong! Her temper flared indignantly and she quickly grasped onto it, fueling it with her frustration and anger, letting it carry her, letting it change her stride from hesitant to purposeful, letting it give her the unwavering strength she needed in order to face him.

Liz paused at the threshold between the hall and kitchen, eyeing Red. He was lounging on the couch. His back was to her but she could see that he was reading. Lifting her chin, she marched out of the shadows of the hallway and slipped behind the kitchen's bar. Grabbing a glass off the shelf, she then opened the refrigerator and filled the cup with water from his Brita filter. Before the stainless steel door swished shut she drank half the glass, eyes half-closing in something akin to ecstasy as the blessed liquid ran down her scratchy throat, easing the discomfort.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him rise from the sofa and walk toward her. "Where do you keep your aspirin again?" Her tone was sharply brusque--and she was satisfied to see that it gave him pause and forced him to regard her warily.

"How many do you need?"

All of them. "Two, I guess."

He opened the cupboard to her far left. After tapping out two pills from the jar, he slowly extended his hand, holding them out to her. As her fingers brushed against his palm, their eyes met. Flushing, she swiftly glanced away from his intensely searching gaze and popped the medicine in her mouth, taking a quick sip of cool water to wash them down. God, how her head throbbed! She hoped the aspirin would take effect quickly!

"How's your head, Lizzy?"

"It feels like it's been kicked by a freaking horse, thank you." Her clipped tone was just sarcastic enough to where his jaw worked soundlessly as he tried to contain whatever it was he wanted to snap back at her. To cover his annoyance, he went to the microwave, zapped what was in there for thirty seconds, and then retrieved the hot mug of....

Oh, Lord.
Liz couldn't quite stifle a moan as she stared at his familiar concoction. The very smell smacked her nose and offended her weakened stomach.

"You know it works," he told her calmly. "Finish your water and drink it without fussing."

"I don't fuss."

"You do. You are right now." Red steadily held out the ginger tea to her.

Grumbling under her breath, she accepted the steaming mug. She hated to admit it, especially right now, but ginger tea did aid in significantly lessening the symptoms of a hangover--she just abhorred the awful taste! Wrinkling her nose against the aroma, she turned away from him and made her way to the living room. Carefully she eased down on the sofa, tucking her knees up against the arm's cushion, cradling the mug in her hands. Well, really, making this brew was the least he could do for her, considering it was his fault she felt so Goddamned crummy!

Red sat down on the opposite end of the sofa. He wasn't too far away from her--she could feel the warmth radiating from his body--but it sure seemed like there were miles between them.

"Lizzy...."

God, she wasn't ready. She closed her eyes briefly, shaking her head. "Not yet, Red. Just....not yet." She had to get her nausea and frantically ringing headache under control first.

She had to harden her heart so she could get through this.

Clamping his mouth shut, Red picked up his book from the coffee table and opened it to where he'd left off. But as they sat there, Liz sipping as quickly as she could on the detestable tea (it was better to drink it down when it was piping hot), with the weighty silence spreading between them, around them, she noticed that he wasn't really reading--he'd been on the same page for at least seven minutes now.

Elizabeth wondered what he was thinking about--if he was gathering his arguments to him...if he was even building a defense. How could he possibly justify his atrocious behavior to her? The repulsive feeling of betrayal began to sizzle and foam within her again, stealing her breath, making her feel sick to her stomach.

"Who is she?"

The bitter words escaped her before she could consider them. Her eyes flicked to him, watching as he slowly closed his book, carefully laying it down in the table. "Her name is Madeline. She's been a business partner of mine for a few years now."

An eyebrow arched in disbelief. "A business partner?" How stupid did he think she really was?

"Yes."

"It looked to me like you two were on a date, not...working."

Red's eyes flashed at her derisive tone. "We were working, actually. Negotiating a deal."

"Uh huh. I see. And were you also negotiating a price for her boobs?"

"Lizzy," Red growled warningly.

She glared at him, remembering exactly how his eyes had wandered lustfully over Madeline's
breasts--which had been displayed so provocatively--when she'd purposefully leaned forward over
the table towards him. The woman had been using her wiles--Liz had recognized her flirtatious body
language. What killed her though was the fact that Red had looked and had encouraged her by
looking.

The prick.

"You kissed her hand." She couldn't keep the accusatory tone from betraying her innermost
insecurities. What else had he done with her in the past? They obviously had a...passionate...history.
The very thought of Red rolling that gorgeous woman between the sheets of his bed, pleasuring her
in ways that were intimately familiar to Elizabeth, made that wildly possessive part of her soul bay
lustily, hackles rising as it furiously snarled mine, mine! "Is she your lover?"

Red hesitated, seeming to wrestle with himself for a split second before admitting, "Only
sometimes."

"What the Hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that whenever I'm in town or she's in town, sometimes...we see each other."

His tone was infuriatingly steady and it set her teeth on edge. "Meaning you sleep together," she bit
out.

He regarded her silently.

God, this was so difficult. Bracing herself, Liz unwillingly--but bravely--met his eyes. "Were you
planning on sleeping with her tonight?"

His expression grew troubled--and that was answer enough for her. Her simmering fury frothed,
instantly boiling over. "Oh, Red. How could you?"

"It's just business, Lizzy!"

His voice was rasping, desperate. But she was too blinded by her own roiling emotions of searing
torment and heartache to glimpse his own miserable struggle. "Are you telling me that you sleep with
her so she'll give you her business?"

Red looked wretched and extremely uncomfortable. "In...a manner of speaking."

His hoarse tone, discomfited eyes, and uneasy posture wasn't enough to even begin to pacify her
anger and the heartrending--and freshly renewed--sense of betrayal. "You use her," Liz hissed
furiously.

"No--" he began, but she cut him off with a snarl.

"Yes! You do! When you have sex with someone so you can get something else out of it, that's
using someone, Red!" It should've made her feel better--that fact that he didn't see Madeline in a
more romantic light--but it actually made her feel even worse. "I can't believe I have to tell you that!
It's despicable."

Red was visibly angry now. "Don't be so naive, Lizzy!"

"I'm not naive! I'm sure this kind of thing is done all the time in your world!" He inhaled sharply at
that. "But just because other immoral people do it doesn't mean that you have to resort to such
deplorable methods!"
He stared at her, breathing harshly.

"Unless you like using women." A violent, glacial anger swept through her, spiraling up from the howling depths of her soul. "Are you using me, Red?"

"How could you even ask me such a thing?" Red snarled, outraged.

The icy maelstrom whirling within her kept her surprisingly calm in the midst of his impassioned rage. "Well," her chilly tone was clipped, "if you can use her and rationalize your reprehensible behavior away so fucking easily, how do I know--how do I really know--you're not just using me too?"

Red studied her in shock--as if he had never seen her before. And maybe, in a way, he hadn't. Maybe the veil was lifted from his eyes and mind and he finally viewed her the way she had always hoped he would--as a mature, intelligent woman who confidently knew her own mind. The depressing thing about it all though was that it took a situation like this to make him see her that way!

The shivering silence stretched tautly between them for a long moment before he broke it. His voice was quiet, but it was gruff with suppressed anger, with guilt, with longing. "Because it's different with you, Elizabeth. It's always been different with you. It's more with you."

Her heart twisted agonizingly in her chest. God, how she wanted to believe him. "If what we have is really that special, then you'd want to be with me. Only me. Like I only want to be with you. Then her eyes flashed with temper. "But it seems like you don't. And I think you wanted me to date other men so you could rationalize sleeping with other women, like Madeline. How many women have you slept with over the last five months we've been...involved?" she demanded, sneering the word.

"None."

Liz blinked, admittedly astonished. Red seemed just as astounded by his own honest admission. They gazed intently at each other as the span of a heartbeat passed. Then another. And another.

"But...you would've slept with Madeline."

"Lizzy--"

"It's wrong. It's so wrong, Red."

He closed his mouth and actually looked away from her. Was he ashamed? She tried to ignore that taloned fist squeezing her heart as she studied him. To her eyes, he was the same man she had known for nearly her whole life. His face may have aged over the years, the lines of it more jaggedly angled, the strain around his eyes and mouth more apparent, but the passionate vitality that burned inside of him was still the same. And yet, he now also seemed like he was...someone else. And that someone else was a stranger to her.

As if he could read her thoughts, Red's eyes defiantly flashed to hers and she caught her breath, unnerved by what she saw lingering there in his gaze. "You're looking at me like you've never seen me before."

"Maybe I haven't," she whispered.

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I've learned there's a whole other side to you. And that it's capable of...of doing inexcusable, dishonorable things."
The blood seemed to drain from his face, but his expression remained fierce. "I'm the same man I've always been, Lizzy."

"But now I know you better than I ever have. And I can't condone what you do with Madeline. I won't." Distressed, she looked away, moving to set her empty mug down on the coffee table. "And now...I even understand myself better," she continued softly, almost as if she were talking to herself, but her eyes flickered to his again. "I know that I can't...I can't share you. I don't want to share you. Just the thought of you making love to another woman is...." She shook her head, momentarily at a loss for words. "I can't compartmentalize my heart like that. And I don't think I can be with a man who can."

Silence reigned between them as Red gazed at her. It was disconcerting. And it was stretching too long.

Much too long.

And that made her temper pulsate and rise, throbbing, within her again to defend her vulnerable, wounded heart. She had just bared the tumultuous emotions of her soul to him and he couldn't offer her a single word of sincerity back?

"I won't be another notch in your belt, Red," she finally hissed, rising to her feet. "I won't." Then she abruptly turned from him and all but fled to the front door where her shoes were.

She had to get away from him.

"Lizzy, it's the middle of the night. Where are you going?"

She quickly stamped her feet into her sneakers. "Home."

Suddenly he was beside her--but he must have felt the waves of vexation rolling off of her because made no move to touch her. "It's the middle of the night," he repeated quietly. "At least wait until morning."

"No." She straightened, hand grasping the knob on the door as she pressed back against it. "I need to leave." Numb. Stay numb. Don't show him anything. Don't give him the satisfaction, she chanted the litany over and over again in her mind as she warily watched his eyes, as her trembling hand pushed the door open, as that something down deep within her soul howled mournfully.

"Lizzy...."

Her blue eyes pierced his. "Let me go, Red."

He let her go.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to Daniel and his Beta for letting me talk out my plans for this chapter with them. They helped me narrow down an idea that will play out in the following chapters :)

My Red is a man with his own set of flaws. I want Lizzy to be able to show him that he's not perfect and I want him to become a better man because she is in his life. We've
seen how he helps her--I also want to show how she can help him.

You know, the give and take :) 

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! I know it was filled with angsty drama but hopefully it helped ease some of the collective Lizzington heartache that's out there. Stay strong, Lizzington hearts!

Thank you always for all of your amazing support.
Red hissed uncomfortably, breath whistling sharply between his teeth as the icy water from both shower heads bombarded his heated skin, but it immediately succeeded in doing what he had needed it to do—clear his fucking mind.

That wasn't to say that his mind hadn't already been somewhat clear when he had stormed into his suite, ripping off his tie, shirt, pants, and underwear and allowing them to drop unceremoniously to the floor in a zigzagging trail as he stalked to the bathroom, fighting his simmering rage and repressed lust. That wasn't to say that he hadn't already been somewhat in control of himself when he'd clawed at the shower's dials, turning them all the way to cold and submerging himself under the freezing spray. If he hadn't been in control of himself, he would still be with Madeline in her hotel room right now.

Instead, he was here. Alone. Willingly submitting himself to all this Goddamned cold, cold water instead of rolling Madeline between the sheets of her bed.

He hated cold showers. But he had loathed the way he'd felt within Madeline's close proximity even more.

Growling to himself, Red clenched his fists before deliberately resting them against the smooth marble, watching the droplets of water stream in icy rivulets down his wrists and arms.

It had been a week since his conversation--well, perhaps a more accurate term would be his confrontation--with Elizabeth here in this very suite. During the last seven days he had tried everything he could think of (short of paying her a surprise visit at her damn duplex) to get her alone so he could talk with her again. First, he had given her the entire day to cool off--she'd been so furiously upset when she had skittishly bolted away from him in the middle of the night on Friday that he had known giving her the space she needed was the wisest course of action he could take.

On the second day, he had sent her a casual text to try and open the door of communication again: I'm assuming you made it home alive and well last night? Of course, he always had his people watching her place so he already knew she was home safe and sound, curled up on her sofa with Bronn, watching television. It had taken her two hours to respond with a simple, -Yep.- Her frosty attitude had been extremely obvious in that terse, one word reply, so he had figured she'd required more time to herself before she would even consider speaking--or typing--a full sentence to him.

When he hadn't heard from her on the fourth day, he had called her. Red hadn't quite known what he'd wanted to say to her. All he'd known at that point in time was that he had wanted to hear her voice--and in so doing, bridge the void gaping between them. But Lizzy had let his call ring and ring and ring--then had allowed it to go straight to her fucking voicemail. When he hadn't received a call back from her that evening, he'd finally felt the stirrings of exasperated anger. After all, he'd been patiently trying, for God's sake!

Red had then impatiently allowed exactly twenty-four hours to go by before he had tried calling her again on the fifth day. When she hadn't picked up, his ire had swirled with a peculiar, tempestuous anxiety he had never quite felt before--not even when she had broken her phone and had left him dangling, blind and mute, for a week. The unfamiliar mix of emotions he'd experienced had set his temper to teetering on a very sharp precipice, and Baz and the others in his employ had warily
sidestepped and veered around his volatile moods over the next two days.

Then Madeline had contacted him on the sixth day of Lizzy's pointed silence, confirming with him that her "purchase" would most definitely take place Saturday night and would he mind meeting with her once more Friday evening to go over a few last-minute details? Even now Red wasn't sure if she had been serious about "going over the details" or if she had just wanted to seduce him. She was such a devious and clever liar that she could even fool him--sometimes.

They had met a couple hours ago at her hotel room--a beautiful suite of luxury in one of the finest high rise establishments in the entire city. They'd discussed the details of their negotiation again, and he had once more reassured her of his men's loyalty and that they'd do the job they were paid to do in shipping her "purchase" out of the country--and do it well. But a part of him had been distracted by those Goddamned feelings of anxious frustration and vexation directed toward a certain, infuriating blue-eyed girl. Or perhaps they had been directed toward himself? As he thought back to that moment, to how his arrogant pride had tried to defend his--how had Lizzy put it? Ah, yes: "reprehensible behavior"--it was actually hard to say. Cunning Madeline had sensed the instability roiling within him as a predator senses weakness in its prey and had stepped closer, sultry mouth suddenly very close to his. And then they'd kissed.

Red wanted to believe she had instigated it--but he couldn't say with certainty that she had. It had been a heated kiss, turning artfully fervent the longer it had lasted. It had been a kiss to entice him, to arouse him--and arouse him it had. Growling, Red had pressed her back against the nearest wall, feeling those large breasts of hers squish flush against his chest, feeling her tongue dance skillfully with his, feeling his growing erection throb deliciously against her thigh.

But as she had continued to tantalize his lips with hers and tease his body with her hands, he had begun to compare her with his certain, infuriating blue-eyed girl--something he had certainly never done before...something he hadn't even been aware of until his conscious mind had brought it to his attention.

Madeline was exceptional in the bedroom--she knew exactly how to please a man, and, because of their history, was well aware of what he preferred. But Red had suddenly found her kiss to be lacking...something.

It had been strange--her technique had been excellent, but there'd been an innocence...a sweetness...an honest passion that he'd desired to feel as their lips had clung together--and it had been missing. Madeline had kissed him with a strategic purpose in mind--she had an endgame to suit her lusty needs.

But Lizzy....

Christ.

She kissed him for the simple joy of it--for play and for ardent exploration. She had this way of briefly breaking their kisses up to bite gently at his lower lip, to nuzzle him, to look at him with those guileless eyes of hers before she hid them behind her dusky lashes, wordlessly entreating him to kiss her again.

As Madeline had wrapped her silken arms around him, bringing his nose to the soft curve between her neck and shoulder, Red had inhaled the designer perfume she had spritzed there--and found it too damned cloying. He had suddenly, desperately, missed the fresh, soap-and-water, clean scent of Lizzy.

Then, as his fingers had slipped up Madeline's spine to grasp the back of her bared neck, he had
found himself wishing their path had been impeded by Lizzy's mass of wavy locks she always wore carelessly down her back. He had suddenly wanted to tangle his fingers in that long hair and pull on it while his lips melded hungrily with hers, while he pressed her lithe form up into his. He had wanted to feel her slender hands slide lightly up his sides and then clasp him close.

But it had been Madeline's luscious figure curving into his body--it had been Madeline's experienced lips and probing fingers provoking his arousal.

And all of it had been wrong.

As Madeline's hands had strayed to the buttons on his shirt, slowly beginning to undo them one by one, something deep within him had snarled disgustedly, abruptly and completely revolted by this woman who was doing her damnedest to seduce him and use his body for her own pleasure--just as he had seduced and used her so many times before.

Elizabeth had been right--all of this was absolutely contemptible!

As the realization had dawned on him, momentarily blinding him, his frenzied lust for Madeline had fled swiftly, leaving him frustrated and yearning for a certain, infuriating blue-eyed girl.

Christ, even now, with the cold water streaming around him, he could still feel the burning ache of desire for Elizabeth spreading throughout his body. No, he hadn't fucked Madeline--he couldn't, not with the way Lizzy's accusations had been ringing in his mind, not with the memories of how her silvery laugh had shivered around him, of how her sapphire eyes had glittered as she came down over him...not with the way his soul had been suddenly belling for her.

Red blinked, water dripping from his long lashes. He shook his head, trying to recall how exactly he had extricated himself from Madeline. Fuck, he couldn't even remember what smooth excuses he had given to remove himself from her company.

But he had.

Red grabbed the bar of soap off the shower's counter and began running it over his quivering body, trying to fucking soothe it down. Yes, he physically hungered for Lizzy--but it wasn't just sex he wanted from her. He fucking missed her--her voice, her capricious moods...just being in her lively presence. He had told her the truth that night, about how what he shared with her was...more. He hadn't felt this deeply for a woman since his lovely high school sweetheart who had later become his wife and mother to his one daughter. His thoughts immediately and violently shied away from those extremely agonizing memories and he mentally shoved them back, back, back until they were tiny, pinpricks of light flickering deep within him.

His relationship with Elizabeth had a few similarities to what he'd had before as a married man, and yet, at the same time...it was quite different. Red had watched Lizzy grow up, and just from that singular factor alone did their relationship diverge from the other. He not only knew Lizzy better then anyone because he'd been present as she had aged from child to adult, he also understood her very well--and was fascinated by how she was maturing.

Lizzy had been an impulsive little girl, but now, as a young woman, she was...mercurial, her emotions shifting constantly like quicksilver. And she was mesmerizing because of it. She was vivacity embodied, filled with the lightning of life that flashed, went electrifyingly dark, but then defiantly sparked again.

Red had learned that she could be sly and evasive, and yet in a split-second, she could turn just as swiftly around and become as passionately intimate as if she'd been his lover for years...not just a few
months.

Lizzy had a discerning nature. There were rare times when she appeared to be older than her years and Red found her stunningly captivating in those brief moments. He wondered at her: how could a woman so young, and at times so naive, show such percipience? Last week, she had revealed how incredibly insightful she could be by forcing him to see himself in a way that he never would have before if she had not snarled viciously at him, exposing truths about his character that were repugnant.

It had been extremely difficult--and painful--but Red had reluctantly introspected during the long, lonely nights this past week, doing his fucking best to shove his conceit to the side so he could analyze himself without being inhibited by his inflated ego. And he had come to realize that her fierce judgement of him that night had caused some of the peculiar anxiety that had plagued him.

Red certainly wasn't used to her disapproving of him. It rankled that she was disappointed in him--so much so that she absolutely refused to speak with him. The mirror she had held up to his inner visage had shown a dark reflection of himself staring back at him--and it hadn't been a handsome one. While Red had long ago resigned himself to the fact that there would always be ugly and vile demons lurking just behind his eyes that Elizabeth would sometimes be able to glimpse, he could not face her hatred. The fact that she had briefly seen him as Raymond Reddington and had detested what she had seen had struck a piercing uneasiness in his heart.

He could very well lose her over this.

It couldn't happen.

Red put the soap back and turned off both water jets. The air felt like warm velvet around his chilled skin--what a sweet relief it was! After briskly drying off, he wrapped a towel around his hard waist and purposefully headed for his closet.

He had to see her. Tonight. He couldn't allow her loathsome opinion of him to keep festering. He wouldn't let one more night go by where she was under the impression that he'd been using her. He snarled furiously out loud at that, grabbing a pair of black boxer briefs and then angrily pulled them up around his hips.

You're hardly a fucking 'notch in my belt,' minxlette, he growled at her in his mind as he tugged on a pair of dark indigo jeans and shrugged into a jet-black button down shirt.

Since she wouldn't answer his calls he would just have to show up at her door. Red bared his teeth in a savage smile at the thought of riling that temper of hers. It would be worth it, though, to...how did she like to put it? Ah, yes: get it all out in the fucking open.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and for every kudos and comment you leave. I appreciate all the support! :) 

EDIT: I said it last chapter in the Notes but I'll say it here too: Daniel and his Beta have been helping me flesh out my ideas for these current chapters :) thank you, you two! You guys rock.
"I thought you'd be with Madel--Ms. Pratt for, ah, a bit longer tonight," Baz greeted Red in surprise, rising to his feet as the older man came into the room.

The honest shock in the other man's face irritated Red. Had Baz accurately guessed what Madeline's ulterior motive had been and just assumed Red would be...detained, all night?

Red bared his teeth in something like a smile as he pocketed his key. "Obviously not, Baz."

"Of course." Baz eyed his employer, a fierce sort of satisfaction...and was that a glimmer of pride?...flashing in his gaze.

Grinding his teeth, he chose to ignore what the younger man's expression revealed what he thought about his perceived character.

Red glanced around, taking in his surroundings. It was only his second time in the apartment he had bought for Baz and Aaron. The first time he'd been inside, it had been right before he had committed to the unusual purchase.

He had paid a lot more than what it was worth, but he had wanted to speed along the process. He had needed to assure himself that all his safety requirements were met long before Lizzy moved into her new place.

The apartment was small, but neat and clean. More importantly, it was cater-cornered to Elizabeth's duplex so the men he hired could observe and watch over her and the surrounding area with ease--and without being seen.

That she remained blissfully unaware of their guarding presence was essential.

The guards' kitchen could easily peer into her den, which was where she apparently spent most of her time. The television, a plush armchair, and a coffee table where she tended to set her mail, toss her keys, and eat her meals, dotted the cozy room.

And although Red knew Bronn’s dog bed was rarely used--the dog preferred to cuddle with Lizzy on the sofa--it sat situated prominently by the sliding glass doors that lead out to the rather spacious backyard.

Red had been told by his people, who had helped Elizabeth move in, that she had exclaimed over all the expensive furniture, wondering why in God's name the previous tenants hadn't wanted to take any of it with them. The truth was that Red had actually furnished the entire place for her and had also footed the bill to have internet, cable, as well as new carpets and hardwood flooring installed.

He had been just as generous with Baz's and Aaron's lodgings, and as his sharp eyes took in his surroundings, he was pleased to see that the two bachelors had kept everything up quite nicely.

"What are you doing here, Red?" Baz enquired.

Red turned his attention back to the younger man. "I'm giving you a temporary reprieve."
Baz arched a brow. "Really?"

"Mmm. I'll watch over her for a while."

"She's still giving you the cold shoulder, huh?" Baz’s penetrating eyes turned sly and mischievous. "You hope to finally remedy that?"

Red shot a scathing look at the other man, who only absorbed it and smiled calmly and knowingly back.

"Keep your cell handy, Baz," he bit out.

Baz flashed his teeth roguishly at his employer's predictable snappish and evasive reply, deliberately patting his front pocket to reassure him that his phone would indeed be handy.

Red flicked his hand impatiently toward the door and Baz's grin widened fractionally before he grabbed his keys and took his well-deserved leave—for a time, anyway.

Once the other man was well and truly gone, Red pulled a glass down from the cupboard, filling it halfway, though he loathed the metallic taste of tap water.

He prowled the kitchen in distraction, but if he were being completely honest with himself, it was really to see if he could catch a glimpse of her through the den's window.

Red glanced down, peering through the slats, finding the room empty. Sighing his disappointment, he raised the water to his lips, only to slowly put it down, untouched, seconds later.

There she was.

But instead of wearing the hip-hop practice clothes like he had expected, she was very obviously dressed to impress a man.

A man who very obviously wasn't him.

His jaw clenched tightly as his eyes raked her body.

The filmy violet sheath dress accentuated her narrow shoulders and the deep plunging neckline that only gave him a teasing view of the shadowed crevice of her bosom. A creamy embroidered floral pattern flowed down the front of the dress, highlighting her tapered waist. Full bell sleeves danced hypnotically along her delicate arms and high slits in the frock exposed tantalizing glimpses of her long, pale legs.

It was gorgeous on her.

She was gorgeous.

Red watched as she raised her fingers to tease and shake out her hair, leaving the sensual waves dancing along her alabaster shoulders and down her back.

Christ.... Red instantly visualized another moment when he had seen the dark mane so beautifully tousled...after an especially enthusiastic romp in his bed.

His eyes fervently roved over her. He could just imagine trailing the tips of his fingers across all that bare skin. He wanted so badly to bury his hands in those sexy, disheveled locks...needed to feel her breasts press intimately against his own chest....
Before he was consciously aware of what he was doing, Red lifted his phone, pressing it to his ear.

He couldn't recall pulling it out of his back pocket. He couldn't even remember making the decision to dial her number. But the ringing in his ear informed him that he had done all those things.

From across the distance between them, he saw Lizzy pause in her activity to glance down at her phone, which was buzzing on the coffee table. Then she reached down and picked it up, her expression unreadable as she decided whether or not to answer his call.

"Red."

The sound of her voice, even though it was far from warm or affectionate, eased the tightness in his chest just enough to loosen his tongue.

"Lizzy. I'm surprised you answered." His dryly light tone contrasted sharply with her rigid and wary stance.

Just from the way she had said his name he knew she was trying to maintain an emotional distance from him. But as he watched her nervously take her lower lip between her teeth, he also thought that maybe, just maybe, she finally wanted to talk to him.

Why else would she take his call?

"I'm glad you did." This last he said in a softer, more serious tone. He could tell that she was given pause by his demeanor, suddenly unsure of how to proceed with him.

But her wary hesitation didn't last long. After the span of a heartbeat passed, Lizzy shrugged those smooth shoulders of hers.

"I can't talk long," her tone was fiery and she lifted a defiant chin. "I have a date."

Ah. So that's why she decided to answer her phone. She was obviously still furious with him—and clearly resentful. Right now, she wanted nothing more than to rub his nose in the fact that she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of moping and pining away over him.

And she was going to make him understand that she was lovely and desirable and was going to fucking prove it by going out with another man.

Red actually found her current attitude more amusing than not. It confirmed that she still cared about how he perceived her. Cared about what he thought of her.

She may have purposefully ignored him for an entire week, but things certainly weren't over between them.

"Oh?" His tone alone conveyed his thoughts—thoughts Elizabeth was not privy to, but took instant exception.

"Yeah," she replied defensively, a knee-jerk reaction to his wry inflection.

"Can you cancel?"

"What?"

"Can you cancel your plans?" he specified, even though he knew she was well aware of what he meant.
"And why would I do that?" she asked suspiciously.

"I'd like to see you."

"Your arrogance knows no bounds! Does it?" she demanded, incensed, as she stalked forward a couple steps before whirling around to flounce back to the coffee table.

He couldn't help but notice the distracting sway of her hips and the entrancing movement of her dress as she paced angrily.

"After what you said to me," she took a deep breath, gathering the courage to continue, "and what you freaking didn't say to me, last week," she seethed quietly, "what makes you think I'd just drop everything for you?"

"Well," he began patiently, eyes trailing up to her face, "you did answer my call."

Lizzy hissed at him. Even despite her smoldering temper, he could see her twisting her hair around her fingers. Whenever she fidgeted like that, she was usually frustrated and struggling internally with something...and it was usually something she didn't want to admit to herself.

"Do you want to see me?" His voice lowered.

"I can't just cancel on Jason!" she grated. "Unlike you, I actually live here and have a reputation to uphold in my circles, you know. I already toe the line of incivility and I can't just--"

"You didn't answer my question," he interrupted softly. He saw her bare her teeth in a silent snarl of aggravation. "We can talk about the other night, Lizzy," he added persuasively.

She scowled fiercely at that. "I have nothing left to say."

"I do," he told her, his quiet tone serious.

Her lips came down over her white teeth in a thin line. He could just see the sharp winds of her mind whirling cunningly as she tried to figure out how best to derisively snap back at him and smoothly avoid the pointed direction he was leading their conversation.

But he wasn't going to allow her to catch one of those fucking winds and bolt. Oh, no.

"I've missed you this week." He had meant the words to come out gently, lightly. But his yearning for her came through, deepening his voice to a gravelly purr.

Lizzy closed her eyes, brow furrowing.

He gazed at her through the panes of rain-spattered glass separating them, wondering what that particular look meant. "Have you missed me?" he asked, voice a steady murmur.

Her eyes flew open in perturbed annoyance. "What the Hell kind of question is that?"

A faint, knowing smile touched his lips. She was trying to sidetrack him with her tempestuousness.

It wasn't going to work.

"It's a rather simple question I'd like you to answer."

Lizzy was stubbornly silent.
"You know what I think?"

She tossed her hair restively over her shoulders, refusing to rise to his baiting.

His eyes gleamed at that.

"I think you want to indulge that capricious temper of yours," Red stated without hesitation. "You're still angry with me, Lizzy. I know it," he readily admitted. "And you really want me to feel it," he stressed. "You've punished me by ignoring my calls rather than speaking with me, adult to adult."

She sucked in an outraged breath at his implication that she was a coward--and less than mature.

"You want to keep punishing me by going out with this...what was his name?" he purposefully baited. "Jason?"

Red didn't have to look at her through the window to know how vexed she was. He could feel her ire through the phone.

"But you know what else I think?" he questioned, not really expecting a response. "I think you do want to talk to me. You do want to hear what I have to say." He paused briefly, letting the anticipation build. "I think you have missed me."

As Lizzy turned toward the window, he caught a better view of her face and it betrayed the conflict simmering within her. Despite her fury and pride and crushing disappointment in him, he spoke the truth about her.

Because he knew her.

"You've missed me." Red wanted her to admit it.

He couldn't really peg why it was so important to him. Perhaps he desired her to affirm it because he had missed her. And by having said what he had already...he had left himself somewhat...exposed...to her.

Though with the obstinate way she was resisting him, and, he thought, resisting herself, he doubted she realized it.

Maybe he unconsciously wished Elizabeth to be just as unguarded as he was in this moment, so they could co-exist on the same emotional level.

He had expected her to violently lash out, something she tended to do when she was tenaciously pursued and trapped with nowhere to escape to. So when her voice reluctantly fractured the silence that had swelled between them, he was surprised at the divergent cadence of her tone, which was severely taut and yet softly fragile all at once.

"You've been in my life for as long as I can remember." Her tone was almost resentful, almost reminiscent. "I can't...I can't even recall a moment when you haven't been there, Red."

"Is that a yes?" he murmured.

Lizzy snarled viciously, so conflicted and angry and completely unwilling to admit to her own desirous yearning to see him.

The sound of that feral noise caused a knowing smile to ghost at the corners of his mouth. The wild part of his own soul recognized it and crooned in satisfaction. He could understand her character well
enough to know that she had revealed the truth to him—albeit unintentionally.

"May I come over? To talk?"

"I have plans," she growled lowly.

She was back to balking, was she?

"Cancel them." His enunciation made it a suggestion, not a command.

"You don't really want to talk," she accused him. "You just want to--" She clamped her mouth shut with an audible snap of her teeth, the rest of her sentence hanging suspended, unsaid, between them for a moment before she mustered her nerve and finished, "Seduce me. Use me." Her tone was heavy with icy reproach.

Red swallowed a flash of outrage so intense it made his voice glacially harsh. "No, honey."

Her volatile moods swirled, instantly shifting. "You don't want me...." Her soft voice made him focus his full attention back onto her.

He gripped the edge of the counter before him, intently studying her face as he quickly tried to make sense of her change in tone. It had been colored with a frosty, wary resentment but was now laden with a hurt...disappointment?

"I certainly didn't say that."

Her brow puckered.

"I don't want you ever assuming that I want to use you for sex." The very words made his lips curl in disgust. "You accused me of that last week and this grievous misunderstanding needs to be set straight right now," his grave delivery left no room for doubt. "I have never and will never treat you in such a deplorable manner. Sex is not the reason why we are involved, nor is it why I want to see you tonight, Lizzy."

He watched as she mulled over his words, running a hand through the long hair hanging over her shoulder, nervously plucking at the ends that just brushed passed the tip of her breast. He watched as a myriad of emotions flickered over her face too quickly for him to identify. But...he thought he recognized one, for it lurked, quivering, within him as well.

"Although...."

Lizzy's fingers stilled their movements as she waited attentively for him to finish his thought.

He smiled wryly, almost completely positive he was correct in reading her. "I wouldn't turn down such an intimacy if you invited me, Lizzy."

Her breath caught slightly as she realized what kind of influence she truly had over the situation—over him. And he immediately took note that she didn't rush to deny that she wouldn't invite him.

His eyes caressed over her. "If you were, say, to kiss me."

She touched her fingers to her lips.

Red's curiosity sharpened and before he could contemplate the wisdom of it, he continued cautiously, "And if you'd let me kiss you back." He waited for a hiss of affront, an indignant growl.
He tilted his head to the side, observing her intently. "Maybe letting me work my way down from your lips to that sensitive spot you have right beneath your earlobe."

He expected a snarl of outrage. Instead, her fingers silently strayed under the heavy fall of her hair to stroke the familiar spot.

He was honestly shocked that she wasn't stopping him. That she wasn't offended. The fact that she wasn't putting a halt to his words proved once again that despite her lingering resentment and anger, she still yearned for him the way he yearned for her.

"Maybe I'd let my teeth tease you there. Maybe suck on it a little." His voice was a low murmur. "I know how much you like that."

He could just imagine the flush he found so charming rising in her cheeks because she bent her head, her hair falling, hiding her profile from him.

"Don't you, Lizzy?" he asked, giving her one final out--a chance to call a stop to this before he indulged the passion shivering between them.

The decision rested with her. He held his breath, waiting.

"Yeah," she whispered, raising her head.

Even across the distance separating them he could see her pique warring with her desire. But her longing was overtaking all else. Her hand moved in a mesmerizing path down her throat, coming to rest over her heart. Even from this distance, he could see the rise and fall of her bosom as her breathing quickened.

Red smiled savagely and released the desperate hold on his sensuality. It rushed forth, belling, immediately consuming him with a heady fire.

"But not as much as you enjoy my hands on your breasts," his voice lowered sensually, "The way I cup them in my palms. The way I squeeze them." He imagined her soft flesh filling his hands. "You enjoy that most, I think?"

Red's eyes darkened as Elizabeth shook her fingers free from the flowing sleeve of her dress, revealing her bared breast to his vision. Taking the white flesh in her hand, he watched her hesitantly squeeze it, as if a small part of her still thought it was wrong to be on the phone with him, allowing him to talk to her in this way.

Time to dispel that particular concern of hers.

"Put me on speaker." His tone brooked no argument.

Her hand shook as she pressed the speaker button, placing it on the coffee table.

"If I were there, I'd hold both your breasts in my hands, Lizzy." He watched, fascinated, as she lightly cupped them, lifting their weight. "Stroke my thumbs over your nipples."

He focused intently on her as she did as suggested. Though he was too far away to see if they stiffened, as her head fell back and the pale line of her throat was fully exposed, he had no doubt they had.
"Are you wearing something?"

"A dress," she breathed.

"I'd peel it away from those exquisite breasts of yours so I could feel all your skin against mine."

His nostrils flared as she pulled her arm from its sleeve, the silken fabric falling in a delicate motion about her waist. Her pert breasts now completely bared in the cool air tightened even more.

His cock throbbed at the sight, his blood roaring through his veins. Stroking a hand over the growing bulge in his pants, he gently cupped the growth. Even through the thick denim he could feel how warm it was.

"I'd pull at your nipples, gently at first." He watched her pinch them, before quickly correcting her, "Gently, baby. Gently...."

A moan escaped her and then he saw her sink her teeth into her bottom lip, cutting the husky sound off abruptly.

"You can make as much noise as you want, honey," he smiled, unzipping his jeans. "It's a Friday night. No one is home to hear you." His large fingers slid between the metal teeth and cotton flap, pulling his stiff erection free.

Red studied the way she played with herself. A sharp pant left his mouth as her tugging increased in rhythm and her breathy little whimpers fell like rain from her lips.

"Beautiful girl," he murmured, stroking himself slowly. "You're standing up, aren't you?"

"Mmm...."

"Lie down on your sofa...or bed, sweetheart," he quickly caught himself, remembering she didn't know she had an audience.

Lizzy reclined back against the couch, sinking deep into the soft pillows. Christ, how he wished he were actually there to feel her slender body trembling beneath his!

"I'd squeeze and tug at those erect little nipples." His breathing became strained watching her do as he said. "Yes...ah, God," he groaned, increasing the speed of his strokes.

"I'd run my other hand between your breasts, down your front, down your belly, down, Lizzy. Down. All the way. I love feeling your soft skin. I love feeling the goosebumps rise on your body." He shivered even as she did. "Do you know what I'd do next, honey?"

He focused on her hands disappearing under her dress as she pushed at the wisp of silk until it was unceremoniously shoved down off her shapely hips.

"Yes," she whispered.

His expression was fierce. "Go on then."

A gasp tore itself from her lips as she fingered her sex with one hand and quickly rubbed the swollen nipple of her breast with the other, losing herself in the sensuality of her arousal.

His gaze devoured her as she writhed on the sofa. Her hair tumbled heavily over her shoulders, the full peaks of her white breasts poking through the dark strands. One wayward lock fell over her cheek, the feathery ends sticking to her lips. With every pant that left her, it floated cheekily about,
only to get sucked back into her mouth as she inhaled, trying to catch her breath.

It was one of the most stimulating sights he had ever seen in his life.

As he watched her becoming lost in the throes of her passion, he found himself stroking his shaft in concert with her movements, as though he really were there with her, enjoying this physical intimacy. An intimacy that was pushing him closer and closer to the precipice of his own release.

He was likely to fall off that jagged edge soon, but his masculine pride snarled at him to wait, *wait.*

Wait for her.

"Faster, honey," he rasped, his eyes slitting heavily. "*Faster,*" he urged. "Use two fingers, baby, not one."

Fuck!

Red’s eyes snapped open wide, jerking towards her quickly for any indication that she knew, had realized, he had been aware she had only been using one finger.

His heart pounded anxiously as he watched her for any sign that she had caught on to what he’d let slip. But she was too far gone, completely lost in her own sexuality to comprehend what he had said.

Relief swept wildly through him and his soul howled possessively as he watched the Lizzy's hips buck just seconds before she threw her head back in abandon as she came.

With a hoarse cry, he swiftly followed her, spiraling down into a warm abyss of intense pleasure.

Red didn't know how long he stood there in the kitchen, cupping himself, muscles languidly shaking, thoughts floating. But as he finally blinked bleary eyes, he came back to himself--back to the crushing reality.

The annoying pain in his hand was not from gripping a headboard or even Lizzy too tightly as he’d brought them to an explosive release...but from clutching the grooves of the counter, leaving deep, red indentations in his palm.

And the silence he normally enjoyed with her as they tried to catch their breaths after they had made love was instead an all too silent cell phone.

A silent phone and black screen...indicating Lizzy had hung up on him.

Chapter End Notes

*Thank you* to my beta readers, Daniel and his Beta, for taking the time out of their busy schedules to help me with this chapter! I really appreciate your suggestions and advice!

To my readers, thank you always for your kudos, comments, and support :) I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
Elizabeth closed her lips lightly over the straw of her iced macchiato and sipped as Jason carefully lead her out of the popular coffee house and down the congested sidewalk. It had rained earlier that day but the night was blissfully clear and dry. The air was warmer than usual, almost balmy. The amazing summer weather had brought more throngs of people than usual out of their homes and apartments. The downtown blocks of the city were vibrating with a persistent energy, especially right along this particular strip where so many of the bustling shops and teeming bars were situated, animatedly luring multitudes of patrons in with their flashing neon signs advertising sales and deals.

"Whoops--watch out, Liz!" Jason cautioned her, quickly wrapping an arm around her bared shoulders to swiftly guide her away from another couple about to collide into them. Once he safely moved her away into a steadier stream of people flowing up the crowded street, Liz waited to see if he would remove his arm--he didn't. In fact, he snugged it more securely around her, bringing her slightly closer against him.

Her brow puckered uncertainly as she thought over whether or not she wanted that. Usually she didn't mind easy and relaxed intimacy from her casual dates--an arm draped around her shoulders or waist, loose hand holding, even a peck here on the cheek or there on the lips...it was all fairly tame and unthreatening. Her dates knew the boundaries she wouldn't cross, thanks to her widespread reputation of being willing yet aloof--unattainable. Most young men, if they were lucky enough to go out with her, didn't try to force her to move beyond what she was comfortable with, probably because each hoped to be the one she would return to time after time. And she wouldn't lie to herself...it did feel nice to be pressed against Jason. He had a great physique and his hand was soft and warm against her skin. But after what had happened on the phone with Red a few hours ago....

God.

A flush bloomed hotly in her cheeks and she was extremely grateful for the velvet cover of night that hid their sudden, vibrant color from her date.

Jason had arrived not fifteen minutes after her trembling fingers had scrabbled at her phone, finally finding and clumsily hitting the End button. Then she had sat there on her sofa, half naked and replete, gulping in shuddering breaths, face crimson with residual lust...and embarrassment. Once she had caught her breath and could think somewhat coherently again, she had glanced down at the screen of her phone and had gasped in shock as she'd read the time.

Jason was coming!

With her confused thoughts awhirl, Liz had bolted up from the cushions, quickly readjusting her dress as she had rushed into her bedroom to slip on a fresh thong and fix her makeup and hair. She hadn't had the time to spare even a thought about Red--and certainly she hadn't been able to reflect on what she had just done with him over the phone, or to even decide how she felt about it. All she had known as she had shakily dashed more makeup on her flushed face was that she had to make sure she didn't look like she had just risen from sensually tumbling about on her own damned sofa.

Liz had inhaled deeply, trying to see if she smelled like sex. God, did she? Growling quietly to herself, she had rummaged around the bathroom, desperately trying to find scented soap, hairspray, perfume--anything!
She had finally found an old bottle of lotion called Amazing Grace at the back of the cabinet—a gift from one of her friends. Since she didn't really like scented perfumes, soaps, or lotions, it had been barely used. Liz had taken it out, had unscrewed the top and had sniffed. It hadn't gone bad—thank God. The aroma was clean and light and it had reminded her of soft muguet blossoms, but it was also strong enough to mask any trace of the activity she had just engaged in.

Or so she had hoped.

Cheeks burning, Liz had squeezed a hefty amount of the creamy stuff in her hands and had rubbed it all down her smooth legs and arms, praying to God it would be enough, and, at the same time, hoping that it wouldn't be too much to where Jason would start gagging if he came too close to her.

As she had darted down the hall at the sound of her doorbell ringing, her phone had instantaneously gone off in her hand. She had glanced down, already knowing what number would be flashing insistently there. Annoyance had warred with her guilt as she had jammed her finger into the silent button before throwing her phone into her purse. She had tried to tell herself that she wasn't avoiding Red because she was agitated and flustered, that she was only ignoring his call because Jason was literally waiting at her door to take her out.

But she'd known even then, deep down, that she hadn't been entirely truthful with herself. The act of hanging up on Red had rung with more emotional truths than her half-hearted, rational excuse had in that moment.

Red hadn't called her again, but as she had walked around the promenade with Jason, trying to make the effort to enjoy herself, she'd thought she could feel his presence. She had glanced around furtively, but of course Red hadn't been anywhere. It had just been her thoughts of him plaguing her, demanding that she reflect on what had happened, lecturing her that it wasn't psychologically healthy to keep the memory of his phone call locked away inside her. She had to honestly acknowledge what had happened with open eyes and decide how she was going to move forward with Red...with herself.

Of course, that was rather difficult to do with Jason around.

All throughout dinner, Liz had valiantly struggled to shove Red and what they'd done out of her mind. She'd been able to tell that Jason had been aware that she'd been discomposed, and he had done his absolute best to draw her out. It was embarrassing that he had recognized her distracted state at all, but instead of giving her up as a lost cause and shortening the time of their date, he'd risen to the challenge of attempting to engage her attention.

And his masculine wiles had worked for a time.

Jason had been charming—lightly teasing her, cajoling her to playfully tease back, regaling her with stories that were humorous enough to be episodes in a sitcom, asking questions that had led her to slowly open up about her likes and dislikes, the courses she had taken and was planning on taking when school started up again, her favorite hobbies. He'd expressed honest interest in her hip-hop class, inquiring if she would be performing in front of live audiences any time soon? She had shrugged a silken shoulder while giving him her best unsure-but-game smile as she had replied that she wasn't quite one hundred percent certain yet, but that she was definitely considering performing on stage at least once.

His expression had sharpened in heated interest at the sight of that particular smile of hers, and Liz had glanced self-consciously away, knowing exactly what that look meant because she had seen it in Red's eyes many times before.
Red.

That infuriating, handsome, arrogant prick.

Liz took another sip of her iced coffee, eyes flashing defiantly down at the sidewalk.

He was probably furious that she'd hung up on him *again*. She seemed to be making a habit of doing that. It certainly wasn't polite--or mature--of her. Her nostrils flared in frustration as she admitted her childish behavior to herself. But she had just been so Goddamned embarrassed about how she had actually come *over the phone* with him. And she'd been angry, too--angry that he'd seduced her even though he had just told her that sex wasn't why he had wanted to see her tonight!

*That's not quite fair...and you know it....*

Liz winced, absently swirling the ice around in her cup.

*Honesty, Liz.*

She wasn't really angry with him. Well, not for *that*, anyway. In truth, she was furious with herself for succumbing to her own desire for him. Red had given her plenty of opportunities to stop him from carrying her down that sensual current.

But she *hadn't* stopped him.

Because she had wanted him.

God. They should've had a long, heart-to-heart discussion instead of getting intimate like that. What was vexing to her was that she had known better! Sex--even if it was technically phone sex--made everything so much more complicated. Blurry. And things were already complicated and blurred enough between them without throwing physical satiation into the whirling, spiraling mess of her own volatile emotions.

She shivered slightly, remembering how his deep, gravelly voice had sounded as he had purred her through pleasuring herself. At first, she'd been so reluctant to give in to her longing for various reasons, one of them being she had felt rather...foolish...touching herself like that, and the other more significant one being--of course--that she'd instinctively known she shouldn't be engaging in such an intimacy with Red until the air had been completely cleared between them. But as she'd fallen under the spell of his damned voice, willingly throwing caution and common sense to the fucking winds, and as she had stroked and tugged on her own flesh, she had vividly imagined that *he* had been there with her, murmuring in her ear, large hands and fingers caressing her to her throbbing release. That had been her undoing--pretending he had been there with her. Everything she had felt physically and emotionally had been made so much more intense by her yearning for him.

Despite the fury she'd been harboring against him throughout the entire week, she had still longed for him--something she could now fully acknowledge to herself, but her own pride had viciously held her back from admitting it to him. She stubbornly hadn't wanted to give him the satisfaction of knowing he could read her so well--even though they both knew he could. And even though she was fairly certain he'd been able to discern how she had truly felt, she'd been savagely pleased to know that her refusal to tell him what he had *wanted* to hear had been an annoyingly sharp thorn puncturing his inflated ego.

Conceited man. Served him right!

Had it been immature of her to handle his question that way? Maybe. Probably. But when it was wildly rampant enough, her temper tended to take the bit in its teeth and gallop recklessly away with
Red knew that about her, just as he'd known she had missed him.

How could she have not, though? Like she had reluctantly conceded to him over the phone, his presence had been with her throughout her whole life. He had either been physically in Nebraska with her, or he'd been available by phone, or she'd had a token of their relationship always nearby: books he'd given her, that expensive silver and leather belt he'd gifted her on her fourteenth or fifteenth birthday, sweet and loyal Bronn....the list went on. During this last week when she had purposefully cut Red away from her, it had felt like a part of her had been missing, as cliché as that sounded. She'd felt, for lack of a better word...incomplete, and had tried to fill that void with physical activities, like jogging and dance, traipsing around the city with her friends, and going out on this date tonight with Jason.

Her efforts had kind of worked this last week--but not entirely. During the quiet moments of the day when she hadn't been mentally or physically engaged, she had still found herself wanting to be with Red...casually hanging out in his company, walking around the city with him, watching TV with him, talking with him, laughing with him, even snarling and sniping with him. She'd been furious with herself for it, and she'd been incensed with him as well. But even her vexation hadn't been able to block the vulnerable emotions that had lain simmering just beneath her flaring temper.

She had missed him.

She had missed him because she loved him.

Liz scowled as she allowed Jason to escort her across the street toward his car.

Not that this admission of love was anything new to her. She'd loved Red her whole life. Of course, that love had changed as she had matured, and it had metamorphosed this year into something deeper...something--dare she use the word?--romantic. She couldn't just immediately stop loving him because he'd behaved like a gigantic ass last week.

As she analyzed it, that was probably why she was still so angry with him. Not that she wasn't justified in feeling anger toward him. She was! But the fact that she loved him multiplied all the conflicting emotions surrounding her feelings for him tenfold. Everything that whirled within her was amplified too much--her frustration and anxiety, her desire and embarrassment, her yearning and fury.

Maybe she should have cancelled on Jason. If she had then she wouldn't have given in to temptation over the Goddamned phone. But then she would have been giving Red exactly what he had wanted! The thought had been utterly abhorrent to her. She hadn't wanted to encourage his presumptuous arrogance. He'd been correct in that she had definitely gone out of her way to make him feel just how infuriated she was with him--how else would it penetrate that thick, egoistical skull of his that she wasn't someone to be taken advantage of?

It had certainly rankled though when he'd accused her of behaving childishly. He had known exactly how much that would bother her--the ass! He was well aware of how to push her sensitive buttons and rile her frothing temper!

Liz grudgingly admitted to herself that he'd had a point though, that maybe she really should have spoken with him sooner. If she had, then maybe she would have had the upper hand now since she would have called him on her own time and on her own terms. Instead, she'd answered when he had called, throwing all control into his hands, and he--being the masterful conversationalist that he was--had grasped that control tightly and had run swiftly with it!
That was, until he had thrust it back at her when she'd been at her weakest point, saddling her with the heady power to either tell him to fuck off or fuck her over the phone. Goosebumps rolled in waves over her body as the memory began to encroach on her consciousness. Not that what had happened tonight could simply be deemed “fucking.” There had been lust involved, yes, but as always with him, it was, or rather...it had seemed more than that.

The emotions she had felt—the ones that had fueled her passion—had been exquisite and all-consuming. Her lingering fury and resentment had been suppressed as the misty tendrils of her longing for him had rolled in, fanning throughout her mind, mingling together until they'd become a thunderous, roiling fog. Desire had flashed like lightning as his encouraging voice had aroused her body and heart.

Despite his imperiousness, Red's tone had also held the underlying affection and tenderness she'd come to recognize whenever they made love. She hadn't been able to see his face, but at the time she hadn't needed to--Liz had thought she'd felt that vibrant and ardent connection to him despite the physical distance separating them. It was hard to put it into the strict and coherent structure of words, but she had been sure she'd been cognizant of the emotions that had been running through him and emanating from the phone, for she had been certain that they'd matched hers, meshing and entangling with hers until it was all she had been aware of.

But as she'd heard Red groan as he had come just as intensely as she had, crackling doubt had sparked through the haze of her satiation. The sounds escaping his mouth had been so basely primal that her insecurities had once more surged to the forefront of her thoughts: had her mind and body been tricking her into thinking there had been more than just physical lust between them? Red had been adamant when he'd promised her that he had never used her. And she'd been so certain of what she had felt, but....

How could she really know without speaking honestly with him? Without seeing his face?

Liz had to determine for herself if Red was telling her the truth. And the only way to be assured was to be in his presence and really look into his eyes. As they said, eyes were the windows to the soul. A phone call wasn't going to ease her disquiet, but a confrontation might.

No.

God, she didn't want a confrontation.

Liz murmured a thank you as Jason solicitously helped her into his car.

But that's what it was going to be, wasn't it? She lifted her chin defiantly, staring out the window into the night. Better to be frank with herself than to hide behind flowery words that were just pretty lies. She'd be better prepared if she fully acknowledged the truth—that this conversation they would have sooner rather than later wouldn't be painless.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for your kudos, comments, and support! :)

Sidenote, did the show ever mention when Liz's birthday is? Or Red's, for that matter? I'll have to make them up if we don't have dates! Thanks in advance for your help :)
"I had a great time with you tonight, Liz," Jason smiled at her. "I'm glad Katie introduced us at the club last week."

"Tonight was nice," she agreed, smiling back at him once she had opened the front door to her apartment. And she wasn't really lying. Despite everything, she'd enjoyed her time out...on the surface level. Dinner and coffee had been pleasant and he'd been solicitous and charming but...the date had been lacking.

And it wasn't Jason's fault. Overall, he was a nice enough guy. It just...hadn't been the experience she had really desired.

Unaware of her discordant thoughts, he daringly reached out, lightly tucking a bit of hair behind her ear. The action brought him unexpectedly closer--and in that moment, he reminded her so much of Red it was startling.

"Would you like to go out again next week?" His fingers trailed down her back, following the tumbling fall of her hair.

"Ask me next week," was her coy response, heart thudding despite herself.

Jason chuckled appreciatively at that, enjoying their banter. "Can I ask you something, Liz?" His tone was warm, intimate.

"Sure." His eyes were green. How had she not noticed that before?

"I normally don't do this on first dates because I know it can turn girls off. But..." He cocked his head slightly to the side, studying her face. "Can I kiss you?"

Liz blushed, admittedly taken by his charm. "Sure," she whispered. But did she acquiesce because of her attraction to him, or because that head tilt had reminded her so much of Red?

His kiss was soft at first, lips melding with hers. Her nostrils flared slightly, taking in his scent. A pang of disappointment struck her--she'd half-expected to breathe in something else.

After a moment had passed, he lifted his face to look down at her. "Beautiful girl," he murmured admiringly. It was exactly what Red called her sometimes. She shivered and didn't resist him when he dipped his head for more. Her lips parted of their own volition and the kiss deepened. His hands hesitantly wrapped around her arms and he very lightly and unhurriedly pressed her back against the doorjamb. Gentle heat suffused her body. Her fingers gripped the material of his shirt as her body began to respond to the call of his. She felt relaxed, languid. It was pleasant. It was nice.

But it wasn't the sensual fire she craved. Her body liked it, there was no question about that. But her blood wasn't singing through her veins, her heart wasn't hammering in her chest, and that passionately snarling part of her soul wasn't soothed because...Jason was nice, but he wasn't Red.

Guilt suddenly flooded her thoughts.

Red.
She shouldn't be doing this with Jason. Not if she really loved that conceited, infuriating, green-eyed man.

This was wrong of her. It was all wrong.

"Hold on," she breathed once their lips parted. "Wait."

"For what?" he asked softly, unable to quite veil the lust burning in his eyes as he came closer again, seeking her lips.

"Wait." Her voice was stronger now as her guiltily conflicted thoughts began to claw out of the haze of sensuality.

Suddenly a vicious snarl filled the air around them.

Liz jerked away from Jason, eyes wide in shock as Red appeared out of the darkness of the den to stand in the entryway. His arms were crossed menacingly over his chest and his eyes gleamed with an unfriendly light.

"I believe she asked you to wait," he hissed, baring his teeth threateningly at the momentarily stunned younger man. "She shouldn't have had to tell you twice. Once should've been quite enough."

"Red? What the Hell are you doing here?" And how the Hell did he get into her apartment?

Red's eyes flickered to her and he was about to respond—but when Jason's upper lip curled and he squared his shoulders in challenge, the older man immediately turned his full attention back to him once more.

"You're him, aren't you?"

A curious brow rose. "Who?"

"They call you Liz's daddy," Jason sneered, attempting to make the word an insult.

A bark of condescending laughter escaped Red even as Liz shot a seething glare at Jason. She hated that term!

"That's what 'they' call me, hmm? How amusing." The smile he turned on the young man was lazily arrogant. "Lizzy knows very well what we are to one another. As we are the only two involved in this relationship, what 'they' say and what it implies doesn't concern me in the slightest."

His green eyes then fell piercingly on Elizabeth for a brief moment. The deep intimacy in that look made her breath catch—but it didn't make her any less furious with him for breaking into her place!

"How the Hell did you get in?" she ground out.

"Do you want me to get rid of him for you, Liz?" Jason asked her, glaring at Red.

"I'm not going anywhere unless Elizabeth tells me to go," Red snarled darkly at Jason.

A fiery hiss instantly filled the entire room.

Both men were suddenly looking intently at her and Liz belatedly realized she was the one making that noise. Slowly she let it die away as she glanced sharply from one man to the other. The air was charged with her fuming vexation, but there were also rippling undercurrents of one territorial male
challenging the power and authority of the other. However, a heavy silence now reigned since both men had realized the wisdom of holding their tongues and how important it was for their futures with her to await her decision.

An embarrassed and angry flush rose in her cheeks as she edged away from them to stand solidly on her own. She crossed her arms over her chest, expression fierce.

"I'm tempted to throw you both out," she growled.

Jason slanted her a wary look, obviously unused to her sharp temper and the tones of voice that came with it, but Red only smiled. It was faint hedging of the lips, but she saw it flickering there. And was that pride for her sparkling in his eyes? Liz glared at him and he arched a brow at her, as if to say, Well?

Meanwhile, Jason's eyes flicked back and forth between the object of his desire and her man. Jason didn't know Liz well at all, but even he could sense the profound connection between her and the man who was at least two decades her senior. He observed it and acknowledged it, but that didn't mean he had to like it, or even accept it. Knowing that her interest in him was indeed waning and he had maybe one more shot to recapture it, Jason grasped onto the only thing that would maybe cast a shadow on that man and convince her to kick him out. He could very well get thrown out too, but at least no one else would have her tonight.

"If he really broke into your place, Liz, you should call the police," Jason had the temerity to advise her. "There's really no justification for breaking and entering. It doesn't matter who you are."

Red didn't even bat an eyelash in the younger man's direction. Jason's desperate attempts to grasp Elizabeth's attention and to try and intimidate him were pathetic at best. His gaze remained fixed on her, silently and respectfully waiting for her to make a decision--one way or another.

And Red's reactions were what decided her.

Steeling herself, Liz turned to the young man. "I'm not going to call the police on him, Jason. His being here actually saves me the trouble of calling him because I do need to...to talk to him," she said, jaw clenching slightly in frustration as she tossed her head in Red's direction. God, this was so extremely awkward. She really didn't need to explain herself to Jason, but she felt obligated, like she owed him since he had shown her a pleasant time tonight. True regret passed over her face briefly as she met his eyes. "I'm sorry, Jason."

"Me too," he bit out, obviously trying to cover his furious disappointment and failing miserably. He glanced at Red, who was watching him intently, seemingly ready to toss him out on his ass if he so much as glanced at Elizabeth in the wrong way. He certainly didn't want to bear that humiliation on top of everything else as well! "Goodnight, Liz," he managed to say stiffly before turning on his heel and frustratedly stalking to his car.

Well, it could have ended in worse ways, Liz thought a little guiltily as she watched him start up the engine.

Once the sporty vehicle had disappeared from her driveway, she shut the front door with a deliberately slow click. Then she took her time in turning on the den lamps. Warm light flooded the room and she closed her eyes for a moment, praying for strength. Her confrontation with Red had come sooner than she'd planned. And she certainly wasn't as ready as she'd like to be.

Crossing her arms tightly under her breasts, she turned around to finally face him.
He was watching her warily, probably waiting to see if she would fly into a tempestuous rage now that Jason was gone.

Liz ground her teeth at that. She didn't want his presumption to be the correct one. So she sucked in a deep breath through her nose and then let it out slowly before asking in a deceptively quiet voice, "What are you doing here, Red?" She was rather proud of herself for keeping her temper leashed--for the most part.

"Isn't it obvious?" His dry tone made her bare her teeth in aggravation.

"How the Hell did you get in?" she demanded. "Did you pick my lock?"

Red stuck his hand in his back pocket and pulled out a shiny silver key, holding it up between this thumb and forefinger. "I had this, Lizzy."

"Where did you get that?" she asked furiously.

"I had it made," came the calm reply.

"What?"

"When you moved into this place I had a spare key copied from the master," he explained patiently. "You never know when you might need an extra."

"And you just kept it? For yourself?" she snarled indignantly. "You have a Hell of a lot of nerve, you know that?" She held out her hand imperiously, wordlessly insisting that he give it to her.

He was obviously loathe to do so, but he didn't argue. Stepping closer he placed it gently in her palm, tips of his fingers brushing against her skin. He glanced into her eyes as she curled her trembling hand into a tight fist before tucking it behind her back and clasping her other hand around it.

"He was right, you know," she told him as she sidled away to set her purse and the key on the coffee table. "Jason, I mean. He was right. About breaking and entering. It's a violation of trust, Red."

"I needed to see you."

"Needed. Not wanted."

She understood the distinction. But still!

"Try picking up a phone," she snapped.

His scathing grin had a bite to it. "I have. Multiple times." The sarcasm was heavy in his voice.

Her nostrils flared and she planted her hands crossly on her hips. Well, fuck. She'd walked right into that one!

"I'm tired of you hanging up on me, Lizzy," he sighed, quite unable to cover his exasperation. "And I'm tired of waiting to see you. We need to talk about some things."

"Yeah," she snorted derisively, rolling her eyes.

"About tonight," he continued, unfazed by her fit of pique.

She shifted uneasily.
"About last week."

Liz looked away from him and sat down in the arm chair, lips pressed into an extremely thin line. Red walked around the sofa and sat down on the side closest to her, eyes fixed raptly on her face. She tried not to think about how only a few hours ago she'd reclined in that same exact spot, body twisting and quivering as she had....

Shoving that flash of memory down deep into her consciousness, she swallowed thickly and stared down at her clasped hands.

"You were right, Lizzy."

Her eyes flew back to his in puzzlement. "About what?"

"About Madeline and I. You were right," he confided quietly. "I thought a lot about what you said last week," he confided quietly. "I won't make any excuses. It was a despicable thing I did and it's not something I'll be doing again."

Liz knew she ought to feel very relieved, or at least feel something along those lines and openly express it to him, but instead she chose to ignore it—most likely because she didn't want to talk about another woman with him.

So she gave him a hard scowl, turning the conversation to a matter that was much more pressing. "And what about the other thing?"

"You mean your unfounded accusation of me using you for sex?" His impatient tone was aggravated. "I already spoke to you about it on the phone earlier, honey."

Their eyes met. She fiercely searched his gaze, raising a thin brow expectantly as a weighty silence began to stretch between them.

"No," he finally growled through clenched teeth. "No, Lizzy. I have never and will never do that to you. Not ever," he stressed. "How many fucking more times do I need to say it?" Red snapped his mouth shut, obviously making an effort to rein in his flaring temper. When he spoke again, it was in a quieter, more controlled voice. "It wounds me deeply that you would even think me capable of doing such a thing to you."

"Well, you did it to Madeline," she replied defensively, not liking how she suddenly felt so guilty. She'd had every right to question his motives! "And you've probably done it to other women too, though I don't really want to know about them, Red." She noticed irritably that he didn't deny it.

"You're capable of doing a lot of things that are...dark." She shrugged self-consciously at his piercing look, wishing she had the vocabulary to more accurately describe what she meant. "I can sense it in you," she tried to explain. "You're obviously capable of using people to get what you want. And.... I know you're capable of violence."

"What man isn't?" he defended himself in soft murmur, eyes gleaming peculiarly.

"I know you've hurt people before," she went on as if he hadn't interrupted. "You're probably even capable of killing, if the situation warranted it." She knew he was. She had beheld that cunning savagery up close and personal all those years ago.

He went very still, regarding her silently.

"Those things about you...they don't scare me, Red. Maybe they should. But they don't," she took in deep breath and let it out slowly. "But this..." her voice trailed off, suddenly uncertain of how to
"If sex was all I wanted from you, how would you explain our relationship when you were a little girl?"

Her brow furrowed.

"Or even when you were navigating yourself through those difficult teen years?"

She frowned at him.

"You can't, can you?" he asked the rhetorical question softly. "I know it's apparent but I suppose it bears repeating: you were obviously too young for that kind of intimacy for most of our years together, Lizzy. I wasn't harboring any type of despicable, licentious, ulterior motives against you then, nor am I now."

It was obvious that even the repulsive suggestion of something so depraved was difficult for him to elaborate on, but he did.

For her.

To ease her anxiety and destroy the dread residing within her.

His eyes gravely entreated her to believe him. And as she gazed unabashedly into his face, she didn't see any slithering shadows of horrifying lies or sickening half-truths lurking there.

In this moment, he was as transparent as he had ever been with her.

But when had Red ever lied to her?

He hadn't. Not even when she had confronted him about Madeline. He could have lied to her, could have tried to hide every disappointing truth. But instead he had been openly straightforward with her, just as he was being now. His frank honesty began to slowly alleviate her lingering doubts and soothe her seething anger.

"And tonight?" she heard herself ask.

The expression in his eyes warmed slightly as they searched hers.

She quickly looked away from him, blushing a deep scarlet despite herself.

"I don't think that had anything to do with lasciviousness, darling," he finally murmured. Leaning forward, he reached out across the small distance between them to touch his fingertips to her hands in a light, questing caress.

Too embarrassed to look at him, she instead studied his hand, the way the veins curved around his long fingers and up his wrist to disappear under the cuff of his sleeve, the way the grooves in his knuckles stood out, telling the story of his age, the way the blonde hairs caught the light as he moved to place his hand more firmly over hers.

"Maybe we just missed each other, Lizzy."

Biting her lower lip, she hesitantly glanced up at him through her lashes. Something in her expression must have given her true feelings away, for he suddenly permitted himself a small, confident smile.
"Arrogant man."

He raised a brow at that. "Is that an accusation or a statement?" His wry tone lightly teased her, testing her mood.

"Can't it be both?" she grumbled.

Now assured of her current state of mind, he chuckled. "No...." He rose to his feet, gently persuading her to join him by lifting her hands in his. "If you're accusing me then I will be able to come up with an argument for why you're right--or wrong."

Liz didn't resist as he carefully brushed his fingers against her wrists, slowly slipping them up beneath the flowing sleeves of her dress to wrap them around her bare arms.

She shivered.

"But if you're stating a fact, then it's a truth that cannot be disputed." His eyes glinted at her. "So which is it?"

"A statement," she informed him defiantly, blue eyes flashing even as goosebumps rose on her arms at his caressing touch.

"You're not even curious to hear my defense?"

"You don't have one," she retorted. "And even if you did I would have so many examples proving you wrong that I could most definitely bring you dow--"

Red placed a finger playfully over her lips to shush her, but she instantly turned her head to take it between her front teeth, lightly applying pressure at the joint. She could taste the slight tang of sweat, feel his hard nail against the tip of her tongue.

His eyes widened fractionally in astonishment at such an assertive display for dominance. Then his hand relaxed in submission even as he drew closer, expression sharpening in keen attentiveness as he searched her haughtily glittering eyes. She increased the pressure very slightly before releasing him. That hand of his immediately moved to cradle the back of her head, his fingers burying themselves in her hair as he brought his lips down on hers.

A passionate fire instantly flared between them, and nothing about the kiss was soft or gentle--or nice. It was a desperate meeting of mouths and clashing of teeth and it left them both breathless.

As Red ran his hands fervently down her sides, she could feel him trying to take control of where this intimacy was heading. She whipped her lips from his, snarling. He'd controlled her earlier over the phone, telling her exactly what to do and how to do it. She wasn't going to let him to do that this time!

Red let out a rasping growl of shock as she imperiously pushed him down on the sofa before climbing on top of him, straddling his hips.

His fingers slid between the silken folds of the high slits in her dress, digging into the smooth skin of her hips as he steadied her. "Lizzy...." his gravelly tone was almost questioning.

"Hush," she growled lowly, nipping at the fleshy part of his earlobe.

He hushed--except for the groan he let out as she brushed herself purposefully against the bulge hardening beneath her.
Chuckling throatily, she shifted her thighs out of the way and unzipped his jeans, fingers meandering their way beneath the folds of cloth to stroke and tease him to the point where he could grow no larger.

And as she pulled his erection free, playing with him, her eyes focused on his face contorting with primal lust and impatience and frustration simultaneously. It was utterly fascinating to watch all those differing emotions cross his features and then blur together.

Then those eyes of his snapped open to look into hers. The feral gleam in them made her hair immediately stand on end. Baring his teeth at her in a challenge, he pulled her dress down her arms to free her breasts. She snarled as he suddenly thrust his knees upward, the jarring movement pushing her forward to where he could suckle and tug on them without struggling to reach her.

Now he was the one chuckling, the sound rumbling down deep in his chest as she moaned like he had, half in desire and half in frustrated impatience. White-hot sparks seemed to be rushing throughout her body, starting at the very tips of her breasts where Red was pleasuring her to center at the throbbing place between her legs.

Growling savagely, she wriggled down onto his hard cock, as much for taunting revenge as to try to relieve some of the building pressure within her. But it wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough.

Shoving that slip of lace underneath her dress to the side, Liz took him in her hand and then smoothly impaled herself over him. His grunt of surprise echoed her shuddering gasp. For a what seemed like long moment she sat there, hands braced against the back of the sofa, breathing heavily, shamelessly enjoying feeling the hot length of him filling her.

Then she felt Red flex the muscles in his thighs and hips, urging her to move. Her head fell forward, brow pressing to the side of his neck and she began to fluidly thrust herself against him. He willingly rose to meet her time after time after time--until his own desire for even more overwhelmed him and he attempted to take control and increase their pace.

She hissed her displeasure, biting at the side of his neck warningly. Undaunted, he growled back at her, taking her slender sides in his hands and pushing her up and off of his chest so he could look into her eyes. As he held her defiant gaze unwaveringly, he moved experimentally, endeavoring to find a pace they both desired.

And as Liz began to enthusiastically move with him again, they found it. She grasped the back of his neck with one hand, teeth lightly scraping his temple as she lost herself in their momentum, in the enthralling stimulation flooding her senses, blinding her to all except the way he felt around her, inside of her.

When she and Red had first come together physically in Nebraska, she'd thought pursuing her body's release had been like darting swiftly after a shooting star until she was caught up in the sparkling propulsion of its tail, the glittering sensations bombarding her until she shattered in climax.

In truth, she knew now that she wasn't dashing after that compellingly shining comet--she was that heavenly body, hurtling forward, always rapidly forward, willingly burning up her own energies to encompass him and herself in the exquisite physical and emotional passions that thrilled her soul.

And she was close now.

So close.
With a gasp, she held herself up, shivering, rocking lightly against him, prolonging the pleasure for a few seconds longer.

Just a few seconds longer.

But when Red breathed her name in her ear, fingers curling in her hair, her lips curved into a slow, knowing smile and she finally thrusted against him, into him--and instantly she was whirling in the rippling pulsation of her release, swiftly circling wider and wider until she found him and caught him and intertwined herself with him as he, too, lost himself, falling against her, through her, with her.

Always with her.

Chapter End Notes

I am very happily lucky to get another update written and posted so quickly! I hope you all enjoyed it :)

Thank you for your support. I appreciate every single kudos and comment left here and on the Facebook group. 💖
All was dark save for the faint glow of the nightlight shaped like a seashell that warmly illuminated a tiny portion of the far corner of Elizabeth's bedroom. Red fixed his eyes on it, absently admiring the intricate details that were etched into it as he tucked himself more firmly against her back. He could feel the ridges of her spine against his chest and stomach and the bone of her hip as he curled an arm comfortably around her waist. His fingers cupped her just below her navel, and his flesh stirred very slightly at the sensual sensation of skin slipping against skin--despite already having made love to her twice.

A faint smile touched his lips and he lightly inhaled her scent. She must have put on lotion before she'd gone out because he caught a hint of muguet blossoms. It was unusual for her to wear anything with a perfume, but it was a pleasant change all the same.

Funny how he hadn't noticed it earlier.

Well, to be fair, he hadn't been aware of too much earlier--his focus had been narrowed down quite a bit.

*Intoxicating minx,* he thought fondly, fingers tightening very slightly on her taut flesh.

Once their frenzied passion had cooled, Red had realized that the blinds hadn't been completely drawn to hide them from the view of the casual passerby...or of any particular guard who could very well happen to glance through the slats of the kitchen window in the duplex cater-cornered from hers. At the time she had imperiously pushed him down on the sofa and had straddled him soon afterwards, he certainly hadn't been thinking of being watched. And as he had reclined against the plush cushions of the sofa, Lizzy a soft and pliant weight resting against him as they both had begun to regain their bearings, he hadn't really given a fuck if someone happened to look in and see them. But, as his rational mind began returning and he'd given the situation some more thought, he had reluctantly figured she probably wouldn't share the same mind frame as him on that point.

And, actually, the more he had thought about it, he hadn't much liked the idea of anyone else observing her half-naked in his arms.

So Red had finally coaxed her to move to a place a little more private...her bedroom.

Lizzy had shyly lead the way down the hall, fingers lightly curled in his. Before they'd crossed the threshold of her room, she had flicked on the overhead fan. Soft golden light had seeped from the middle of the ceiling outward. The fan had slowly begun to turn, lazily bringing in fresh air from the open window. Since there hadn't been anyplace else to sit, they'd perched on the edge of her bed together while he'd looked around curiously.

It had been his first time in her finished and decorated bedroom with her in attendance.

Elizabeth's decor choices were lovely, both in neutral, warm colors and in simplicity.

The wooden wind chimes from her childhood, having already begun to cluck and click musically in time with the fan's movements, hung above the windows that were half-shaded by gauzy white curtains. Various geodes and three impressive amethyst clusters sparkled on her large wooden desk. Quartz rocks she'd hoarded as a girl spilled out of a giant abalone shell that glistened beside a small,
pearlescent vase of fresh flowers.  

Lizzy must have recently discovered an adoration for the ocean--he could tell by all the shells she must have collected herself that were displayed prettily in shiny glass jars. A smile had curved his lips at the knowledge that they now shared a love for the sea. He'd have to bring her a handful of seashells from the exotic beaches he'd undoubtedly be back to so she could add them to her collection. Idly he had wondered if she'd ever be interested in exploring the surface of the ocean with him.  

He'd love to take her out on the water sometime.  

His gaze had then flickered from her desk to travel around the room. Color prints of jagged, snow-capped mountains and wide open fields of gold hung in groups on one wall. A fairly large print of a herd of wild horses galloped across the other. She had always loved photographs of nature. These particular prints had most likely reminded her of her childhood home, for they had certainly reminded him of it.  

Red had craned his neck around to look behind him. Her many bookshelves were lined with magazines, classic works of literature, and college textbooks. He had also thought he'd spied a few of her favorite novels from her childhood. Ah, yes. There was Bridge to Terabithia. Then his eyes had wandered closer to where they were sitting. A leather-bound journal and blue ballpoint pen had rested on her nightstand next to an old photo of she and Sam sitting on the porch together.  

It was such a sweet photo of the two of them. Sam was in his prime and his smile and eyes were alight with pride. She was maybe seven or eight years old. Her messy hair was done up in adorably sloppy pigtails and her smile was rather impish as she dimpled at the camera. Red had noticed that the pen laying in front of the photo was uncapped. He'd been fairly certain that the journal propped up next to the photo was where she had written down her thoughts about Sam when she'd been in the agonizing throes of her grief. Red had been glad she'd taken his advice to write. Since the pen was uncapped, he had curiously wondered what she wrote about at night. Did she write only about Sam? Or did she now write about other things as well?  

"Do you like how I decorated?"  

Her voice had brought him out of his musings and he had looked at her.  

Red knew her very well. But to be in such a private...well, sanctuary, had made him feel like he had now intimately glimpsed the vulnerable part of her she usually attempted to cover up with her volatile moods and shifting temper. Being with her in her bedroom like this had sharply reminded him of just how much she trusted him.  

His expression had been tender. "I most certainly do."  

"You don't think it's too...juvenile?"  

Juvenile as in that all this had fiercely reminded him of the whimsical innocence of her girlhood? Of that sweet purity that still resided within her, despite the fact that she was maturing into a young woman?  

Absolutely.  

But he'd had a feeling that was not quite what she had wanted to hear.  

He had countered her question with one of his own. "Do all these things in here make you happy, Lizzy?"
She had given him a small, hesitant smile. "Yes."

He had smiled encouragingly back at her. "I think it's a lovely room. There's nothing in this peaceful niche that can be improved upon." Then his eyes had glinted mischievously as he'd patted the comforter. "Except for maybe the size of the bed. It's just a tad smaller than I'm used to," he had teased, delighted to see a faint blush stain her cheeks. It had confirmed that the thought of making love between the cool sheets of this queen-sized bed had also crossed her mind.

"Just for that, I hope you roll off in the middle of the night!" she'd told him, trying to cover her demure flush with a haughty tone.

"Are you inviting me to stay the night, Lizzy?" he'd asked softly.

She had searched his eyes, for a moment taken aback by the seriousness of his tone. Then her own had glimmered thoughtfully as she'd recovered her poise. "I suppose I am."

"Well," he had smiled. Shifting closer, he had moved in to kiss her on her lips. The lingering heat between them had swelled slowly, languidly. "If I roll off," he'd finally murmured as his mouth had traced its way to her temple, "I'm taking you with me."

Her body had shaken slightly with muffled laughter as he'd wrapped her in his arms.

And for a time after, they had rolled around on her bed--and while they'd come to close to the edges a few times, neither of them had fallen off.

Red smiled, eyes sliding down her form half hidden by the sheets.

He was relieved they'd finally spoken face to face tonight. Although...the air between them certainly wasn't cleared entirely. It would take Elizabeth a bit more time to truly forgive him for his behavior, and for breaking into her apartment. In the weeks to come, he would know she was still displeased by a snide remark thrown at him here or a snarky comment dropped on him there. She tended to hang on to things in the back of her mind and chew on them until they were finally ground up to nothing. It was her way. She had always allowed her emotions too much control--she felt things too deeply.

It would take time but he would be patient with her.

Red wondered if she were also upset with him for driving Jason away. She had seemed to like him well enough. Since Red had prematurely given Baz some time off tonight, Red himself had had to tail Lizzy and Jason for a while. He had furiously watched the younger man shower her with tender affection and had observed her positively respond to it in her sweet, flirtatious way.

The scene that had been unfolding before him had aggravated him more than his heart had wanted to consciously concede. So his pride had made the decision for him to leave before he could make a complete and utter ass of himself. Not wanting to admit to Baz that his plans with Lizzy had gone awry, Red had called in Aaron to take over his watch.

Possessive rage had burned in him as he'd taken a cab back to Lizzy's duplex. His plans may have twisted away from what he had wanted originally, but the night wasn't over. He would get her alone to talk to him one way or another. So, instead of skulking around outside or even holing up to wait for her in the guards' apartment, he had defiantly let himself into hers and had made himself at home while he'd impatiently waited for her.

And when Elizabeth had finally opened the front door, he had almost said something to warn her he had been there so she wouldn't startle too badly--but then he had seen Jason. That possessive streak
of his soul had growled furiously as the young man had leaned in to kiss his Lizzy. His hands had balled into fists as Jason had pressed her back into the frame of the door—and his teeth had bared themselves into a grimacing snarl as she had started responding to Jason’s touch.

_You brought this on yourself_; he'd scathingly reminded himself.

She hadn’t wanted to see anyone else and he had insisted that she should. But hypothetically talking about her casually dating and actually observing her with another man were two completely different things. Red had fiercely regretted the strings he’d attached to their relationship, even though he’d had a good reason at the time to do so. But somehow that reason hadn’t seemed to fucking matter anymore as he’d watched Lizzy grasp Jason's shirt in her hands to bring him closer.

Then, almost just as abruptly, she had started to disengage herself from him. The young man must have overstepped himself somehow for she had suddenly told him to wait.

Twice.

The fact that Jason hadn't listened to her either time had instantly reminded Red of the horror she’d experienced as a young teenager with Derek. The memory of how she had looked after what that rat bastard had done to her...how so very thin she had been, with fresh scars, bruised eyes, and a fearful heart, had flashed across Red’s thoughts in a rush of glacial fire, finally snapping his already roiling temper.

If Lizzy said no, she meant no! And he'd be damned if he'd stand by and let any man take advantage of her before his fucking eyes!

"Red?"

He startled out of his thoughts—he hadn't known she was still awake. "Mmm?"

"You're so tense," She began to turn over and he rose up on an arm to give her room. Her pale flesh glinted out of the darkness around them and his eyes trailed from her naked breasts up to hers, which were sparkling questioningly at him. "What on Earth are you thinking about?"

Unable to resist touching her skin, he rested a large, supple palm against the smooth place just above her navel. "If Jason hadn't stopped kissing you, you would have employed those self-defense skills I taught you, right?" It was suddenly very important to him that she confirm this.

He had to know she was still capable of protecting herself.

A brow rose in surprise. She obviously hadn't been expecting those words to come out of his mouth. "He...he was stopping, Red. He may have been, like, horny, but he wasn't an asshole."

"If you have to tell a man more than once to stop, the man is an asshole," Red bit out.

"You don't like him, do you?"

That was an understatement. "I don't tend to like assholes."

She searched his face. "You just don't like him because he took me out on a date."

His nostrils flared—and her gaze suddenly shone brighter.

Was she pleased?

Lizzy tilted her head to the side slightly, watching him carefully. "And because he was kissing me."
At his soft growl those sapphire eyes of hers flashed triumphantly.

"You don't want me to see him!" she declared with proud certainty. "Or anyone else." She held his eyes knowingly. "Do you, Red?"

He couldn't lie to her. Wouldn't lie to her. But he also didn't want to confirm the truth of what she accurately proclaimed. So he kept his mouth stubbornly shut. Turning his face away, he eased back down to rest his head on his pillow.

But as he figured, she wouldn't let him dismiss her so easily.

Instantly Elizabeth was propped up on a slender arm so she could look at him, hair tumbling over her shoulders to brush against his chest. "You didn't answer my question."

No, he hadn't. It would open avenues to a discussion he certainly hadn't planned for. "And you didn't answer mine," he reminded her pointedly.

She waved a hand dismissively, but whether she was dismissing his question or agreeing non-verbally that she would have kicked Jason's ass, Red couldn't say. And he would have pursued an answer...but she beat him to the punch.

"You don't want me going out with other men. Not really. Just like I don't want you seeing other women." A ghost of a possessive snarl threaded through her words and that dark wildness within him perked, interest sharpening acutely as it strained toward the wildness in her.

Trying to smother the desire to encourage what he sensed in her--and what he already knew existed within himself--he gazed silently up at her, unable to trust himself to speak.

There had been a reason why he'd had made her promise him to keep dating other men. It had been a good reason. A valid reason. It had been a key part of his rationalizing that he could be involved with her. But, like it had earlier, it was fading again from his conscious mind. His certainty was faltering. And she could sense that as clearly as if she were a she-wolf in the throes of the hunt, cleverly discerning weakness in the one she pursued.

The intuitive minx.

Her eyes glittered as she closed in. "Your silence says everything, you know. It gives more away than you realize, Red."

"You've known me a long time, Elizabeth."

"I know," she murmured. "And seeing you this way...it's new to me." Then she lifted her chin slightly. "But I can recognize jealousy when I see it." This time she was the one to place a hand right above his navel, fingers lightly digging through the coarse hairs there.

"I don't want to date other men anymore," she confided softly. "When they're gone and I'm alone afterward, I feel...cheap. Dirty. It all feels wrong."

Biting guilt bitterly flared in Red at her admission. That certainly hadn't been his intent when he'd had her promise to keep dating casually. But it was without a doubt his fault she'd felt that way.

Her gaze had a faraway look to it. "I tried to hide that realization from myself. I told myself that since I wasn't committing to any of them and they knew that before going out with me...then it was all okay. And, at one point, it had been okay before you and I...before we...." Her voice trailed off and
her eyes refocused on his. "I told you last week that I don't want to share you. Well, I also don't want to share myself with anyone else."

Christ, her heart was in her eyes.

"Only with you."

It was a gift.

The greatest gift she could give him.

Was he worthy of such devotion? Such trust? Such faithfulness?

His heart twisted painfully in his chest as his hand covered hers, gripping it tightly.

No. He wasn't.

"We make each other happy." She squeezed his hand back, but her uninhibited and sweetly open expression began to slowly shutter as he struggled to say something to her, something that was truthful. "Don't we?" she asked, tone fierce but expression very fragile.

Yes! his soul howled, but he was rendered speechless by the damned sense that he would ultimately do her harm by accepting such a gift. She could get hurt. She could get killed. How could he possibly keep her safe and hidden in the shadows when all he wanted was to bring her with him out into the light and be washed anew in her pure and bursting vibrancy?

He'd been silent for too long.

Red could feel the pain beginning to emanate from her.

Goddamn it, he was hurting her with his fucking inability to speak. Of all moments for words to fail him! Profound desire of the heart and deep self-loathing warred within him, but he managed to force her name passed his lips.

"Lizzy--"

"You know what I think?" she broke in quietly.

He closed his mouth, waiting warily.

"I think you're afraid to be happy." Then her eyes flashed at him in uncomprehending frustration. "But why? You deserve happiness, Red."

His throat tightened at the sincere surety in her voice. Oh, sweetheart, he thought. Oh, my lovely girl.

Before he could stop himself, Red traced the curve of her cheek with the back of a finger. Even as he touched her he could feel his resolve relenting. "You deserve more." His tone was brusque to hide the rasp of deep emotion.

"You've tried that line on me before," she snorted, shaking her head. "You're all I want."

"Why me, Lizzy?"

"After all this time, you have to ask that? Isn't it obvious?" She stared down at him in seething exasperation. "Because I love you, you idiot! Despite your excessive amount of arrogance and conceit and pride...."
His eyes gleamed up into hers as he placed a gentle finger over her lips for the second time that night to shush her.

Lizzy glared at him but held her tongue.

"You can detail all my faults later," he told her with an amused smile. "And at length, if you so desire."

Her nostrils flared defiantly.

"Lizzy." His expression turned serious and he took his finger away from her mouth. "I've loved you since you were a little girl, scrabbling around the barn with scabby knees and hay tangled in your hair."

She wrinkled her nose at him, but her eyes were fixed raptly on his face.

He hesitated. God, that was the first time he'd admitted to loving a woman out loud since....

Slowly he moved to sit up. Elizabeth considerately folded her legs beneath her to make room for him. His eyes traced her face before he reached out to tuck a curling lock of hair behind her ear, an old, comforting gesture of affection he'd shared with her a hundred times before.

As his fingers moved through the soft strands, Red suddenly couldn't imagine any other man having her permission to caress her in this simple way, to connect with her physically, even emotionally.

The very thought was abhorrent to him.

His fingers stopped moving for a brief moment, tightening possessively in the long, abundant mass. And if the thought of another man having this intimacy was so detestable to him, and she didn't want another man having it anyway, then why continue pulling the string he'd attached to their relationship? It made them both miserable. He'd been a fucking fool to think an honest, spirited woman like Lizzy could keep fragmenting her heart--that they could continue a relationship that didn't demand true and abiding commitment from both involved.

She deserved a committed lover, a steady relationship she could pour her whole heart into.

_He_ may not deserve it, but he longed for it as much as she did.

And the danger that he'd be subjecting her to? God, hadn't it always been there, circling her like a giant shark? Wasn't he already doing everything in his close and far-reaching powers to protect her?

Yes, he thought, caressing his fingers down her back. He was. And he would proceed to cherish her and protect her as he always had.

"I loved you then," he continued softly, "as a man loves a sweet and delightful child." He cupped her cheek in his palm, his eyes meeting hers. "And I love you now, as a man loves a beautiful and vivacious young woman."

She reached up, hand sliding around to hold the back of his neck. The slight pressure he felt there was so heartbreakingly familiar, for she had so often clung to him this way when she'd been a girl and had wanted him to lift her in his arms, or when he had been comforting her, soothing her physical or psychological hurts.

But it was not as a child that she embraced him now.
The kiss she gave him thrilled his senses. It was gentle and fiery all at once--just like her.

*But how long will this last?* his common sense whispered fiercely, unexpectedly floating up from the far corners of his mind. *You cannot hide who you are from her forever. You cannot hide who she is from herself forever, either.*

The feral, desirous, yearning part of him snarled at that, rearing up to slam the thought back down--but the uneasy feeling of apprehension lingered. It didn't have a voice, but it whirled slowly, spiraling, drifting through him.

And it made him ask, "Are you sure this is what you want?" It was the last out he could give her--and in offering it to her, he also presented it to himself. But even as he said the words, he couldn't stop himself from trailing his lips along the line of her jaw, large hands settling themselves on her waist. *A steady, long distance relationship isn't easy, sweetheart. I wouldn't want you to have regrets."

"I know it'll be difficult," she agreed quietly when he pulled back to look at her. "I know that. But... I'm willing to try." She gave him her best unsure-but-game smile. "If you are."

Red reassured her of his definitive intentions the only way he knew how.
Chapter End Notes

This chapter took a while for me to write...but I wanted to get it just right. It was such an important moment for both of them that I didn't dare rush it and only worked on it when the inspiration was there.

Thank you always for reading, your kudos, and leaving comments. I always love hearing what you all have to say! :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"Oh my God," Katie moaned, dramatically prolonging the vowel. "That bacon smells so freaking amazing! Why the Hell did I choose this week of all weeks to cleanse?" she demanded, more to herself than to the seven young women and three young men with her.

Elizabeth hid an amused grin behind her hand as the group of friends stopped meandering down the aisle of the Farmer's Market to salivate wistfully over all the bacon-wrapped goodies creatively displayed before them.

"Lord, look at all that bacon!" someone exclaimed softly.

They all watched avidly as the cook behind the tables flipped twelve fresh slabs of the salty pork onto the massive grill. They spat and hissed, bubbling contentedly over the flames.

The aroma was intoxicating.

Katie whimpered.

"This always happens to you, Katie!" Liz chuckled teasingly, nudging her friend. "I don't know what possesses you to come down here when you're cleansing. There's too much temptation!"

"I think she likes torturing herself," Jason grinned.

"Maso, Mark, agreed with a fond smile down at her.

"Maybe she likes proving that her will-power is stronger than her cravings," Liz laughingly offered in Katie's defense.

Jason eyed Liz over Katie's head and smiled.

"Liz, you're sweet but you give me too much credit!" Katie sighed. "I honestly just forgot the Farmer's Market was this weekend."

That made everyone else chortle.

Unable to resist the temptation any longer, quite a few of their group jumped in line to buy something--Mark being one of them. He grabbed Katie's arm and tugged. "C'mon, babe. Just stand in line with me and help me decide what to get. I'll even let you have a bite!"

"I'm cleansing," Liz heard her protest, although not very strongly, as she allowed herself to be pulled into the mass of hungry, waiting people.

Snorting softly to herself, Liz shook her head in fondness over her friend. Katie most likely would have a bite, and probably more than one--not that Liz could blame her! She almost was enticed to get something herself but she was trying to hold off until lunch.

The breeze picked up, sweeping fresh air from across the ocean into the crowded stalls. Following the wind's direction, Liz walked lightly over to the pier's railing to look out over the silver water while she waited for her group. The sky, hazily gray, was just a bit threatening today and she was glad the rain was holding off.
This would probably be one of the last dry weekends in Seattle for a while. It was late August and summer was drawing to a close. All too soon it would officially be fall. Her junior year of college would start up and the really rainy days would be upon them, driving most everyone indoors.

Liz rested her arms on the rail as she watched the gulls drift lazily on the winds. It was good for everyone to enjoy the dry weather while they could!

"Hey, Liz."

Startled out of her thoughts, she glanced to her right. Jason had come over to stand beside her, holding four bacon strips, two in each hand. Each little bundle was wrapped in crinkly white parchment paper.

"I know how much you love bacon." He offered one to her. "Here."

If there had been any way to politely refuse him, she would have. She didn't want to encourage his attentions, no matter how innocent they seemed. But since she couldn't think of a graceful way to decline for the life of her, she accepted with a small smile. "Thanks, Jason."

He smiled back down at her and she quickly looked away out to the ocean again. Not that she was worried he would try to touch her or anything like that if she held his eyes too long. It was just.... Well, it was still a little awkward to be hanging around him today even though they were both part of a bigger group.

It had been two weeks and a day since the night when Jason had taken her on their first and last date, when Red had broken into her apartment to lie in wait for her, when she had kicked the younger man out so she could be alone with Red and have it out with him...when she had told him she loved him. When he'd said the same to her.

Unable to resist the lure of the mouthwatering treat she now held in her hand, she bit into one of the pieces and began to chew.

It was good. It was tasty. And maybe she was rather biased, but it just wasn't as delicious as Red's home-cooked bacon was.

A smile curved her lips as it always did when the memories of that night and the morning after flashed through her mind.

Liz had always known Red had loved her but to hear him actually say it...well, the words had drawn everything out into the open. There wasn't a vague ambiguity about what kind of love existed between them anymore, despite the fact that it couldn't quite be put into a verbal structure. It was an intricate knot that fluidly twisted and writhed profoundly within and without, disdaining trite definitions.

Their awareness of one another was subtly changed now. There was a shining, sensitive openness thrilling between them that hadn't been there before. Of course, that shared vulnerability lay rippling like molten gold just beneath the inner barriers of their minds and hearts.

If a stranger had been watching them that morning after, he or she wouldn't have been able to perceive or understand the paramount metamorphosis that had taken place within both Liz and Red that night, but she was intimately aware of it and recognized it in him as well—in the slightly different cadence of his voice when he'd spoken to her, in the underlying softness in his expression when he'd looked at her....
Elizabeth had woken to the sweet and savory aroma of bacon wafting just underneath her nose. Her nostrils had flared, mouth instantly watering. Her eyes had blearily flickered open to see Red sitting beside her on the bed, dressed in nothing but a button down shirt and his black boxer briefs, patiently holding out a piece to her.

"You slept soundly through the alarm I'd set on my watch. When I tried to get you up, you mumbled something unintelligible and batted at me like a kitten bats at a ball of yarn," Red had informed her with a teasing smile. "Then I figured the only thing that would wake you on an early Saturday morning was the smell of a hot breakfast. Looks like I was right! Nothing's really changed all that much since you were a young girl," he'd chuckled, tapping the glistening end of the bacon strip against her lips.

Her eyes had narrowed slightly. Well! If he was going to tease her, she'd tease him right back!

Wrinkling her nose at him, Liz had taken a third of the delectable treat in her mouth and had gently bitten down, gaze holding his flirtatiously as she had done so. Very aware that his eyes had been raptly fixed on her, she'd purposefully rubbed her lips, shiny and slick with grease, together.

One of his eyebrows had arched in delighted surprise at her rather provocative display.

She had smiled coyly up at him after swallowing the rich morsel, the tip of her pink tongue darting out to lick her upper lip.

"What time is it?"

"Seven-thirty," he had drawled, watching her.

She'd closed her eyes, dramatically screwing her expression up into one of exasperated dismay.

"Don't you ever like to sleep in, Red?"

"You know I don't sleep very much. Besides," he'd deflected jovially, "I tend to be ravenous when I stir in the morning."

His eyes had glinted jauntily and she'd known she could take that statement any way she wanted.

"And Christ knows I can't depend on you to make a breakfast that isn't burned!"

His blithe laugh had boomed at her indignant snarl.

"Unless you can actually cook bacon without turning it into blackened bits?"

She had hissed at him.

"I take that as a no?"

"You know you make better bacon than I do," she had grudgingly hedged, eyeing the half-eaten piece he still had held near her face. "And you probably always will!"

Unable to abstain any longer, she had propped herself up on her elbows to take another delicate bite.

"Hungry, Lizzy?" he'd purred, shifting closer while she had chewed, the tender fat melting on her tongue as she had swallowed.

"For bacon?" she'd asked, wide eyes feigning innocence as she had purposefully misunderstood his suggestive implication. "Always." Her smile had been impish as she had primly taken the last crunchy bit from his fingers with her teeth.
Red had licked the tips of his thumb and index finger free of salty grease, gazing intently at her as she had finished.

Then he had leaned in to kiss her.

His kiss had been seductive. Tantalizingly slow and deep. It had made her breath catch and her arms go rubbery. Her fingers had tightened in the sheets, body stirring.

"Mmm," he'd hummed against her mouth, cupping her cheek in his palm while his other hand had fallen beside her to steady himself as she had slowly sunk back into the pillows.

After a long and languid moment, he had finally pulled back enough to look down at her. "Well." His affectionate eyes had glinted knowingly as she'd gazed up at him, unable--and unwilling--to hide her own desire that had mirrored his.

And very soon after they had unhurriedly satisfied one kind of hunger, they'd devoured the rest of the bacon and scrambled eggs Red had whipped up.

"Liz?" Jason asked.

*Shit.* She had completely forgotten that she wasn't alone! He must have asked her something.

Flushing, she turned to look at him. "Sorry." She forced a smile, embarrassed. "My mind was elsewhere. What's up?"

That feeling of awkwardness was back, infiltrating her thoughts and making her uncomfortable. She took another bite of the bacon to try and feign nonchalance.

No doubt thanks to Katie, word had spread throughout her various circles that Liz was most definitely in a steady relationship now with Red, though apparently the people in her groups didn't refer to him by that name. They still called him her "daddy"--short for "sugar daddy"--or they called him "that older man" when she was out of earshot. According to the gossip mill, most of the girls did it partly out of envy and partly out of respect. The guys...well, the guys tried to twist both those titles into an insult out of jealousy.

Jason rubbed the back of his neck, watching the water lap beneath them. "I hear you're going steady now with that man I...met...the other night."

She warily tensed, waiting.

"No need to get prickly on me, Liz." Sensitive to her change in mood, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "I'm just wondering...why?"

"Why what?" She was proud of herself for keeping her tone quiet and controlled.

"Why are you going steady with him?"

"Because...." She frowned, knowing all of this was extremely personal and that he absolutely had no business prying into her private life--but she felt compelled to answer. And perhaps if what she told him made it throughout her circles, everyone she knew wouldn't think so low of her. Or Red. "I love him." Then, with a stinging touch of asperity, she added, "You know, it's what people do when they have feelings for each other."

He cleared his throat, and she couldn't tell if he was discomfited or jealous. Perhaps he was both. "Maybe this isn't my place to say but...." He dared to look closely at her. "Isn't he a bit old for you?"
"You're right," Liz replied, unable to keep the warning growl from her tone, "it isn't your place to say." And she knew she should have left it there. In hindsight, maybe she should've walked away. But again, she felt like she had to defend herself--and defend Red. "An age gap doesn't matter when you feel deeply...." She hesitated, then changed her wording. "When you love someone."

"That's a sweet thing to think, Liz." He met her gaze unflinchingly. "I guess I shouldn't have expected anything less from you. You're a sweet girl."

She didn't know what to say to that. Was he being sincere? Or did he think she was naive? Was he being condescending? Was he being condescendingly sincere? She ground her teeth and decided not to reply.

"But, realistically, it's not...." He paused, then perhaps against his better judgement, he plowed on, "Liz, what if you're being used?"

She stared at him, admittedly rather taken aback that he was indicting Red for committing something she had also accused him of doing.

Then she scowled. Not that she particularly liked to remember she had done that to Red. She'd had her reasons, but it was rather difficult on her to recall the fury she had felt and the look of outraged hurt in Red's green eyes.

And Jason had no solid basis for his slur against Red's character!

"A man like that...." Jason continued into the heavy silence, unaware of her ricocheting thoughts, "he doesn't just settle down with a twenty-one year old girl who's not even out of college yet."

"How the Hell would you know?" she snarled, now visibly upset.

As much as she didn't want to admit it to herself, she still felt self-conscious about how young she was compared to Red--especially when she found herself unwillingly speculating on his past love life. Not his married life. That was something Liz considered to be off limits, a topic that was never to be discussed nor deliberated on. Red had made it perfectly clear he never wanted to speak of his long-deceased wife, or daughter. And to ruminate over them? It somehow seemed wrong--disrespectful--to do that to the dead. Red had been a different man when he'd been married, living a completely different life--a life Liz hadn't really existed in.

So she couldn't be jealous of that.

But the other women who had paraded through his bed afterward, including the gorgeous Madeline.... That was different. Liz sometimes did speculate on how and where she ranked with all those mature and beautiful women he'd been with throughout the years. And, well, she couldn't help but feel a little insecure--even despite everything that she and Red had established between one another. She wished she didn't feel that way, but she was only human, after all.

And human emotions were rarely clear and straightforward.

Liz glared at the young man, furious that he had touched on a sensitive nerve. "I know Red. You don't know him at all, Jason."

"Yeah, well, I know men." He shrugged. "Believe it or not, I'm not trying to cause trouble here, Liz. Or upset you. But I guess I kind of failed at that."

Liz's answering snort was caustic.
"I'm just...." He sighed before once again meeting her fiery expression. "I like you a lot and I'm trying to look out for you." These words came out in a bit of a rush. "That's all."

The presumptuous nerve of this guy she'd only known for a month was astounding! He most likely was only pursuing her this way because his masculine pride was still smarting. Being handsome and already successful in his mid-twenties, he probably wasn't used to being denied by women he was attracted to.

"I don't need you 'looking out' for me," she bit out, blue eyes flashing angrily. "I have someone who already does that, Jason. And no matter what you seem to think about him, I know that he does feel the same way about me as I feel about him."

"For your sake, I hope you're right." Was that freaking pity in his eyes?

Seething, Liz stepped away from the railing--and him. "I'm going to go see what's taking Katie and Mark so damn long," she told him, tight voice clipped. Without waiting for a response, she whirled around and stalked away.

"I was so furious with him, Red! I couldn't believe he had the gall to try and make me doubt you!"

Liz was resting in bed against the headboard, knees drawn up tightly to her chest, phone jammed to her ear as she stared, unseeing, out her window into the night.

"I avoided him as best as I could for the rest of the afternoon. I should've just left!"

"No, honey. You did the right thing," Red told her, voice a gravelly murmur in her ear. "If you had left, he would've known he had really gotten to you. You wouldn't have wanted to show weakness that way."

She sucked in an outraged breath.

"Not that I'm implying you're weak, Lizzy, so don't start snarling at me." His firm tone was half-amused, half-serious. "But his jabs at my character had rattled you, correct?"

"Yeah," she scowled.

"It's okay to admit it to yourself. And to me. But to show that Jason's hardly-veiled criticism of me--and, to an extent, you--bothered you so much to where you would have fled.... Well, that would have been a mistake."

Liz took her bottom lip between her teeth and chewed on it lightly as she thought over his words.

"Once someone like that, someone with a wounded ego and a chip on his shoulder, knows he can rattle you so easily, he, and others like him, won't stop trying to get your goat."

"Sounds like you speak from experience, Red."

"Oh, I've had my share of experiences where I've had to deal with...difficult individuals." Liz could just see him baring his teeth in a vicious smile. "That's why I'm advising you even though you didn't ask me to. I want you to toughen your skin against this kind of censure. You need to."

"Because this'll come up again? You and me being together, I mean?"

"Won't it? You know your friends better than I."
"Yeah," she grumbled. "It probably will. Me being exclusively involved with a man two decades my senior is apparently all the rage along the gossip grapevine right now."

"Two decades and five years," came his saucy interjection.

"Red!"

"Come now, Lizzy," he chuckled. "Don't take all of this too seriously. It's really not so bad. This Jason character is just a spoiled boy who didn't get his way so now he's throwing a sort of temper tantrum."

"It still hurts."

"That's because you care about what these people think of you," he replied gently.

Liz lifted her chin defiantly—but he was right. She did care. How could she not? She did hang out with these people on a regular basis. She was strong, but she wasn't immune to what was said about her and the emotions those words conjured up. On the contrary....

"You feel things deeply," he murmured, echoing her train of thought. "You always have. Now you need to work on trying to temper yourself, honey. These gossipmongers you'll encounter will actually aid you in honing that effort."

Liz closed her eyes. "Their insinuation that I'm...that we're doing something wrong won't last forever, will it?"

"Not forever, sweetheart. Our kind of relationship is...unusual, especially when it involves a woman your age. But it's not unheard of. As the weeks go by everyone should lighten up."

"Because it'll be old news."

"Mmm. More likely because of that than because they've gained maturity," he agreed dryly.

That elicited an appreciative snort and grin from her.

"Ah. There's that light-hearted spirit," Red smiled. "Feeling better?"

"Talking to you always makes me feel better."

"I can make you feel even more so..." he hinted suggestively.

A surprised laugh burst from her. "No!" she blushed fiercely. "No, Red." She waved a flustered hand. "That--what we did--it was only for the one time. Just the one time."

"Are you sure?" he crooned, voice lowering an octave.

God, her face felt like it was on fire. "I'd rather you were here." Pleased and embarrassed all at once, she raked her nails through her hair. "When are you coming back to Seattle?"

He chuckled warmly at her smooth and quick deflection. The throaty sound of it made her toes curl. "I'm hoping before Labor Day...before you start your classes. When do you sign up?"

"Next week on Monday."

"Any idea what you want to major in?"
"I'm still torn between Psychology and Law. I've done really well in both subjects. Maybe more so in Psychology than in Law though."

"I'm not too surprised about that."

A brow rose. "Oh?"

"Mmm."

"Why?"

"Well, because of what we touched on earlier." Liz heard him shift his phone to his other ear. "Your ability to feel so keenly...in a way, it's a gift, honey. Because you're able to feel so much, you're able to intuit why others behave the way they do. Not many possess such empathy. If you learn to temper it--not suppress it, mind you--it could become a real asset if you decide to become a psychologist."

"Or psychiatrist?"

"You'd have to study medicine as well."

"Oh. Right."

"Is it something you want to do?"

"I honestly don't know what I want to do, Red. Sometimes...." her voice trailed off.

"Sometimes...?" he prompted gently.

"Sometimes I don't feel any older than eighteen," she admitted softly. "Like, there are times when I feel like I don't have a direction. That I'm just...floating through college."

"You're hardly 'floating,' Lizzy. You do have direction," he stressed reassuringly. "You just told me the two directions you're most interested in."

"But I don't know which one I really want!" she sighed, frustrated.

"It'll come to you, honey. By the time you need to declare your major, it'll come to you. Just be patient with yourself."

She pursed her lips, knowing he was right about her needing to be patient. One of her faults was being much too hard on herself when she didn't think she was meeting her own high standards.

"And remember, if you do choose a major and you realize later in your heart that it's the wrong path, you can always choose another to walk down. Nothing is written in stone, and certainly not your future."

"I wish I had that," she murmured longingly.

"Had what, baby?"

"Self-assurance."

"You do have that."

"Not like you. You have it in spades, Red."
"Don't forget that I have a few years on you," he smiled. "Some of what you're hearing from me comes with the wisdom that age brings. But you are stronger than I think even you realize, Lizzy."

She bit her lower lip thoughtfully.

"Remember, be patient with yourself. Keep studying hard. Listen to your intuition. Everything else will follow."

"Should this be my new affirmation?"

"If it'll help you."

Her blue eyes glittered with a smile. "Red?"

"Mmm?"

"Thank you."

She could almost see him smile at her. And it made her heart achingly twist in her chest.

"Always, sweetheart."

God, she missed him.

"Where are you right now?" She'd forgotten to ask him earlier--she'd been too distraught over the events of the afternoon to remember to do so.

"I'm in England. Well, London, to be precise."

"London!" she exclaimed, glancing at the clock on her nightstand. "Isn't it, like, two or three in the morning over there?"

"Four, actually."

"Red," she moaned, shaking her head. "Why didn't you tell me? I didn't mean to wake you up!"

"I wasn't really sleeping, Lizzy."

Which meant he had been. "If you had said, 'I wasn't sleeping' then maybe I would've believed you," she admonished in a soft growl. "I really should let you go. I'm so sorry."

"Don't be sorry," he replied breezily. "I needed to get up early anyway, so everyone wins today, darling."

Liz had a feeling he was saying that just to be sweet to her, but she didn't push it. "In any case, I should let you go so maybe you can squeeze in another hour or two of sleep--or rest--before you actually have to physically get up and out of bed." Before he could protest, she added, "And I need to take Bronn on his walkie anyway."

"His walkie?" Red's tone was amused.

She blushed. "Yeah. Um, it's a new term for our nighttime strolls. They're different from our morning walk-and-jogs, so I wanted to give them a different name."

"It's quite charming, Lizzy."
She rubbed the side of her warm neck self-consciously. "Red?"

"Mmm?"

She hesitated for a brief moment, prolonging his presence for a few seconds longer before she told him, "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too, honey. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Once she reluctantly hung up, Elizabeth smiled tenderly down at the face of her phone. She was fairly certain that when they had intoned their traditional sign off of "I'll miss you," what they had both really meant was, "I love you."

Chapter End Notes

I'm back!

I took time off of writing last week to work on *Sine Qua Non's* outline with my betas. They really helped guide me and get the creative juices flowing--I so appreciate their selfless aid! Thank you, Daniel and Jami!

To my readers, thank you for your patience in waiting for this update. I really hope you enjoyed it!
A horrible, bloodcurdling scream shattered the night, startling Elizabeth to violent wakefulness.

What the Hell?

She bolted upright in bed, her heart crashing painfully...apprehensively against her breast. A flash of lightning lacerated the night sky, brightening her room in an eerie glow for a split-second before darkness consumed it again.

Liz blinked rapidly, erasing the imprint of the room from her eyes. Squinting, she tried to define the shapes around her, verifying that it was a bookcase--and not an intruder in her apartment--that she was looking at.

As she listened to the torrents of rain pummeling the roof overhead, she calmed somewhat, only to jerk violently a moment later as thunder cracked viciously overhead, shaking the floor beneath her.

Had it just been the storm? Or had someone really uttered that piercingly frightful sound?

Throwing off the heavy blankets, Liz crawled to the edge of the bed, peering out the slats of the window blinds. Straining her eyes to see anything, her ears focused on picking up any sound that would confirm that what she had heard was real, and not part of the turbulent storm echoing all around her. Or part of some incredibly disturbing dream.

Just as another blast of thunder resounded throughout the atmosphere, her keen ears picked up a prolonged, earsplitting shriek of terror reverberating throughout the small neighborhood of duplexes.

And it was all too real.

Someone out there needed help!

Gasping, Liz jumped out of bed and tore down the hall to the front door, her natural instinct to aid the weaker overcoming all caution. Her shaking fingers scrambled nervously on the silver locks of her door, making it nearly impossible to release them from their secure hold. Flinging the door wide, she ran out onto her porch and down the steps.

Her eyes darted anxiously about, straining to see through the relentless sheet of rain. Her ears were tuned to anything other than the storm happening around her.

The neighborhood was slowly and sluggishly stirring from hearing the unusual ruckus. Lights were flickering on behind shuttered screens. Questioning voices were calling back and forth throughout the apartments. But no one else was outside.

Wiping uselessly at the heavy drops of rain stinging her eyes, a sudden dread enveloped her as the lights flickered around her before going out, plunging her surroundings and streetlights into darkness--as she pushed further into the unknown.

Alone.

The frigid water rushed over the cement like a restlessly shifting river, soaking the hem of her sweats,
chilling her further. Her wet feet slapped the concrete as she pivoted in a rapid circle, hastily searching for the source of what had ripped her from her slumber.

*There....*

By the gate to the carport, half-hidden by shrubbery.

With her heart lodged sharply in her throat, Liz sprinted to a crumpled form that lay motionless, discarded carelessly in a growing puddle of water. Skidding to a halt beside it, Liz didn't feel the cut of gravel biting into her bare feet as her eyes widened in shocked dismay that quickly turned to paralyzing horror.

She was almost completely unable to comprehend the gruesome sight she beheld.

It was her neighbor, Lauren.

Elizabeth stared in horrified disbelief at the young woman's disturbingly haunted and distorted features--complete terror was clearly etched on her once beautiful face.

Lauren's normally warm brown eyes were devoid of the light of life that was usually contained within them. Now, they stared vacantly--fearfully--up into nothing.

Her tall, sinewy body was twisted into an unnatural position.

The young woman's bruised torso lay bared to the wind and rain. Her blouse lay in tattered ruins beside her, though a single sleeve was knotted around her neck, leaving the veins of her throat bulging under the silken fabric.

Her naked legs were spread as far as the restricting fabric of her jeans and underwear at her ankles would allow, and the sight sent a sickening wave of fierce grief through Elizabeth.

*Raped,* the chilling word drifted numbly into Liz's mind. *She was raped.*

Lauren's fragile neck was crushed, skewed.

Broken.

*Murdered.*

The young woman's arms were splayed limply outward, stiff fingers curled into bloody claws as if she had been desperately attempting to fend her murderer off and had scratched and scratched and scratched until she had drawn his blood.

*Evidence....*

This was evidence the police would need to find this...despicable animal.

No.

Animals didn't have it in them to do something like this.

This was man-wrought evil.

Liz looked around frantically, searching for anything to protect the only link to discovering his identity. Removing her top shirt, she tore at it, wrapping Lauren's hands quickly, protecting them from the driving rain. If anything, the blood evidence would soak into the shirt. Any skin would be
preserved under her nails.

Wouldn't it?

There wasn't any of Lauren's blood pooling in the wallow beneath her lifeless form, but the lack of it made the ghastly scene so much more terrifying.

Goosebumps rose all over Liz's body.

The eerie way in which the empty shell of the woman she had known lay there, disturbingly still as the rain fell unchecked against her glassy eyes staring sightlessly up at nothing and how her horrendously and repulsively mangled body became cold not from the chill of the rain but from its lack of life...directly and alarmingly reminded Elizabeth of a sinister scene out of a horror film she had watched as a teen.

But this wasn't a movie--this was violation. This was death.

And it was undeniably, devastatingly real.

Icy fear swept through Liz, leaving her chilled to the bone and shaking. Suddenly she just couldn't be out here alone anymore. Someone had to call the police. Someone had to help her! She opened her mouth to yell for aid--

And suddenly her feet flew out from under her as she was forcibly slammed onto her back.

Stars exploded behind her eyelids, their multicolored radiance blinding her as her head cracked against the wet cement. Through the agony she was dimly aware of heavily muscled thighs straddling her middle as she sank bonelessly beneath the weight of them.

The wind had been knocked out of her--she couldn't breathe!

A man's dark laugh of ill-intent filled the air.

The sudden nausea she had felt was replaced by a surge of panic as she frantically struggled to catch her breath. Blinking rapidly, she fought past the bright blips of lingering stars obscuring her vision from the hit she had taken to the head and, now, from the lack of oxygen she was experiencing.

Whipping her arms free, she tried to defend herself from her attacker--just as Lauren had.

Her sharp nails fought desperately against the malevolent bulk suffocating her. Wildly seeking to catch purchase, she bit and clawed into the bastard's fragile skin.

She could feel the warmth of his blood spotting her fingertips as she tore at his flesh with everything she had.

Even through the driving rain and over the roar of the adrenaline pounding in her ears she could still hear him laughing maliciously at her ineffectual efforts to try and wound him. The man was thoroughly enjoying her failure.

Reveling in it. Getting the thrill he needed. By feeding off of her fear, his disgusting obsession...his craving...was being quenched with each second that passed.

As his grimy paws came down to grasp her wrists and hold them far too easily above her head, a spark of outrage so intense it made her physically shudder ignited beneath her panic, and with that, a tiny bit of air was sucked down into her squashed and starved lungs.
Her fury burned brighter and brighter as she found her breath again. Both her rage and the piercingly cold air that filled her body cleared a way for rational thought to emerge.

Snarling, she frantically thrusted one leg up like Red had taught her years ago, trying to throw him off balance so she could dislodge his grip. But she had remembered what to do too late in this frenzied and jarring confrontation. The man had her completely immobile...she was hopelessly pinned down by the hard muscles in his legs and arms.

Hissing desperately, she spat into his leering face.

"What a little wildcat," he grinned cruelly.

Using one hand, he slammed both her wrists to the cement, bruising them painfully. The thick fingers of one hand crushed her bones and tendons while his other curled into a fist before it brutally connected with the tender side of her head.

The harsh blow sent Liz's ears to ringing discordantly, and she was now more than helplessly disoriented. Even more flashing spots of sparking light erupted and multiplied, overwhelming her ability to see clearly even though her eyes were wide open. And just as abruptly as her vision had ruptured into lurid, pulsating lights, those very lights were now beginning to quickly fade around the edges of her perception...leaving her mind reeling with agony and terror.

Everything was getting so fuzzy. So sluggish and dark.

So cold.

She was numb. Too numb to even scream for help as the rapist began hurriedly tugging at her clothing.

The storm raged around them, but Liz could distantly hear Bronn madly barking, furiously sounding the alarm. She was vaguely aware of the metallic zipper of his pants whirring down his bulging crotch, the sound of it overwhelming the confused and muted shouts of her neighbors.

They seemed so far away.

And then the morbid thought came to her like it would come to anyone in such a paralyzingly frightening situation--she was actually going to die like poor Lauren had before anyone did anything.

Suddenly something--or rather, someone--powerfully rammed into the two of them like an enraged, charging bull. Her attacker was airborne for what seemed like several drawn-out seconds before he landed heavily in a muddy splash a couple arm lengths away from her. Then he was savagely rolling and scuffling with her ferocious rescuer....

A robustly lean man who had long, silvering hair.

Elizabeth panted, purposefully widening her eyes as she attempted to watch the two men fight, trying so desperately hard to stay awake. But the tantalizingly sweet fingers of darkness finally and completely shrouded her sight as oblivion enveloped her.

The very last things she was aware of before she unwillingly plunged deeply into unconsciousness was the sound of a sickening crunch of bones, a man's shrilling howl of agony, and the pelting raindrops relentlessly needling her face.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you, Daniel and Jami, for reading through this chapter and helping me clarify and edit. I appreciate it so much!

To my readers, thank you so much for your kudos, comments, and support :)
A soft knock sounded on the door. "Elizabeth? Dear?"

Liz stirred out of her fitful doze, eyes slowly flickering open.

"Are you awake?"

Drowsily she shifted in the crinkling hospital bed, squinting toward the door. It was open just a crack and the nurse, Kim, was peering inside. The older woman smiled when she met Liz's bleary gaze.

"Hi, sweetie." She slipped inside the room, flicked the light switch on to dim, then swiftly and competently checked the bags of fluids hanging around Elizabeth before turning her warm brown gaze back to her.

She had eyes like Lauren had once had...colored like mahogany with flecks of honey glinting around the irises...alight with gentle smiles and life.

Liz swallowed thickly passed the sudden lump in her throat and quickly looked down at the starchy white sheets tucked around her.

"Do you need anything?"

_A time machine so I can go back and erase the last six hours_, she thought dully. But rather than saying _that_ she shook her head--then winced.

"Try not to move your head too much right now," Kim advised gently, checking her IV. "I came in here to tell you that the police are here. They want to ask you a few questions about...what happened."

Liz looked nervously at her.

Kim gave her a reassuring smile. "Do you feel up to talking to them?"

Liz had already told her story to the sexual assault nurse examiner before she had submitted to undergo a complete physical examination. It had been the most excruciatingly embarrassing ordeal that she'd ever gone through—and she was already beginning to block it from her memory.

Even though the rapist hadn't succeeded in carrying out his original intent, Elizabeth was still considered a sexual assault victim.

After she had clawed her way out of the darkness of oblivion to consciousness, after she had been soothed by the hospital staff that she was safe and sound, she had slowly and haltingly told her story as best as she could to the quietly attentive sexual assault nurse examiner—who had thankfully been a woman and had been very patient while she had taken her notes.

Then Liz had been told to lay down on a special white paper that had been draped over the bed. The nurse had spoken softly to her throughout the whole process, informing her of what was happening and why.

Liz's panties, modal raglan, and softest cotton sweat pants she had ever owned had all been cut away
and placed in paper bags, one for each article of clothing, to be analyzed later for evidence. A small part of her mourned the loss of her favorite pajamas—but she knew deep down that even if she had been able to keep them, she would've burned them to ashes. Her long, damp hair had then been combed out so that anything the police could use to implicate the rapist that hadn't washed away in the rain had fallen onto the paper she'd lain on. Her sensitive skin had been carefully swabbed, then the dried blood from her assailant had been scraped out from underneath her fingernails. This was also to be used as evidence.

Hopefully the police would have enough between what had been taken off of her...and Lauren...to find out who exactly the Hell-bound bastard was.

The uncomfortable cuts on her feet from the loose gravel, the shallow scratches on her arms and hands, the deeply painful, mottled bruises around her sore ribs, tender stomach, and weakened wrists, had all been photographed, documented, and then treated. The worst injury she suffered from was the throbbing concussion on the left side of her head.

Well, it had been throbbing. It wasn't pulsating so much now. That was probably due to the pain-dulling medicine being pumped into her.

The very last thing Liz wanted to do in this moment was retell—and in so doing, relive—what had happened to her, but she understood that it was vitally important for her to do so.

Especially if it would help the police catch this particular devil-incarnate.

"Su--" Her voice cracked from disuse—or rather, that's what she told herself, anyway. Unwilling to give in to the despairing weakness lingering just within mental reach, she cleared her throat and tried again. "Sure."

Kim handed her a cup of water, understanding glowing in her dark eyes. Liz glanced self-consciously away and gratefully drank it down.

"I'll go get them then, okay?"

"Okay," Liz whispered, bracing her mind and quickly shoring up the hard defenses around her heart.

Then the thought came to her like it had multiple times before while she had been drifting in and out of sleep all morning...she desperately wished Red were here.

The very thought of him was enough to make hot tears prick behind her eyes, so she quickly shoved his image away down deep inside of herself. Stay detached. Don't feel, she thought numbly as the two detectives came slowly into the room.

Instantly she felt suffocated.

There were too many people in here!

Slamming the walls tighter around her innermost emotions, she warily watched them approach her as she tried to catch her uneven breath.

Don't feel anything. Not even anxiety, she harshly berated herself. Just breathe. It'll be easier to tell the events of the night if you remain detached and breathe. Just breathe, damnit!

Drawing in a deep, shuddering breath, Liz let it out as quietly as she could through her nose, hands clenching beneath the sheets.
"Elizabeth Scott?"

"Yes?" Her voice sounded so different to her own ears. Why was that? Was it due to exhaustion? To stress? Was it the concussion making it appear slurred and distorted?

"Miss Scott, I am Detective Shelby," the stocky man said. There was a gentleness in his gray eyes that made the tightness in her chest ease slightly. "And this is Detective Levinson." Shelby nodded his head at his partner, a diminutive woman with a face as pointed and as sharp as any fox's. Her clear eyes weren't as soft as the man's, but they weren't unfriendly either.

"We know how trying a night you've had."

"Trying" was an understatement, but Liz understood what he was trying to do and appreciated the effort.

"The nurse told us that you have a concussion?"

"Yes." Was that the only word she could say?

"We certainly don't want to keep you long from resting," he told her gently, "but the man who did this is still at large and any information you could give us would greatly aid our efforts to bring him to justice."

Liz wondered how many times he had uttered the same words to other victims of different crimes of violence. It certainly sounded rehearsed, but...it got her talking.

She wanted that malevolent creature found. And if he happened to get shot and killed in the process of being taken in? Well, Liz certainly wouldn't mourn his death!

And so she began to tell her story for the second time that morning. The two detectives would sometimes stop her narrative to ask her questions, or to have her clarify a detail. Just as she was reaching the part about how she'd been rescued by a man she didn't know, a firm knock rapped on the door.

Detective Levinson glanced fiercely out the window, one brow raising in surprised annoyance at the jarring intrusion.

From the angle Liz was sitting up at she couldn't observe who had disrupted them, but evidently the detectives weren't too pleased to see who was standing out her hospital room's door.

She glanced uncertainly at Shelby.

"One moment, Miss Scott," he told her, flashing her a reassuring look before getting up out of his chair to follow his partner out into the hall.

Alone once more with her thoughts, Liz sighed out a quiet breath of relief and closed her eyes, fingers moving down her side under the blanket to trace the edges of her cell phone. Someone had gone into her apartment to get it for her--and her purse, too--before she'd been transported to the hospital.

She had no idea which of her neighbors had had the common sense to do that during the time of confused and fearful commotion that must have passed when she'd been unconscious, but she certainly appreciated their rational thoughtfulness.

Elizabeth had been so logy with pained exhaustion this whole morning that she hadn't been able to
call Red yet to tell him what had happened. She had considered texting him earlier, but as her trembling fingers had hovered over the buttons, the very thought of trying to type out the gruesome story of what had happened to her had been too incredibly daunting.

Besides, her rational mind knew that it would be better if she spoke to him directly about it.

But at the time...had that been an hour ago?...three hours ago?...her concept of time was blurring and smearing like a watercolor painting...she just hadn't had enough energy to do it. She faintly recalled the moment when she had allowed the insistent tendrils of oblivion to envelope her as she had been trying to decide what exactly she should do.

If she didn't pass out again once the detectives left, she would call Red.

She needed to call him.

Liz swallowed thickly, heart aching in such a piercing way that it was physically painful.

God, she needed to hear his voice.

Stop it, she rebuked herself sharply. You're not done with the police yet. Her eyes flicked open and darted impatiently toward the closed door. Don't feel. Breathe, Liz. Just breathe.

The heavy door handle clicked and the detectives walked back inside. Two new visitors followed after them: a tall, middle-aged man with a rugged face and a woman with intelligent and penetrating eyes who seemed to be in her early thirties. Both wore FBI jackets.

And they seemed fiercely satisfied about something.

Liz shot a querying glance at Detective Shelby.

"Miss Scott, these are Special Agents Goodwin and Austin with the FBI," he gestured to the man and woman respectively. "It appears that the man we're after...well, he may be a man the FBI has been tracking for quite a while."

He didn't seem too pleased about having his current investigation interrupted, but Liz knew enough about the politics between the two agencies that the Feds took precedence if cases crossed. She knew it was, in a way, selfish of her to be so perturbed by this change of events, but she'd almost been done relaying her story. She didn't want to go into it for a third time!

"They will take over from here, Miss Scott." The detective gave her a small smile. "I hope you will recover soon."

And then he and Detective Levinson were gone.

"We apologize for barging in like this, Miss Scott," Agent Goodwin began immediately without preamble. "When Austin and I were notified of the incident tonight and got wind that you, one of Grady Forman's victims, were actually alive and recovering here at Oceanview Medical...." Agent Austin pressed a hand to his arm and he paused, as if realizing that his rushed words weren't exactly following protocol. "Well, we had to come straight away," he finished gruffly.

"Is that his name?" Liz asked quietly. "Grady Forman?" Even his very name felt slimy on her tongue.

"That depends," Agent Austin said, coming closer to Liz and pulling out a photo from a plastic threering binder she'd been holding under her arm. "Is this the man who attacked you this morning?"
Liz took one look at the colored photo and shuddered. The blood drained swiftly from her face, leaving her feeling breathlessly light-headed and shaky. Stinging bile rose in the back of her throat and she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, defiantly swallowing it back down.

Never in her life had she lacked such control over her own body.

She hated it and the feeling of helplessness that surged within her.

"I take that as a yes?" Austin inquired softly as she observed Liz's obvious distress.

"She needs to verbally confirm his identity herself, Austin," Goodwin murmured patiently, keen eyes fixed on Elizabeth.

After a long moment, when Liz finally felt like she could speak without vomiting, she forced her eyes open to look at the two agents. "Yes. That's him."

Goodwin's shoulders visibly sagged with relief and Austin permitted herself a very small smile. They'd found his elusive trail!

"You're quite lucky to be alive, Miss Scott."

Not knowing what to say to that, Liz lowered her eyes.

"I know this has been a terrible morning for you, but...could you please tell us what happened?" Austin asked, perching in the chair closest to Elizabeth.

"Like the detectives mentioned earlier to you, Forman is still out there and we need to find him as quickly as we can," Goodwin said, sitting down beside his partner and pulling out a pad of lined paper and a pen from his own binder.

At Liz's resigned dispiritedness, Austin added gently, "I promise this will be the last time you'll need to tell it today."

Liz looked at the blonde agent not much older than her. She had sapphire blue eyes, just like she did, and they were filled with compassion for Liz and what she had gone through--but they also burned with a determined, almost savage fire to hunt down and apprehend the bastard.

Liz recognized that brutal viciousness in the woman, for it existed in her as well. It was almost completely hidden by the tame protocols that civilized behavior dictated people follow, of course...but it definitely resided just within the inner barriers of her mind, pacing on unsheathed claws and snarling menacingly.

Now this...this was an emotion that Liz suddenly realized she could indulge. This wouldn't make her weak.

Flinging herself against and then through those barriers, she intimately embraced that primal part of herself like a lover, and its enraged fury gave her the strength she needed to get through this last interview.

As her eyes bore into Austin's, the agent's widened almost imperceptibly--she must have glimpsed in Liz what Liz recognized in her.

But then Elizabeth began speaking, her voice stronger and surer than it had been earlier when she'd been relaying her story to the detectives, and Austin's attention zeroed in on the timeline of events Liz laid out for her.
"I'm sorry," Goodwin interrupted halfway through the interview. "You said you wrapped Lauren's hands in your sweatshirt? To try and preserve the blood on her fingers?"

"Yes," Liz murmured, a little self-consciously. "I figured it could be the only evidence the police would have and the rain would have washed it away otherwise."

Goodwin exchanged a glance with Austin. Liz wasn't sure what it meant and she lost some of the fierce assurance she had felt earlier, insecurely hunching in on herself. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, Miss Scott," Goodwin said quickly, meeting her eyes. "No. There are those who would say that disturbing a crime scene wouldn't be the right thing to do, no matter what the situation was. But given these particular circumstances...I feel differently."

"So do I," Austin agreed. Then she gave the younger woman an encouraging smile. "The fact that you even thought to wrap Lauren's hands during what was obviously a frightening time for you is...impressive."

A slight smile of hesitant pride ghosted at the right corner of Liz's mouth at that. Then she once more gathered her thoughts and doggedly took up where she'd left off.

Another twenty minutes or so passed before Liz finally finished telling the story. Exhausted, both mentally and emotionally, she leaned her aching head back against the hospital bed while the two agents jotted down a few more notes in their binders.

"Agent Austin?"

"Yes, Miss Scott?"

"Do you know who the man was? The one with the long, graying hair who attacked...him?" Liz couldn't bring herself to say the rapist's name. "I mean, I know you haven't spoken with any witnesses yet, but maybe the police mentioned something to you...?" she faltered uncertainly.

"No," Agent Austin's expression was kind, as if she sensed Liz wasn't sure if she had asked an irrelevant question. "The first responder officers we spoke with before we came here to see you didn't know anything about him. According to the witnesses, he had disappeared before the police showed up."

"And...and he did too?"

By the disgusted tone of her voice, there wasn't any question about which "he" Elizabeth meant.

Both agents nodded.
Liz's brow puckered with sincere worry. "I hope my Good Samaritan is okay. I...I owe him my life." Her voice caught on the last word and she quickly glanced down, swallowing hard.

"If we find out anything about him, we will be sure to inform you," Austin told her.

"And we will obviously keep you abreast of any developments," Goodwin added, standing up and motioning for his partner to follow his example.

"Here's my card," Agent Austin said, placing it on the nightstand next to Liz's purse. "If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to contact me."
"We will leave you now to rest. Thank you for your time, Miss Scott." Agent Goodwin inclined his head to her before turning around to open the door for his partner. "I wish we had a more detailed profile on Forman," Liz heard him growl as Austin slipped passed him into the hall. "We need a launching point to start looking for him. This city is so damned huge--" His low voice was cut off abruptly as the door clicked shut behind them.

Elizabeth stared after them for a moment before she wearily closed her eyes.

Silence descended on the room.

God, now that they were gone, she felt so...depleted.

She was completely drained of the vicious fire that had consumed her earlier--that had given her the stout nerve she had desperately needed to relive those terrifying moments.

But she couldn't sleep yet.

As much as she wanted to lose herself in that sweet, cool darkness and hide way from the harsh lights that hurt her eyes, away from the physical pain of her crushed body, away from the emotional agony that hovered threateningly within her, she had one more thing she wanted to do.

Needed to do.

Liz reached down and grasped her cell phone in her hand. Flipping it open, she pressed number one on speed-dial....and waited.

It rang once. Then, "Lizzy?"

Her eyes closed of their own volition as the familiar sound of Red's deep, gravelly voice washed over her, through her.

It completely undid her.

The tears that she had held back for almost seven and a half hours now flooded her vision.

"Red!" she rasped despondently as those hot tears began running unchecked in burning trails down her cheeks.

"Tell me, honey." His voice was harsh with concern as he skipped over asking her what was wrong and instead went straight to the heart of it. "Tell me what happened."

And so, weeping, she told him.

Not all of it. She couldn't bring herself to relay every hideously macabre detail.

But she told him enough.

And as she haltingly spoke of what had transpired, he didn't interrupt her. Not once. He didn't ask for more details about any portion of the harrowing incident. He allowed her to tell her story the way she needed to, nevermind that she spoke about some of the events out of sequence. He didn't ask her to repeat anything. He didn't ask her for clarification.

He listened silently, attentively.

But as soon as Liz was finished speaking, she could feel his building glacial fury directed fiercely towards her attacker emanating icily through the phone.
"Please come home," she whispered into the heavy silence that had settled briefly between them. "Please, Red."

"I'm already on my way, sweetheart," he soothed, and she could tell by the tone of his voice that he'd made a serious effort to set aside his rage for her sake. "I'm coming from England so it'll be a few hours yet. But I'll be home soon."

Relief swept through her as she wiped her cheeks dry with one shaking hand. "They're going to keep me overnight."

"Good," he murmured. "It's just a precaution, Lizzy. They want to make sure the concussion you have won't worsen. And since you were able to clearly tell the detectives and agents what had happened, and just by hearing you speak, I think it's a minor one," he reassured her gently. "You may very well be able to go home tomorrow."

Blinding terror struck her heart.

"I can't go home!"

Red went very still on the other end of the line, and she bit her lip, ashamed of her vehement outburst, of her own despicable cowardice.

"You can come home with me," he finally told her softly. "And stay with me a while. Would you prefer that, sweetheart?"

You understand!

She didn't have to explain to him why she couldn't go back there. He perceived her unspoken reasons and didn't hold her in contempt for them.

A sobbing whisper of intensely grateful relief escaped her and it took the shape of one word: "Yes."

"Well. That settles that." She could hear the tender smile in his quiet voice. "I'll have a couple of my employees pick up Bronn. You still have the hide-a-key in the hanging basket?"

She murmured an affirmative.

"I'll have them use that. And if there's anything else you think that you'll need, you can text me. I'll be sure to tell them."

"Red?"

"What is it, honey?"

"Will you come get me?" Her voice was starting to slur. Tears pricked her eyes again. She was so, very tired. "At the hospital?"

"Of course I will. Now, Lizzy...."

"Mmm?"

"I can hear the exhaustion in your voice. The last thing I want to do is hang up but you need to go to sleep for a while."

Her fingers tightened anxiously around the phone.
He must have sensed her reluctance. "If you wake up and you need me, call me. While you're resting though, I'll text you every so often."

"That way I'm not...I'm not alone," she whispered, blinking heavily, those lingering tears tangling in her lashes.

"You'll never be alone, sweetheart."

It was the last thing she remembered him saying before she sank into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my betas, Daniel and Jami, for helping me! :D

Thank you to my readers for your kudos, comments, and support ❤
"How much longer?" Red demanded of the cab driver, hoarse voice tinged with exhaustion from the nine-hour flight and the jarring time difference his body was desperately trying to adjust to.

"Until we reach Oceanview Medical? Ten minutes, sir. There's more traffic on the roads than usual this afternoon."

Naturally, of all days....

Red glanced blearily at the digital clock glowing on the dashboard, which read 4:37 in the afternoon.

Christ.

This horrible day was probably one of the longest he'd ever faced in his entire life--and he had experienced many terrible, drawn-out days before now.

I'm almost there, sweetheart, he thought fiercely, pulling out his phone to text those exact words to her.

He had sent Elizabeth a message when his jet had finally touched down at the Seattle airport to let her know he was in the city and on his way to her at last--but she hadn't replied.

She was most likely sleeping, and, honestly, Red was relieved. Lizzy needed more sleep than she probably realized. It would aid in quickening her recovery process. Once he got to the hospital he'd be loathe to wake her, especially if she really were sleeping. He knew how little of it she'd had throughout the day. Mostly she had dozed fitfully, and that certainly hadn't been what she, or her body, had needed. But it was probably the best she'd been able to do for herself in an unfamiliar and stressful environment.

The best thing for her now would be for him to take her to his penthouse, the only place he knew she currently regarded as safe. Once she was there, she could relax her guard and actually fall into a deep, healing sleep...knowing full well that she was protected and with someone who truly cared for her.

Loved her.

Ten more minutes of travel time on a congested city street was nothing in the grand scheme of the various timeframes that Red had hurdled through today to get to her as quickly as possible.

But at the moment, this damned cab ride to the hospital seemed like longest part of his day, even though so much had happened....

When Red had received Aaron's phone call, he'd just exited his private town car with an entourage of a loyal few and had been about to push through the impressive glass doors of the Bulgari and walk confidently into a twelve o'clock noon meeting to discuss a potential business alliance with two of the British elite. He had been running late, which had been quite unusual for him, and he almost hadn't picked up.

But as he had glanced down at his buzzing phone, Aaron's number insistently flashing on the screen,
a peculiar feeling of misgiving...of dread...had washed over him.

Red had memorized Elizabeth's guards’ schedules down to their fucking bathroom breaks and it was Baz—not Aaron—who was supposed to have been on call during this particular time of the day.

Aaron's phoning him had been atypical. And in Red's dangerous and volatile life, anything that deviated from the expected norm deserved an immediate and thoroughly probing review.

So Red had paused before entering the expansive hotel and had answered the urgent call.

Thank God he had.

Perhaps his running late to the meeting and therefore being able to quickly answer Aaron's call had been Fate's, or God's, way of ascertaining that no time would be lost in securing his transportation home to the States that very day.

By the time the guard had calmly, but gravely, filled Red in completely on what had occurred in Lizzy's very own backyard...of Lauren's rape and murder, of the physical injuries and emotional trauma that Elizabeth had suffered from at the hands of her assailant, of what she'd had to submit to as a sexual assault victim at the Goddamned hospital...Red had lost his temper.

But he hadn't wildly ranted and raved.

Instead, he had gone extremely, dangerously still.

Savage violence had seethed up from the depths of his soul to radiate out from his piercingly chilling expression. As his howling fury had swiftly consumed him, his vision had seemed to have swum with blood--everything he had perceived had been in stark shades of crimson and scarlet. Time had slowed while his senses had heightened. He had been very aware of every crawling second, of every pulse of his heart, of every aching breath that tore up through his nostrils and whistled out his mouth.

"And where are you now?" Red had finally crooned to Aaron, his voice ruthlessly soft.

He had thought that he could sense Aaron actually shudder on the other end of the line.

"I'm at Oceanview Medical sitting outside her room with a coffee and a newspaper," the younger man had replied quietly, making doubly sure he had uttered every word in his sentence succinctly so there could be no misunderstandings later. "I waited until I was completely alone on this floor before calling you," he had added quickly to reassure Red.

Good thing--Red had been about to viciously berate the younger man for not being more furtive.

"The cameras cannot pick me up, Red. I made doubly sure of that before calling you. The nurses at the front desk are currently between rotations but I don't have too much longer before the morning shift nurse checks in."

"Is she awake?"

"Sleeping. I made sure her purse and phone were tucked away in the ambulance before the paramedics drove off with her. I knew she'd want a way to get a hold of you when she's lucid."

Red had briefly closed his eyes, silently sending thanks for Aaron's quick and clever thinking. "Good."

"I'm watching her, boss. I will not leave her unattended."
"And your partner?"

"After Baz broke the rapist's--"

Red had let loose a long, quiet snarl at the mention of Lizzy's assailant.

Aaron had audibly swallowed rather tensely at the primal sound before taking in a deep breath and continuing steadily. "After Baz broke his right wrist, he knocked him unconscious and then squirreled him away to one of your warehouses in the city before the police arrived on the scene."

"Good. That's good." Red's crooning tone had developed a sort of sharply malicious, almost sing-song quality to it. It was the voice that emerged from deep within him when he rode the jagged killing edge—and it was usually the very last voice any enemy of his heard before their throats were slit or a bullet was fired between their eyes to end their miserable lives. But that eerie tone wasn't directed at Aaron. No. It was purposefully aimed at Elizabeth's assailant.

"Baz is waiting for your call, boss," Aaron had informed Red, voice carefully and warily respectful.

"I'll be sure to contact him as soon as we hang up. Thank you. I'll be in touch."

After Red had snapped his phone shut with a purposefully gentle click, he had unhurriedly taken out his sunglasses and had placed them gingerly on the bridge of his nose. His partially shaded, outward expression and movements must have appeared calm to the employees of the Bulgari.

But the guards who had been surrounding him in a loose circle had known better. Those too-leisurely, serene motions meant Red's rage ran bitingly, violent cold.

As one, they had all eased away from him to give him space, moving so very slowly so as not to draw his attention—or the glacial fury that would have naturally come with it if he'd happened to focus in on one of them. Hot, passionate anger they could unwaveringly stand before and handle with courage. But when Red's ire was brutally frigid....

Well, it was in the best interest of all if they stayed out of his way until he had pulled himself out of the virulent maelstrom.

After several, long moments of tautly strained silence, Red had finally drawn in a deep breath and had let it out slowly, his plan of action fixed solidly in his mind's eye. He had informed his men that he was leaving England immediately on urgent business that couldn't wait and had given them instructions to carry out in his absence.

Then he had turned sharply on his heel and had slid back into the town car—alone.

In the fifteen minutes that had followed, while Red's driver had transported him back to his establishment to pack, he had called Baz to confirm the status of his health, the status of Elizabeth's attacker's health, and their current location.

"I've got just a few scrapes and bruises, Red," Baz had reassured his employer after he had finished relaying his side of events. "Nothing serious. This fucking son of a bitch has a broken wrist and nose. He also has a dislocated shoulder. He's bound hand and foot. And gagged. And," Baz added in disgust, "very much alive. The fucker is like a damned cockroach!"

"I want him kept alive, Baz," Red had growled, his free hand curling into a tight fist.

"I figured you would."
"After I see her...after I settle her.... I will come for him."

"Take your time with her, boss. This bastard isn't going anywhere. We are both very well hidden. I'll text you where I'm holding him."

Red had cleared his throat gruffly. "Baz."

The younger man had paused. "Yeah?"

"Thank you." Red hadn't elaborated. And as he had quickly and abruptly ended the call, jaw working soundlessly as he'd stared out the window, he had known the younger man would perceive exactly what he'd meant by those two, deeply heartfelt words.

Red had then cancelled and pushed back all other business meetings and arrangements he'd had planned this trip with his sincerest apologies made sweeter by the promise of last-minute parting gifts. Well, if he were to be honest with himself, they were really more like bribes that would be thrown together by his loyal team to attempt to soothe any feathers that would be ruffled by his abrupt departure from the country.

Right after that he had phoned the pilot of his private jet to secure travel arrangements home.

He had been packed and in the air within the next hour.

The flight back to the States had been miserably interminable. Red had kept his phone curled tightly in hand, not wanting to waste precious seconds by digging it out of his coat pocket when she called--not when those seconds could be spent speaking with her, hearing her voice, verifying with his own Goddamned ears that she was alive.

More than once he had caught himself flipping it open, impatient fingers anxiously hovering over the buttons that would dial her number.

He had almost called her twice.

But every time he had been about to jam his fingers into the numbers, he'd had to viciously remind himself that he wouldn't be able to hide his grave concern for her if he did call her. She'd be able to hear it in his voice--she was sharp, his darling girl. He wouldn't be able to smoothly deflect how he'd known to call her...to come home to her.

Lizzy was intelligent and naturally inquisitive. She'd be too distraught to question his actions now if he decided to give in to the temptation and call her, but in a few days...or weeks...she would remember.

And she certainly wouldn't hesitate to ask him how he had known she had needed him.

So he had clenched his hand into a tight fist around his phone until his knuckles had turned white--and had resisted.

But that brooding train of thought had forced him to ruminate some more.

While his phone had grown hot in his sweaty palm, Red had considered all the various turns a conversation between himself and a puzzled Lizzy could take, and he had at last come up with a truth he would be able to tell her if he were ever asked how he'd flown in from London so quickly: he had already been on his way because he had needed to return ahead of schedule.

It had been appallingly despicable that he'd even had to fucking think like that--especially
considering this awful situation.

Piercing guilt had struck Red's heart and had squeezed it until his lips had parted in a quiet gasp.

And for a few moments, he had allowed himself the luxury of really feeling the aching self-condemnation before he had resignedly swept it into a corner of his mind, tightly bottling it back up inside of himself.

He hadn't had a choice.

Lizzy had to remain protected from the malevolently dangerous forces that were still out there, persistently sniffing around like bloodhounds for any trace of her well-hidden trail.

How could she remain so if he didn't anticipate how to manipulate facts into truths he could say to her?

Of course, contemplating so intently on Elizabeth had stirred in him again the near-overwhelming desire to phone her. Instead of wrestling with it for too long, he had maneuvered his thoughts to what he would certainly be able to control: the fate of her attacker.

The very thought of that fucker attempting to rape his sweet girl had immediately stirred up the howling maelstrom of his savage temper, which had never quite died down--and it wouldn't.

Not until that fucking creature was dead.

So to appease his temper, at least in part, Red had given himself over to his vivid imagination for a while.

He had pictured himself mercilessly punching the assailant in face, blacking both eyes, bloodying the skin into a pulpy mess. Then he had visualized pummeling him in the gut, rupturing the fragile innards coiled there. After that, he had imagined breaking each of the rapist's ribs and all the bones in his fingers, feet, arms, and legs...one by one...and hearing his enemy howl in agony as he did so.

He had envisioned castrating the fucker.

It was barbaric. Deep down, he knew that.

But so was rape.

Even while Red had fantasized about all the different ways he could successfully maim him, he had been very much aware that in the end, all of that ferocious brutality he could indulge in wouldn't be enough to quench his bloodlust, his need for revenge.

Only the rapist's death would satiate that keen hunger.

However, since he couldn't very well bring about the son of a bitch's death on this plane, Red had eventually--forcibly--turned his mind away from those murderous desires.

To keep himself from going insane with anxious rage, Red had pulled out his laptop and had begun searching the Internet for news blurbs about the attack. Thankfully, there hadn't been much posted. There were a couple headlines here and there, but no photos--nothing paramount. Red had considered all the information he'd come across to be vague at best.

Hopefully this particular news story would stay relatively quiet.

The media loved chaos. It thrived on the masses' obsession for the macabre. Elizabeth certainly didn't
need such fierce and heartless attention focused so intensely on her. Red had succeeded in keeping her shrouded in obscurity in Nebraska's countryside for all of her childhood and in the concrete jungle of Seattle for all of her young adulthood. He wasn't going to allow this horrendous, traumatic event to throw her out into the unsheltered open, where her beautiful face would be plastered on televisions all along the northwest coast—or all over the Internet, for that matter.

Red intended to keep her away from the harsh limelight for her own protection, and if he had to somehow pay off the news stations around Seattle to keep them away from her, he'd do it.

"We will cross that bridge when we get to it. If we need to cross it at all," he'd muttered to himself.

Then his phone had finally rung—and it had been Lizzy.

"We are here, sir," the cabby told Red, startling him out of his reflective mulling. He blinked and stared out the window, relief flooding him as he read the words "Oceanview Medical" on the giant, bronze placard to the left of the stone staircase.

Thank God.

"Thank you. Keep the change." Red didn't even know how much money he shoved impatiently at the driver—it was a couple hundred dollars, at least. But right now, he didn't fucking care about money.

The car had barely stopped moving before he leaped out and jogged quickly up the walkway and stairs, slowing himself to a more sedate pace as he entered the medical building, keen eyes flicking around observantly.

Earlier that afternoon, Aaron had texted him which floor Elizabeth was on and which room number she was sequestered in, so Red immediately made for the indoor stairwell once he spotted it. His right hand grasped the railing for balance as he took the steps two at a time to get to the third floor as quickly as possible.

Pushing the heavy door open, Red crossed the threshold, sharp gaze immediately falling on Aaron, who was sitting in the cozy family area right across from Lizzy's room. Their eyes met. Red gave him the barest flicker of a smile and then slightly inclined his head, both thanking him and excusing him to join Baz.

Then his entire attention expanded and immediately became refocused.

Expression intent, Red quietly—finally—let himself into Elizabeth's room.

As he paused by the door, eyes falling on her sleeping form, a flash of blinding rage momentarily colored everything around him in a filmy red haze before he savagely jerked his head to rid himself of it.

The sickroom was not a place to feel or show anger.

Red took a deep breath in through his nose and then quietly let it out, deep concern for Lizzy suffusing him as he approached the bed.

Oh.... Oh, my sweet girl.

His hands lightly gripped the plastic rail near her shoulder, eyes slowly roving over her, inch by careful inch, as he took in all the grisly details and mentally processed them.
The change in her was utterly shocking.

Her heart-shaped face, which was usually so full, was now sunken in at her cheeks. Her fair skin, which usually glowed slightly with the pink of health, was instead tinged with gray. Her beautiful, long hair, usually so lustrous and full, now hung limply down her right shoulder in dull, frayed tendrils. Dark circles of exhaustion stained the pallid flesh just beneath her eyes. A huge black and purple bruise the size of his fist marred her left temple.

Red's jaw clenched painfully as the savagery in his soul suddenly threw back its jaws to howl furiously for revenge.

Her assailant would pay for this evil--and he would pay in installments for every act of violence he had committed on Elizabeth.

He would first pay in blood.

Then he would pay the final installment with his fucking life.

Red bared his teeth in a silent, incensed growl.

Later, the whispering thought vehemently promised from the depths of his soul, echoing throughout his mind. Later.

Nostrils flaring, he pressed his lips firmly together as he forcibly thrusted his impassioned fury away, burying it deep down within him once again.

He would not indulge his rage here. Not in front of her.

His eyes caressed over her face.

She needed him now.

Everything else in this world could wait--and would wait.

Reaching out, Red stroked her soft cheek with the back of his finger. At his touch, Lizzy drew in a gentle breath and he watched, enraptured, as her chest rose and fell with it.

And as he watched her breathe steadily, as he watched her pulse beat strongly in the hollow of her throat, the realization that he had kept himself from acknowledging all day suddenly and completely consumed him.

He had almost lost her.

Tears unexpectedly welled threateningly and he quickly bowed his head, thumb and index finger pinching the place between the corners of his eyes as those droplets fell down to splash on the tops of his leather shoes.

Christ.

He couldn't give in to this now.

Forcing his head up, he looked down at her. She survived.

He swallowed thickly, jaw tightening as he took strength--and heart--in watching her breathe slowly and evenly in front of him.
She was alive.

Alive!

And right now, that was all that mattered.

Leaning down, Red placed a loving kiss on her brow, lips lingering against her smooth skin. Then, as he pulled back slightly, the fingers of one hand reaching up to very gently trace her cheek, he found himself gazing into her luminous blue eyes.

"Red?"

His smile was tender. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Red," she breathed. Her heart was in her eyes, reflecting in the tears that also glistened there. "I missed you so much."

His heart twisted sharply at her earnest words. "I thought of you all day, Lizzy." He reached out, careful not to bump the IV or the mottled bruises around her joints, to gently take her hand in his. "I'm so glad I'm here now."

She gave him a watery smile.

"How are you feeling, honey?"

She glanced down at their intertwined fingers. "I'm.... I'm okay."

Red lightly squeezed her hand and her beautiful eyes flickered to his. "Truth now, my darling girl," he murmured gently.

"I'm.... God, Red, I'm so tired." She hesitated, biting her lower lip. Then she whispered, "Can I.... Can we go home soon?"

"Of course we can," he reassured her. "As soon as your doctor discharges you, we will go. You did say in your text earlier that he'd let you go home tonight, right?"

"Yeah. But he hasn't come by yet. I.... I really want to go home, Red."

"I know you do, sweetheart. It won't be too much longer now."

He watched as she leaned further back into the pillows, stifling a yawn. Without letting go of her hand, Red wedged his foot between the legs of one of the chairs in the room and moved it closer to the bed so he could sit down beside her.

When he looked back down at her, he saw that her eyes were once again closing with exhaustion. Then she blinked rapidly a couple times, purposefully widening her lids and slightly baring her teeth in a tiny snarl of frustration.

Heartened to see a bit of her familiar fire resurfacing, he chuckled softly. "If you need to go back to sleep, you should."

"I've been sleeping all freaking day. I want to be with you," she murmured--then yawned.

His expression was affectionately amused. "You are with me, sweetheart. And now that I'm here, I'm not going anywhere." He squeezed her hand again before bringing it to his lips to kiss her fingers. "And besides," he continued seriously, "I know you've really been dozing, not sleeping."
She wrinkled her nose at him.

"If you can get a good nap in before the doctor shows up to discharge you, I promise it will be all the better for you."

"I don't want to be alone."

The fire he'd glimpsed in her had guttered out. Her voice was now very small, her tone very hesitant. Even tremulous. It took him briefly aback, for it instantly reminded him of when she'd been a little girl and terrified of going to sleep because of the night terrors that had plagued her.

Recovering his poise quickly, he scooted his chair closer to her. "You're not alone," he soothed, pressing his lips to her hand again. "I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

Lizzy closed her heavy lids, dark lashes fluttering. "Promise?" she whispered like she had done so many times before in nights long passed and beyond her memory.

"I promise, Lizzy."

And like he had done so many times before in nights long passed and beyond her memory, he kept his promise.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my betas, Daniel and Jami, for being such a great help in the inspiration department :)

Thank you to my readers for actually reading this story, and for leaving kudos and comments. All is so appreciated :)
Red pursed his lips as he carefully pawed through one of the four dresser drawers in his closet that Lizzy had claimed as her own a few months ago, searching for something for her to wear to bed that would be lightweight, loose, and very soft on her abused and hurting body.

Most of her clothes were attractively formfitting—which, being the virile man he was, he thoroughly relished, and she, being a sexually-aware young woman, enjoyed wearing—but they’d be far too tight on her bruised flesh.

Red opened another one of her drawers and snorted in exasperated amusement at the sight of all of her skimpy lingerie pieces mashed down in disorganized heaps. As he picked a couple up, rubbing them thoughtfully between his fingers, his slight smile faded to a frown. Even everything in this impressive and forever-growing collection of sheer and stretchy lace undergarments that she loved would be too uncomfortable on her tender skin.

Tomorrow he would have someone from the hotel run down the street to the department store to buy her some simple and soft cotton tees—two sizes too big, of course, so she wouldn’t feel restricted—and perhaps a pair of baggy pajama shorts...or maybe pants. He’d seen her wear both to bed on occasion so he’d have to ask her tonight which she preferred.

Maybe he’d just give the hotel employee enough money to buy both, in addition to the shirts.

In the meantime....

Red tucked her camisole and thong back into the depths of lacey chaos, closed the drawer, and then walked further into his closet. After a moment’s thought, he pulled out one of his neatly folded white undershirts the lowest of the many shelves that lined the wall. She could wear this...as long as there weren’t any stains or holes. After shaking it out, he scrutinized it, turning it over twice.

It was pristine—not that he was too surprised about that. He tended to take good care of his clothes. But he’d had to make sure or he would’ve been at the mercy of her teasing for a long time!

A tiny smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth as he thought about the moment he went into the bathroom to lay it out on the counter by the two fluffy black towels he’d brought out for her. Then he padded across the expansive bedroom, making his way to the sliding glass door that looked out onto the veranda.

Lizzy was where he’d left her ten minutes ago, still kneeling gingerly beside Bronn. The massive dog’s head was propped up on her thighs, his eyes closed in blissful abandon as she fondled his ears and stroked his heavy coat. He could hear her murmuring to him through the thick glass—he wondered what she was saying.

Carefully he edged the door open a crack. Bronn's right ear twitched at the sound, but Lizzy hadn't noticed.

"....sorry. I'm so sorry, Bronn," she was saying softly. "It's my fault."

Red tilted his head to the side, brow puckering.

What was her fault?
"If I hadn't gone out there, you wouldn't have hurt yourself trying to....to get to me."

Oh, sweetheart....

Exhaling quietly, Red leaned against the door jamb.

Hours ago, when he had sent a couple of his people to Lizzy's duplex to pick Bronn and a few other things up, they'd taken one look at the dog lying listlessly in the muddy backyard, and, once they had won his trust, had rushed him to the nearest vet.

From what Red could surmise, the fiercely loyal animal had torn his front paw pads to shreds desperately trying to knock down the wooden gate--the only barrier that had been between him and his adored lady--so he could rush to her aid.

Red was quite certain that if Bronn had succeeded in tearing down the gate, Lizzy's attacker would be dead, probably by having his throat viciously torn out and strewn around the yard.

But for all his weight and strength of will, the dog hadn't been able to bust through the barrier, and had severely battered himself up in his valiant attempt to do so.

His forepaws were currently wrapped in heavy gauze and surgical tape all the way to the elbows. Red was impressed by how his men had secured Bronn up here in his suite so quickly--the Sarplaninac was one hundred thirty-five pounds of thick fur, sharp teeth, dense bones, and hard muscle. It most likely hadn't been easy. His men must have carefully carried him around the back of the hotel to the service elevator, one man taking the front, the other supporting the back.

Bonn may not be able to walk now, but he was a proud and strong fighter. He would become physically well again fairly quickly.

And while Elizabeth was strong and a courageous fighter as well, her recovery on both the physical and emotional levels would take time.

Red attentively watched her as she slowly ran her fingers through Bronn's thick, sable-colored ruff.

She hadn't been quite truthful with Red over text when he'd been en route to Seattle. She had assured him that the doctor had said she could go home tonight, and he'd been so exhausted and practically out of his mind with deep concern for her--and barely suppressed rage--that at the time he hadn't thought to question the legitimacy of that statement. In truth, the doctor had actually thought it imperative for her to remain overnight so he and his staff could continue to monitor her minor concussion.

But once Red had arrived, Lizzy had been so frantically desperate to flee the hospital that she had absolutely refused to stay any longer. Once her doctor had come to see her for the last time before the evening shifts began and a new doctor assigned to her, she had fiercely declared her intentions of checking herself out. Since she was an adult woman and Oceanview Medical couldn't very well hold her against her will, she had impressively manipulated that fact to her advantage.

Once Red had swiftly figured out the truth of the matter, he had tried his very best to compromise with her, endeavoring to convince her to stay the night and then check out as early as she was able to tomorrow morning. But Lizzy had been adamant! She had vehemently, almost ferociously, vetoed every rational argument he'd brought up in favor of her staying.

He was positive he understood why.

Lizzy had always loathed hospitals. Her intense hatred for them stemmed from the years when Sam
had been fiercely battling cancer. Red knew that she harbored many anxiety-ridden and dreadfully painful memories from all the various days and nights she'd spent in the cancer ward.

But it wasn't just the ghastly memories of being in those coldly sterile hospital rooms that had made her stubbornly resist Red's gentle attempts in persuasion.

When she'd been younger, Lizzy had most likely learned to associate hospitals with fear--fear of pain, of sickness, of death. And even though she was older now...more mature...possessing the insight to intelligently analyze the reasons behind certain behaviors--including her own--that deep-seeded fright without a doubt still existed deep down within her.

And fear wasn't always rational.

Especially not when she had almost been brutally and physically violated...especially not when her own, fragile life had precariously hung in the balance just hours ago.

That entrenched fear shivering in her heart had been severely compounded last night--and it had invaded her conscious thoughts, making itself known to him by gleaming almost wildly out of her blue eyes. There had been no use trying to reason with her by that point, so Red had backed her decision to leave, regarding the doctor with a sharp and baleful stare until the younger man had relented with a resigned sigh and disapproving frown.

It was an understatement to say that the doctor hadn't been too keen on discharging her, but he had been somewhat mollified when Red had assured him that he did have some medical training (how could he not, with the type of life he lead?) and he would watch over Elizabeth tonight, waking her every couple hours and checking her cognizance.

In turn, Lizzy had promised the doctor that she would return to his care if her concussion worsened overnight. Though considering how acute her mental abilities were now despite her exhaustion, Red doubted it would.

But he'd feel more assured of that if she showered and got into bed relatively soon.

So he slid the glass door open wider. Bronn lifted his head and Lizzy glanced over her shoulder at him.

Red immediately schooled his expression to a calm and steady neutrality. Christ, she looked so wan, so gauntly pallid. She needed to fall into a deep, healing sleep as soon as she could. Perhaps then some healthy color would come back into her face and some of her vibrant shine would return to sparkle in those lovely eyes of hers.

He gave her an encouraging smile. "Shower's all ready for you. Come on."

Wordlessly she rose to her feet and gave Bronn one last caress before she followed Red inside.

"I want you to wear the shirt I laid out on the counter for you tonight," he told her as they entered the bathroom. "It's loose enough so it won't rub or pinch you uncomfortably. And it's pretty soft." He watched as she brushed her fingers curiously against it. "It's also tagless, so it won't abrasively itch the back of your neck. Why they still produce undershirts with tags and sell them to innocent and unsuspecting customers in the stores, I'll never understand. They're so Goddamned irritating!"

"How'd you get this one then?" she asked, eyes flickering in amusement as she turned around to face him.

"I ordered it on the Internet," he smiled.
A thin brow rose in surprise. "You shop online, Red?"

"Is it so hard to believe? I'm old, but not that old, honey," he teased, trying to see if he could get her beautiful smile to glow in her face, in her eyes.

"I know." Instead of smiling, she flushed and looked down, rubbing the back of her neck self-consciously. Then she glanced up at him quickly before her eyes darted away from him again to stare at the shower.

Red masterfully hid his disappointment and graciously took the hint. "If you need me for anything at all," he told her gently, "I'll be in the bedroom, okay?"

She nodded, watching as he turned around and crossed the threshold. Biting her lower lip, she uncertainly took a few steps forward and then shut the door behind him with a quiet click.

Wincing at how that must seem to him, she twisted on the balls of her feet and walked resolutely over to the shower. In the past, whenever she bathed or showered in here, she had never closed the door on him.

Would he think her ungrateful? Uncaring about all he'd done for her today?

It was insane. All day long she had been so very desperate for him to come home to her. But now that he was here, all she wanted was to be left alone.

What the Hell was wrong with her?

Swallowing passed the guilty lump in her throat, Liz took off the t-shirt dress she'd worn home from the hospital—and then stared at the blanched and spiritless image reflected in the mirror.

God in Heaven. Was that wraithlike woman really her?

A hand rose up in disbelief to touch the sallow cheeks, to lightly trace the black circles under the eyes.

The woman in the mirror did the same exact thing.

Christ.

Her fingertips then hesitantly brushed against the huge, dark bruise on her temple before traveling down the discolored skin sheltering her sore ribs and stomach.

She looked like Hell.

Fury, dark and cold, unexpectedly rose from deep within her. She shuddered at her reflection, baring her teeth in an angry snarl at the battered woman standing before her.

How could she have let that— that monster do this to her?

What in the Hell was wrong with her?

With a disgusted gasp, she whirled away the mirror and the pitiful woman reflected there and fled to the shower. She clawed furiously at the dials, turning on the warm water. As she waited for the water to reach the temperature she desired, she took in a deep breath to settle her snapping nerves.

_Breathe, Liz._ She held her fingers under the steamy mist to test the temperature. _Just focus on one thing at a time. Like taking a freaking shower._
Breathing deeply, she cautiously stepped inside--and was very careful not to keep the extremely tender side of her head directly under the rushing spray of the left shower head. Clasping her shaking hands together, she closed her eyes, allowing the warm water to flow through her greasy hair and down her body. She was very aware of every warm droplet dribbling in her tresses, over her skin, finally beginning the long process of washing away the sweat and grime of the day.

The sensation felt so good.

But...she wasn't feeling *clean*.

Maybe washing her hair would help.

Liz poured a generous amount of Red's Tea Tree shampoo in her hands--but as she began to bring them up to the crown of her head to smear the stuff onto her scalp, she paused, staring numbly down at her wrists. God, they were so...*so hideous*. They were so mottled with bruises that they looked as if a muddy tractor wheel had run repeatedly over them again and again and again. And it seemed like the longer she stared at them, the more they began to hurt. Every dark blotch seemed to suddenly take on its own throbbing heartbeat.

Was the pain medication wearing off?

Or was it just her imagination playing tricks on her?

She felt a burning sensation threatening to seep out from behind her eyes and she blinked rapidly before squeezing them tightly shut.

*She would not* think about how those bruises got there.

*She would not* cry any more today!

With a defiant hiss she briskly scrubbed her scalp, relieved to feel a cold tingling spreading from the part in her hair outward like a pronged star to encompass her whole head. The Tea Tree oils were reacting with her skin and hair, clearing out the dirt and germs and God knew what else from the hospital...from the wet pavement outside of her duplex where Lauren had lain in the puddles, death staring out of her glassy eyes....

With a sharp gasp, Liz tore her thoughts away from poor Lauren...from the way she had looked with the blue veins of her strangled throat bulging and her naked legs spread out like the open wings ripped off of a butterfly--

*It could've happened to me!*

Panic rose swiftly in her heart and, shaking, she forced herself to move under the warm water to rinse her long hair.

*But it didn't*, the rational part of her mind reminded her quietly. *Breathe, Liz. Breathe.*

She forced herself to catch her uneven breath, but her heart was still racing in her chest. God, she *had* to wash away those horrifically foul memories. They made her feel *awful*.

Nauseated.

Dirty.

She had to get *clean!*
Liz frantically grabbed the bar of white soap off the shelf. She urgently rubbed it between her hands, creating a thick lather of slippery suds and bubbles. Then she began rubbing it all along her body.

And she wasn't gentle about it.

With every brutally rough pass she made over her bruised ribs and stomach, she savagely relished the pain that blossomed. Soon her whole trembling body was aflame with it. Everything ached unrelentingly--everything was throbbing viciously. When her soapy hands reached her face and touched the horrible bruise where his fist had jarringly connected with her head, she could suddenly hear him laughing cruelly, could feel his body crushing hers--she couldn't breathe!--she could hear the whir of his zipper, she could feel the growing bulge of his revolting erection--he was going to rape her!--then--

--the memory of stars exploding behind her eyes overwhelmed her. She was blind--helpless!

Liz screamed in remembered terror, clutching at the slippery wall, scrabbling hands seeking to grasp on to something so she wouldn't fall--

"Lizzy!"

Red's rasping voice grated in her ear. His strong arms came up and around her.

Held her.

Whirling around, she shoved wildly at his chest, the sudden fury born from her unbridled fear clearing her vision of the lurid memories of those pulsating stars, of her defenselessness, of the soulless monster who would have raped and murdered her.

"You weren't there!" she shrieked at Red over the echoing roar of the shower's spray, over the frightening ringing in her ears. "I needed you and you weren't there!"

Red tightened his arms around her and she snarled desperately, fingers angrily digging into his soaked shirt as she struggled to escape his hold and yet pull him even closer against her at the same time.

Somewhere down deep within her shrilling, anguished soul, she perceived that this violent rage was misdirected--that she was accusing Red of something he'd had absolutely no control over--of something he couldn't change no matter how vehemently he wanted to.

But it was so much easier right now to blame him than to blame herself.

Mercilees despair reared up and throttled her. "You weren't there!" she sobbed brokenly, tears of shock, of fury, of shame, coursing down her cheeks. "You weren't there!"

"I'm here now!" His fervent voice broke over her like a tidal wave, his large, sure hands clasping her shoulders tightly, his intense eyes tear-bright as they bore down into hers. "I'm right here, sweetheart."

Weeping, Elizabeth collapsed against him.

Red stumbled, his back hitting the marble wall behind them. Slowly they sank down to the slick floor of the shower, Liz huddling in the protective circle of his arms and legs as water misted all around them, drenching their hair, his clothes, her body.

And as he gathered her closely against him, tucking her head under his chin, his heart broke for her.
With every keening shudder, with every grieving tear that trailed down her cheeks to mingle with the water from the shower, his howling guilt for not being there to stop this horrific incident from happening, his murderous rage against the fiend who did this to her, and his deep and abiding love for her all culminated and expanded to whirl together and consume him.

He closed his eyes against the intense onslaught of emotions and pressed his cheek against her hair. More than anything in this world he wanted to be able to tell her that it was okay, that everything would be okay.

But it wasn't okay, and it wouldn't be. Not for a long while.

Red couldn't--and wouldn't--utter cliché and ultimately false platitudes to try and soothe her. Such deception went against his very nature. The mortifying idea of attempting to downplay her trauma for the sake of a few brief moments of comfort was abhorrent to him.

He wouldn't do it.

But he could offer her truth.

"You're safe now," he murmured huskily in her ear, lips drifting to up to gently kiss the top of her head. "You're safe."

And as he held her against his heart, time slowly stretching out before them, he fervently prayed that she would give rein to the strength and courage he knew she had within her and allow his words to flow through her...to give her the solace her ravaged soul so desperately needed.
Thank you always to my betas Daniel and Jami for helping me ❤

Thank you so much for reading, for your kudos, comments, and support!
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
By the time the water streaming from the shower heads turned lukewarm, Elizabeth's anguished tears had finally ceased and she sat curled up in his arms, silent and still save for her chest rising and falling against him.

Despite the cooling water, Red was loath to move her, to disturb the semblance of peace she seemed to have found at last after such a horrifically traumatizing day. So he allowed a few more quiet moments of time to pass. But when he noticed goosebumps beginning to rise on her flesh and her slight body beginning to shiver between his legs, he slowly and gently dropped his arms from around her. Her fingers immediately tightened in the wet folds of his shirt, and when she met his eyes, her own were stark in her white, suddenly anxious face.

"I'm just going to turn off the water, sweetheart," he soothed. "It's getting cold and I don't want you to get chilled."

"Your shoes are ruined," she remarked softly, guiltily.

He took her hands in his and tenderly kissed the dewdrops off the backs of her fingers before rising up on his knees to twist the dial closest to them. Then he sloshed over to the other side of the shower and turned the second knob to off.

"Please, sweetheart? I'm so cold." It wasn't quite a falsehood, and he shivered convincingly. "I really want to get warm again." His thumbs lightly stroked her knuckles. "Will you come with me?"
Red looked down at their hands so she wouldn't feel like he was staring at her, pressuring her. But he furtively watched her out of the corner of his eye, continuing to soothingly caress her skin as he waited for her decision.

After a long, silent moment, his patience was rewarded.

"Okay," Lizzy whispered.

He allowed his lips to curve in a small, relieved smile. Then he slowly rose to his feet, lifting her with him.

It broke his heart all over again to observe her moving so timidly as he lead her out of the shower and onto the plush mat by the sink. Keeping his left hand around one of hers, he reached out with his right and pulled a towel off the counter. Shaking it out, he released her fingers to begin drying her off, starting at her brow, then using a soft corner to wipe her nose, her cheeks, and her chin.

Since he hadn't been able to earlier, Red took this opportunity to mentally take stock of her bodily injuries. The mottled black and purple discoloration of her heavily bruised ribs and stomach greeted his eyes as he stroked the towel gingerly down her breasts and over the wounded areas. Even though his touch was as light and as gentle as he could make it, she still cringed in pain, breath catching sharply.

That was the moment when the mask of steady calm he wore to conceal his ever-present and coldly burning rage slipped.

He ground his teeth, green eyes snapping with vicious fury as he knelt down to jerkily run the towel around her smooth thighs and calves.

"Red?" Her tremulous voice was warily uncertain.

Shit.

Lizzy must have felt the barely suppressed anger in his movements. Now was certainly not the time to indulge his fierce temper.

Leash it, he snarled silently to himself.

But oh...how he wanted to unleash it!

Later, he promised the crouching, growling savagery within him. Later.

He could feel her gazing intently down at the top of his head. But he wouldn't meet her eyes--not until he was sure he had his rampant ferocity muzzled and concealed deep inside of himself once more.

"Would you turn around for me please, Lizzy?" he asked, purposefully schooling his tone to quiet gentleness as he took his time wiping the water droplets from each of her toes.

After a moment's hesitation, she complied, presenting the long arch of her spine to him.

Red gently slid the towel up the backs of her legs and over the small mound of her ass. Then he rose to his feet, eyeing the smooth planes of her back. Besides the deep and dark bruises he had already known were there, splotched on her shoulder-blades from when she'd been thrust violently to the ground, he was relieved to see with his own eyes that her spine didn't appear to be severely injured.
In that regard, she had been lucky.

Draping the towel over one arm, he gathered her long, dripping hair in one hand and settled it over her shoulder to hang down her front.

"Use this," he murmured, offering the towel to her.

As she began to squeeze and pat her hair dry, he very lightly placed two fingers to the base of her skull and moved them down, checking her vertebrae for any signs of injury.

Visual reassurance was one thing. And while Red was almost completely certain the hospital staff had been thorough in their assessment of her injuries, he needed to physically confirm for himself that her back and spine were fully intact. And as his searching fingers trailed down the strong, curving line, his feelings of relief intensified.

Satisfied to not have found anything that the nurses and doctors may have overlooked, he pressed his palm reassuringly to the small of her back.

When she glanced questioningly over her shoulder at him, he smiled his assurances. "Just checking, Lizzy. All is well." Then he reached out and took the damp towel from her. "Why don't you put on that soft, white shirt while I get dry and warm?" he suggested, folding the towel and laying it on the top of the hamper.

Red watched as she slid her arms through the shirt's sleeve holes by herself, but then he stepped in to aid her by helping her pull it gingerly on over her head, each of them careful not to brush the horrible bruise marring her left temple.

Christ, she looked so small and vulnerable standing there with her bare legs and her bare feet and clad in a tee too big for her. His tee. His expression was tender as he lifted a hand and very gently touched her chin. His eyes trailed over her, unable not to notice how the excess material fell over her breasts, emphasizing the way they swelled, how the slight transparency of the fabric revealed the dark nipples beneath.

Elizabeth shifted and Red blinked, eyes flicking to her face. She had taken her lower lip between her teeth and was lightly chewing on it.

She was nervous.

Fuck.

He hadn't meant to make her feel that way. He hadn't meant to stare.

Feeling rather self-conscious now himself, he cleared his throat and lifted the other towel from the counter. "I'm going to step out of these wet clothes and dry off." He met her eyes and gentled his tone. "Would you like to wait for me in the bedroom?"

She visibly tensed.

"Or you can stay, honey," he quickly reassured her. "Whatever you're more comfortable with."

Lizzy nodded and remained where she was, folding her arms lightly over her breasts as she averted her eyes.

Conflicting emotions tore at him as he began to undress, kicking off his sopping shoes and peeling the soaking wet clothing off of his body to lay all the pieces on the counter. He was relieved that he
hadn't frightened her away, and he was touched that she wanted to stay near him. But at the same
time, he was also still deeply concerned for her. The bedroom was perhaps seven steps away, but she
couldn't even bring herself to cross into it without him.

All the early signs that her trauma was lodging itself more firmly into her heart and mind were
beginning to clearly show themselves.

She would need time.

He looked at her as he dried his body, silently observing the way she kept her head down, her long,
damp locks falling forward to hide her face. Sensitive of her feelings, Red wrapped the towel around
his waist to cover what he could of his nakedness.

He would give her all the time she needed.

He would help her.

"Come on, sweetheart. Let's go into the bedroom."

Following closely at his heels, she paused abruptly when he headed toward his closet. "I'm going to
put on my pajamas," he explained patiently. "Why don't you hop on into bed. I'll be there in just a
second."

Slowly she settled herself under the silken sheets while Red quickly pulled on a pair of loose pants
and a tee of his own. When he came out of the closet, he met her tired eyes and gave her a tender
smile. "Do you need a glass of water or anything?"

She shook her head. "No." She licked her lips. "But...thank you."

Once she was asleep he would put a full glass on the nightstand for her. He had a feeling she would
need something to drink later. "Per your doctor's instructions, I need to wake you every two hours."

Her eyes were fixed raptly on his face as he put on his watch and set the alarm before easing down
beside her on the bed.

"But after tonight, we both should be able to sleep normally...without interruption."

"Okay," she murmured.

Knowing she wouldn't relax until he did, he made a show of leaning back into the soft mound of
pillows propped up against the headboard.

After a brief moment, Lizzy followed his example, eyes fluttering shut almost immediately as she
sank into the nest of goose down comfort.

Red reached over and lovingly caressed the curling baby hairs away from her brow. "Sleep well,
sweetheart," he whispered. "I'll be right here when you wake up."

And so the first night of Lizzy's recovery passed uneventfully. But it certainly wasn't easy on either
her or Red. At times during the long hours, he perceived that she was able to finally immerse herself
in a deeper sleep, but then too soon after he was forced to wake her. He hated doing it--hated the
way she sometimes snarled tearfully up at him, so desperate was she to be undisturbed for a longer
amount of time--but he knew it had to be done for her own safety and well-being.

By the time the pale light of dawn shone in through the large windows and the sliding glass door,
both Red and Lizzy were more than drained physically and emotionally. But as he had thought, her concussion hadn't worsened. At least they had wrung good news out of the severely rough night they'd forged through.

As he rose from the bed, finally able to leave her to sleep uninterrupted, he sent exhausted, silent thanks above that nightmares hadn't plagued her. Red had been so concerned about that. Perhaps she'd fall into a sleep so deep that she wouldn't dream.

Red fervently hoped so.

But he was soon to find out that it had been foolish to harbor such a hope....
Thank you so much to my betas Daniel and Jami for brainstorming with me and inspiring me :D

Thank you for reading, for your kudos, comments, and support ❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Frightful darkness, blacker than night, surrounded her. The air was stagnant, foul. Even though rain wasn't pouring from the skies, even though lightning wasn't splitting through the miasma of despair whirling oppressively about, the crashing sound of thunder constantly boomed. The disconcerting beat ricocheted harshly around her, shaking the marshy ground she squelched through at a jarring sprint.

Disorienting her.

Elizabeth painfully forced her mouth open as wide as it could go and she desperately tried to gulp down as much of the fetid air as she could so she could fuel her lungs and heart--so she could keep running.

*He* had found her trail.

*He* was after her.

Hunting her.

Another flash of seething panic struck her frantic heart. Sweat poured down her face and naked body as she leapt wildly forward, putting on yet another burst of speed to outrun *him*.

But it wasn't enough.

Not nearly enough!

*He* was gaining on her!

She could hear the heavy suction of his footfalls close behind her, the snorting of air whistling through his wide nostrils and getting stuck in his throat, his eager, panting moans as he came closer and closer and closer.

She caught a whiff of his reeking stench. Was that his hot breath washing over the back of her neck? Desperate terror consumed her--and she made the pivotal mistake of glancing fearfully over her shoulder.

Instantly she lost her footing. As she plunged into the sticky muck below with a stricken cry, agonizing pain exploded in her head, rendering her completely numb and absolutely powerless.

With a victorious, laughing roar he was on her, pinning her down into the mud with the gross weight of his putrid body.

His malicious, evil chuckle filled her ears until they rang with it. She tried to force her feeble arms up to claw at his face but they were helplessly stuck in the marshland she was steadily sinking into.

Whimpering, she watched hopelessly as one of his hands descended to her throat, thick fingers slowly throttling her, snatching away her ability to breathe...while his other earnestly reached down to briskly rub his already erect penis.
Revulsion flooded her.

Clapping thunder reverberated overhead, briefly drowning out his excited, rutting gasps as he positioned himself to take her by force--

--but then his hand slipped slightly from around her neck.

Air, rank with the disgusting musk of his arousal, suddenly filled her starved lungs and she screamed.

"Elizabeth!"

The terrified shrieking went on and on and on....

"Lizzy!" Red cried hoarsely, gathering her convulsing body in his arms.

At his touch, her blue eyes flew open, her frightened howls turning into rabid snarls as she immediately began to struggle violently against him, uncomprehending of where she was--of who he was.

Red hissed in shocked pain as her long fingernails clawed relentlessly at his bare forearms. Christ--she was still dreaming, lost in the devastating throes of her night terror!

"You're safe, Lizzy!" he fiercely called to her, holding her wild eyes with his own, grasping onto the words that had calmed her yesterday and repeating them over and over. "You're safe! You're safe."

They seemed to be taking effect.

Those horrible, feral sounds emitting from Elizabeth's chapped lips soon quieted to breathless whimpers...then died away completely. She drew in a gasping breath as she came back to herself, her clenching hold on his stinging forearms finally easing. Then she blinked, the expression in her glassy eyes becoming clearer, sharper.

"R-Red?"

Relief swept through him. "You're safe, sweetheart," he reassured her in the softest voice he could manage, moving one hand to cradle the uninjured side of her face. "You're safe."

Tears filled her haunted eyes and she shuddered, closing them tightly--but not before the droplets escaped the dark tangle of her long lashes to trail down her cheeks.

Red pulled her into his lap to hold her close, rocking her gently as she sobbed out her terror.

He didn't ask what she had dreamed of--he already knew.

The savagery he'd been keeping tightly leashed in his soul snapped its tether as she cried despondently into his shoulder. It lunged forward, claws unsheathed as it reared up threateningly, howling in ferocious rage for revenge, for blood--blood!

For death.

A low, vicious snarl escaped Red before he could bite it back. His arms tightened around her trembling body while his conscious thoughts precariously balanced on the jagged killing edge within his mind. He visualized himself finally indulging his rage while exacting his revenge by hurling the fucker to the grimy floor of the warehouse and pounding his face and body with his fists until blood spurted and ran like fucking tributaries. He vividly imagined taking his knife and running it through
to the dangling part of his lower anatomy, relishing the screams of agony that would undoubtedly echo off the walls. After his barbaric needs were satisfied, Red could just see himself finally taking his gun in his hand and aiming it at the rapist's chest and then--

Growling, he jerked his head up.

God, he couldn't do this!

Not now.

Not when she was curled up in the circle of his arms, needing him.

He clenched his teeth tightly together until his jaw ached from the tension and he buried his nose into her soft hair again, breathing in her scent, grounding himself in her presence as he made the extremely difficult effort to mentally step away from the murderous fury that he so desperately wanted to fully immerse himself in.

The sooner he rid the world of the fucker who had done this to her, the better.

And he would do it today.

Red stroked his fingers through Lizzy's long hair before pressing his hand to the back of her neck, rubbing her there soothingly. The heart-rending keening had subsided enough to where he thought she would be able to hear him now.

He brought his lips down to kiss her brow. Then he asked quietly in her ear, "Are you with me, sweetheart?"

She nodded wordlessly.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she rasped, shaking her head vehemently.

Red had thought as much before he'd asked, but in posing the question to her, he had wanted her to know that when she was ready to talk about it--any of it--he would be there for her.

"What time is it?" Her voice drifted softly through the silence stretching between them.

"It's about three-thirty in the afternoon," he murmured, pulling back slightly to look down into her eyes. Using his thumbs, he gently wiped away the sticky lines her tears had left. "Do you want to stay up for a while?"

"Yeah." She shivered. "I don't... I don't think I could fall asleep right now even if I wanted to," she admitted in a small voice.

Red understood all too well what she meant. "Are you hungry?"

Wrinkling her nose in aversion, she shook her head.

He wouldn't force her to eat--yet. But she would need to consume something relatively substantial soon. "Are you thirsty?"

After thinking it over for a split-second, she nodded.

Seeing that her water glass was empty, Red made move to rise from the bed so he could refill it, but
her fingers remained curled tightly in his shirt.

Her eyes darted to his uneasily.

He reassuringly laid his palms over the backs of her hands. "I need to go refill your glass in the kitchen. You know how I won't let you drink anything but Brita-filtered water when you're here," he smiled, lightening his tone just enough to where he glimpsed an answering smile in her eyes, her tense fingers slowly loosening their hold on him—which had been his intent.

"I'll be right back," he promised before rising carefully from the bed, picking up her glass, then padding out of his bedroom and down the hall to the kitchen.

After he filled her glass with fresh, cool water from the refrigerator, Red leaned over the sink to the bar where he had set down his phone and keys earlier. He grabbed his cell and flicked it open. After typing out three quick messages and sending them all, he leaned back against the counter and waited impatiently for the replies.

He didn't have to wait long.

Baz and Aaron almost immediately texted back, confirming the address where they were holding Grady Forman. Then his phone buzzed a third time and when Red read the message, -I'll be there in twenty,- a satisfied smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth.

"Red?"

Elizabeth's voice echoed hesitantly from down the hall.

"Coming, honey," he called back soothingly.

When he came back into the bedroom, she was propped up against the mound of pillows, her iPod in her hands. Her eyes flickered to him as he set the glass of water down on the nightstand closest to her. "I was thinking...."

He raised a brow in gentle query when she didn't finish. "You were thinking...?"

Lizzy took a couple sips of water before she cleared her throat uncertainly. "I was thinking that listening to music would...um...would help me relax a little bit." She shrugged a shoulder self-consciously as she placed her glass back on the nightstand.

Red smiled encouragingly at her. "If you think it would be beneficial, I can certainly put it on in here for you."

When she handed over her iPod and he saw which artist and album she wanted to listen to, a bittersweet feeling of nostalgia came over him.

"Watermark?" he asked softly.

She nodded, nibbling lightly on her lower lip. "One of my earliest memories is Sam playing that album for me at night. I guess it helped me sleep. It's...it's soothing, Red. Peaceful."

He certainly couldn't disagree with her on that. And although she wouldn't remember, Red had actually been the one to discover this album and had played it for her during the times when she had suffered from the horrific night terrors as a little girl...after the night of the fire...before he had insisted on her memory of that terrible sequence of events being erased from her mind.
Red's jaw worked soundlessly as he hooked up the iPod to the room's sound system. He was glad that Sam had kept this tranquil, ethereal music in her life while she'd been young. It touched him to know that even now it could still help her.

As the wistful and melancholy sounds of the piano swelled within the room, he came over and sat on the edge of the bed beside her.

"Lizzy."

She looked at him as he gathered her hands in his.

"I need to go out for a little while."

Her whole body went rigid.

Red squeezed her fingers, trying his best to ignore the pang of guilt he acutely felt at the awful look she gave him. "I won't be gone long, sweetheart. I have a man coming here soon." Christ, her palms were suddenly so clammy. "A guard," he clarified in soothing, reassuring tones. "Someone I've worked with before. Someone whom I trust implicitly."

She wouldn't look at him.

"While I'm gone, he will stand outside the door to this suite...to protect you."

"I don't know him," she breathed shallowly, fright gleaming in her eyes as she glanced up at him before looking quickly away again.

"But I do," he repeated gently. "Look at me, honey."

Her gaze skittishly darted unwillingly to his.

He caught and held it unwaveringly with his own. "Do you trust me?"

"More than anyone," she whispered.

"Then trust my judgement," he advised quietly. "Trust this man who will keep you safe in my stead."

Lizzy looked nervously down at their intertwined hands as she thought it over.

Red perceived how difficult a challenge this was for her. Considering everything she had gone through, he understood that she certainly wasn't comfortable with the idea of a man who was an absolute stranger to her being in such close proximity when she was alone and utterly vulnerable.

And if she refused the services of the guard, Red knew he would have to stay.

But he gravely hoped she would find and corral her inner strength and allow him this one moment in time to be away from her so he could exact his revenge.

"You won't be gone long, right?" Her soft voice finally threaded through the stillness between them.

"No, baby," he replied just as softly, his pride in her suffusing him. He released one of her hands to caress his fingertips just under her chin, guiding her eyes back to his. "I won't be gone long."

"You promise?"

"I promise."
And Red would make sure he honored his word to her. Trust was a tenuous idea for Lizzy right now...and he would not destroy it.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you always to my betas Daniel and Jami for helping and inspiring me!

Thank you always to my readers for your support :)

The album Lizzy listens to is Enya's Watermark, one of my own personal favorites I grew up with ❤
Red's bruised knuckles ached abominably. He flexed his hands, grimacing as the material of the gloves he wore rubbed stiffly against the raw sores that were now seeping blood.

But he welcomed the pain.

It meant the fucking bastard tied to the chair behind him was experiencing pain that was far worse.

"I'm a violent man," Red crooned, voice ruthlessly cold as he turned back around to meet Grady Forman's swollen, terrified eyes. "A passionate man. I have found I must be both to survive in this life I've chosen for myself."

The rapist strained helplessly against the tight bindings securing him down as Red stalked closer. His yelps of fright were muffled by the reeking, blood-stained gag bound unforgivingly around his mouth.

"Violently passionate. Passionately violent," Red's low voice held an eerie, sing-song note to it that made Baz and Aaron exchange a wary glance from within the shadows along the sidelines. He hovered over the quaking, pathetic excuse of a human being, strong hands balling slowly and calculatingly into fists once more. "I have learned the two must go hand in hand so I can exist in an equilibrium." Otherwise, I'd go mad doing what I must do.

His right fist struck out, lightning quick.

Grady screamed hoarsely, saliva foaming at the corners of his mouth as even more bones in his nose broke, crunching like bits of gravel would when underfoot.

Red's nostrils flared in fierce satisfaction as fresh tears of shock welled and then trailed down the man's grimy, unshaven cheeks, mingling with the rivulets of blood already streaming there.

"Do you know why I'm here?"

Weeping, the rapist jerked his head in denial.

Red threw another malicious punch and the murderer's neck snapped backwards with a loud crack. As he shook his hand out, he idly wondered if something else broke since the fucker was bawling and spasming like some rabid creature.

He savagely hoped so.

"I'm here because you need to be put down," Red snarled into Grady's uncomprehending face. "You rape women. You murder them. You're a butcher. Barbaric."

Another punch--this time, directly in the unprotected, pudgy gut that had already been ravaged.

Another howl of agony.

"Perhaps you think I'm not much better than you," Red remarked softly, almost conversationally. "Considering what I'm doing. Considering what I will do to you when I'm finished extracting all the fucking payments you owe...."
Snot oozed thickly from the hunching bastard's flapping nostrils to dribble onto his mangled crotch.

"...to all the women you've raped and murdered." Red leaned closer, eyes glittering viciously in the gloom of the warehouse. "Especially to the one who got away from you."

Grady blinked slowly, and at last comprehendingly, up at Red. Sparks of anger burned in the depraved depths of his eyes. Despite this fucker's severe, physical misery, he was still able to think clearly enough to loathe the fact that Lizzy had escaped his clutches.

And that infuriated Red all the more.

His vision suddenly swam in a spectrum of sanguine colors and he shoved his face closer to Grady's. As he inhaled the bastard's vile stench, he bared his teeth threateningly. "Yes," he hissed, voice throbbing with his frigid wrath. "Her. The only woman to have escaped your evil. She's why I'm here."

He relished the son of a bitch's stifled scream as he smashed his heel down on top of one of his feet and twisted. The sound of bones and veins and cartilage popping was like a fucking symphony to his ears. His roiling fury within threw back its jaws and howled triumphantly as he sensed his prey becoming weaker with each gasping sob bubbling from beneath the sopping wet gag.

"I may have to stoop to barbaric ways to fully avenge her," Red growled roughly, "but I am not like you. I maim when I must. Kill when I have no other option. You wallow in perversion to satisfy unforgivable urges that are beyond bestial, beyond base."

Red turned away from Grady and glided over to the table nearby, shaking off his right glove as he did so. Weak light filtering in through the warehouse's rafters glinted off the handgun he held up in his swollen and bleeding hand.

"If she hadn't been under my vigilant protection, you would have violated her," Red murmured, tone uneven. Discordant. He gently caressed the weapon's barrel before expertly opening the cylinder, checking to make sure it was loaded. "Slaughtered her."

The glacial maelstrom of rage he'd managed to keep at bay just long enough to exact his revenge from this rapist and killer suddenly and violently swept through him as the too-vivid thought of Lizzy suffering in this fucker's hands flashed in his mind's eye. The furiously relentless storm within spiraled wider to swiftly and passionately encompass his whole being.

"And that is why I must do this."

Red whirled around, death gleaming in his grave eyes.

Three gunshots rang out.

Three sickening thuds sounded as they struck their target.

Grady Forman convulsed once before his head lolled forward limply.

He was dead.

A dreadful silence descended upon the warehouse.

Red slowly lowered his firearm as Baz and Aaron came closer to quickly untie the body from the chair.
He let loose a long, quiet breath that seemed to shudder up and out from the very depths of his tired soul. With each bullet he had fired, his intense rage had been expelled forth from his body and heart, leaving him feeling...drained.

Physically and emotionally numb.

But he couldn't give himself over to that tempting sensation.

He still had a bit more work to do here first.

Before his men could observe that his hand was shaking, he holstered his weapon and quickly set it back down on the table. Then he stripped off his other glove and clenched both in one hand, noticing how they were slick with mucus and blood--his victim's and his own--before tossing them to the floor with the rest of the trash the two guards were gathering to burn.

"Is the original plan still in play?" Baz asked his employer, who was wiping down his face, hands, and forearms with a rag.

Aaron paused in stripping the corpse to listen intently for the answer as Red flung the sweaty cloth down beside the gloves.

Methodically, he began to unbutton his blood-spattered shirt and then shrugged gingerly out of it before he dropped it unceremoniously to the pavement.

"Yes."

His undershirt, dark jeans, tennis shoes, and socks soon followed until all his stinking clothing, save the underwear he wore, lay in a ripe heap.

"I probably don't need to say this," he continued as he haphazardly wrapped his bleeding knuckles in thick gauze before he began to quickly dress himself in the fresh change of clothes he'd brought along, "but be certain that everything--and I mean everything--is in ashes and that the body is properly situated before you phone in your anonymous tip to the Seattle police."

"I still think Kaplan should take care of him," Aaron muttered darkly, jabbing his thumb down at the body. "There are just too many risks doing it your way, Red--"

The older man's fierce snarl of censure cut him off just as Baz disapprovingly shot him a warning look.

Aaron flushed hotly and lowered his eyes, unused to being rebuked for speaking his mind, especially when he had a point! But he should've known.... Where Elizabeth was concerned, Red wouldn't stand for counter-arguments or deviations from his way of doing things.

"She needs mental stability. She needs to know she is safe from him," Red gestured bitterly down at the corpse of her attacker, "forever." Tearing his eyes away from the man he had tortured and murdered, he looked sharply back up at a Baz and Aaron. "She needs to know this fucking son of a bitch is dead," he went on, his biting tone icy. "And since Kaplan would squirrel him away to a place where he would never be found by another living creature, and since I can't very well tell Elizabeth that I'm the one who shot and killed him, the news of his death needs to come to her from the police."

He stamped his feet into a pair of worn leather shoes, the squeaking of the heavy rubber soles against the cement echoing in the silence that had fallen in the wake of his impassioned words. "I know there are risks," Red finally said into the stillness. "Those risks are why I'm reminding you both to be
extremely thorough tonight." His green eyes were piercingly serious, and his hard tone brooked no argument. "This is the way it needs to happen. And as long as you do your part, nothing but reparation will come from what happened here."

Baz respectfully inclined his head in obedience, and, after the briefest of moments, Aaron followed his partner's example.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, Red!

This was originally going to be a longer chapter but I decided to split the events I saw (and still see!) in my mind into two parts.

Thank you, Daniel and Jami, for your help :)

Thank you always for reading, for your kudos, comments, and support ❤
The slight squealing noise that the shower dials made when they were being twisted to on or off woke Elizabeth from a deep, and thankfully dreamless, sleep. To her briefly disoriented surprise, velvet darkness greeted her eyes—it was night.

She had slept the entire afternoon and evening away.

Blinking the fuzzy clouds away from her vision, she carefully turned her aching head to glance across the room at the digital clock on the table. It was only 9:04.

It seemed later than it was.

Her ears picked up the sound of a towel rubbing briskly against bare skin and her eyes flicked immediately toward the bathroom. The heavy wooden door was shut, but Liz could see tendrils of steam reflecting in the faint glow of the light as they escaped into the bedroom from the crack between the panel and the floor.

Before she could even form the question in her slowly awakening mind of who exactly was in there, she heard Red's familiar voice utter a soft, wordless curse—which was then promptly muffled, as if he had suddenly remembered that he needed to be much quieter.

Intense relief from knowing that he was finally home flooded her, leaving her feeling somewhat light-headed. She raised a shaking hand to press it over her closed eyes for a moment while she regathered her composure.

Not that she had feared for her life while he'd been away. No. Nothing so...dramatic.

But...she had been apprehensive.

Uneasy.

And thoroughly ashamed of herself for being so anxious.

It wasn't that she hadn't trusted Red when he'd reassured her that he personally knew the man who would be posted outside the door of the suite. It wasn't that she hadn't believed him when he had promised nothing would happen to her while the man was there.

She had put her faith in Red's word.

And she had known he was only putting someone out there to try and make her feel safe while he was gone.

Protected.

But that man had been a stranger—and still was. She didn't even know what he looked like because she had refused to come out of Red's bedroom, using her exhaustion as an excuse not to meet him when she had heard him arrive.

And while she had been so horribly tired and completely drained from the bouts of restless sleep and the terrifying nightmare she had suffered through, that hadn't been the only reason why she had
refused to meet Red's...acquaintance? Employee? Guard? She frowned, wondering how to categorize him as she slowly sat up to take her Tylenol.

She'd have to ask Red about the man who'd been outside later...when she was strong enough to talk about him.

God, even now, when she was feeling a little more rested, she couldn't even imagine conversing with someone...unfamiliar.

She quickly shied away from that stressful thought.

When the man had arrived, Liz had felt deep down that she should probably make herself known to him. But the whole thing had just been so...awkward.

What would she have said?

*Hi, my name is Liz Scott. You're here because I'm a spineless coward who can't endure being alone for even a couple, measly hours, so Red had to call you down here to stand outside the door to give me the illusion of safety. Sorry, you can't even come inside because....*

Liz squeezed her fingers tightly around the pills.

*Because I can't handle it.* Her mental tone was scathing and she angrily popped the medicine in her mouth and swallowed it down with a swig of water.

Not only had she found the whole situation extremely uncomfortable in that respect, but she also hadn't been able to even fathom *looking* a stranger--especially a man--in the face, much less speaking with him, when she still felt so...vulnerable.

So incredibly fragile in body and in spirit.

Red had known her mind. She had seen the gentle understanding glinting in his eyes as he had left her alone to sleep. That was when her shame, which had been patiently lying in wait for her to acknowledge it again, had quietly and insidiously crept back into her heart.

Liz had keenly felt abashed in knowing that Red had obviously been aware of her need for someone to keep watch over her...despite her vehement unwillingness to lay eyes on the man who had done so. She'd been desperately ashamed to have been so breathlessly relieved that the man, who Red had assured her was an extension of himself, had been right outside so she hadn't had to be completely alone...so she could find some sense of security while Red was gone.

And as she had lain there in her nest of blankets and pillows, humiliation filling her until tears finally pricked her eyes, she had fiercely and mercilessly berated herself for letting that son of a bitch Grady Forman *win* by refusing to get up and staying holed up in this room as if she were some traumatized, wild creature.

*Aren't you, though?* a dark part of her had asked softly, perhaps even a little slyly, as it had smoothly coiled like heavy, oppressive smoke within the inner barriers of her mind, soothing her as well as unsettling her.

Liz had furiously closed her eyes as she had allowed that shrewdly coaxing voice gather her shame in its hazy tendrils and settle it deep within her unnerved and conflicted heart.

But it hadn't been submerged too far down. It had still been there...just within reach.
Waiting for her to turn her conscious thoughts fully to it and acknowledge it again.

And while Liz hadn't been able to violently sweep away her acute feelings of disgrace like she had so desperately wanted to, she had been able to ignore them by sinking into the senseless oblivion sleep afforded.

Hearing Red rummaging quietly around, her eyes flickered again to the bathroom door, impatiently wondering what was taking him so long to come out.

The sudden need to see him with her own eyes was overwhelming.

She couldn't wait a moment longer.

Liz carefully slipped out of bed and ghosted silently over to the closed door. She reached out, hesitantly testing the knob.

It was unlocked.

Soundlessly she pushed the door open.

Red was standing in front of the sink, dressed only in his gray boxer briefs. The hair on his body was still damp from the shower he had taken, and a few water droplets still clung stubbornly to his calves. He had his hands under the faucet's running steam, his face twisted into a snarling grimace.

Liz peered closer as he raised his hands from the bowl of the sink--and her eyes widened in shock.

God, what had he done to them?

She must have involuntarily made a noise. Maybe her breath had caught too loudly in her throat, maybe her hand had slipped on the door, maybe the door itself had creaked when she had leaned against it. Whatever sound she'd made, it had given her presence away.

Red started, his eyes snapping swiftly to where she stood at the threshold.

They both went completely still as they gazed silently at one another. Her expression was one of stunned perplexity--his, guarded caution.

I should have locked the fucking door, Red viciously reproached himself when she finally looked away from him to slip easily between the small space between the edge of the door and its casing.

Why hadn't he?

It was really too late to hide his hands, the tangible proof that he had engaged in merciless and downright brutal violence, but he made the attempt anyway by shoving them back under the spray of the warm water.

Christ, what on Earth would she think?

Would she ask him what had happened?

His eyes glittered warily as he watched her come closer.

Long ago he had promised himself he would never lie outright to her. If she did ask him how he had split open his knuckles, if she did question why his hands were so bruised and painfully swollen, he would have to tell her the truth without actually saying what he had done.
Without uttering aloud the atrocities he had committed for her...to exact her revenge in full.

When Lizzy was close enough to touch him, she extended a hand to brush her fingers against the rolls of fresh gauze and medical tape and the small glass jar of medicated ointment that had all been set on the jet-black marble counter. Then her palm drifted to the crystal knobs on the faucet and she turned them slowly off one at a time.

Red stared down at his dripping hands. Some fresh blood was welling, but most of the sores on his swollen knuckles were beginning to firmly clot and scab over. Then her fingers came back into his line of sight and she took hold of his wrists, bringing them toward her.

He was forced to turn his body, following her wordlessly imperious direction.

Before he could stop her, she had taken one of the small wash towels he had brought out of the ornate cabinet behind them and was gingerly patting his hands dry of water and oozing blood.

He watched her intently as she carefully pressed the cloth over the worst of the sores that stretched over the index and middle knuckles on the back of his right hand. As she held it firmly there to try and stop the bleeding, her sapphire eyes lifted to his.

Red waited for the questions--the demand for answers.

Shockingly, amazingly, they didn't come.

Her expression was unreadable as she searched his face briefly before she looked back down to attend to what she was doing.

Elizabeth had only seen Red like this once before. It had been years ago, when she'd been just a teen, stupidly dating that high school boy.

Her brow creased as she peeled back the towel to see if the bleeding had stopped. Not yet. Perhaps in a few more minutes. She replaced the corner of the soft cloth and reapplied pressure to a slightly different point of the wound. She heard Red's soft intake of breath--he was uncomfortable. To ease him, she lightened her touch...but not by much.

She knew enough about cuts and scrapes to keep compression on the deepest parts of them to stop the blood flow so that the bandaging could be applied without much seep-through.

Similar wounds had decorated his hands in painful blotches that night too--the night he had hunted Derek down and had...roughed him up. She hadn't asked Red to do it, but she had known his intent that night. When he had traced the skin just above the burns on her breast, she had felt the cold rage whirling within him and his acute desire to unleash it.

And when she had met his eyes.... God, she could still remember how they had flared with an icy, ruthless wildfire--something that she had never seen burning in them before.

It had unnerved her, but it hadn't frightened her.

She had waited up for him that night. And when she had approached him out by the creek beneath the vibrant flow of the Milky Way, he'd had the same look on his face that he had right now--the intense visage of a wild predator that had viciously engaged in a clashing physical and mental fight and had emerged injured in both those areas, but victorious.

And just like when she had observed his glacial rage and hadn't been afraid, she now unabashedly studied his primal savagery smoldering just beneath the surface with a calm, rational regard, and she
still wasn’t fearful.

There was only one reason why he would have left her today and had come back with ravaged hands and barely concealed ferocity.

And that reason, she deeply suspected, was no longer breathing.

....Was no longer a threat.

Instantly her blood roared fervently through her veins, her heart suddenly pounding with rampant satisfaction as her own, wild darkness within let loose a long, shuddering and rapturous howl.

The savagery lurking within Red immediately threw itself against the barriers of civil humanity he had erected within himself, powerfully straining toward her, for it had recognized the ferocity gleaming in her eyes. Acknowledged it. Desired it.

Desired her.

He clenched his teeth tightly together as he reined it all forcibly back.

Had she given him such a startling look because she suspected what he had done?

He regarded her in a gravely thoughtful silence as her trembling hands discarded the bloody towel and began to very gently apply the salve to his wounds.

Red couldn’t quite stop a hiss from escaping passed his lips as the cold cream touched and soaked into the tender, scabbing sores. She quickly glanced up at the sound before returning her full attention to her careful ministrations. Her touch was as gentle as she could possibly make it, he knew, so he once again pressed his lips together and bore the discomfort without another sound.

In all honesty, he should be the one tending to his own injuries, not her.

She should be in bed resting, if not sleeping.

Just as importantly, she shouldn’t have anything more to do with that fucking rapist and murderer. His hands, even though they’d been encased in gloves, had technically touched that foul bastard. The depraved criminal had corrupted his flesh, and she shouldn't be laying fingers on his filth.

Red resolutely began to withdraw his hands from beneath her touch but she swiftly pressed her fingertips to the pulse points at his wrists, stilling his movements.

Their eyes met again.

Her own flashed with defiance.

The fire in her gaze was so heartrendingly familiar--this glimpse of his confident and mercurial, darling girl--that he wanted to do anything he could to keep her with him, even if it was just for a few more, brief moments. And if tending to his physical needs made her feel a little like her old, assured self, he would give her that.

As Elizabeth lifted her chin slightly, she observed that Red’s expression was warming, his hands relaxing once again in her grip. Flushing, both pleased and a little embarrassed that she had won that very brief battle of wills, she began to wrap his knuckles in the thick gauze he had laid out on the counter.

Maybe he had just momentarily forgotten that she knew how wrap hands, and wrap them well. He
himself had taught her years ago, during her self-defense lessons.

If only she had remembered the most important moves he'd taught her when it had been so incredibly crucial for her to do so!

The caustic and unforgiving thought came out of nowhere, slamming into her mind and heart, leaving her feeling wretched.

Almost immediately that emotion grew and expanded to include a threading vein of remorse as her eyes trailed from his bandaged knuckles up his arms.

Those scratches there.... She studied them. Those didn't look to have been given to him by....

She shuddered.

Reaching out swiftly behind her, she scooped another glob of the ointment onto her fingers and began running the creamy stuff up his right forearm.

Those wounds were from her fingernails.

*She* had scratched him.

She must have done it when she'd been helplessly lost in that horrendous night terror.

Folding her lower lip guiltily between her teeth, Liz soothingly--apologetically--rubbed the salve into those red gashes. Some were shallow. But the ones that were etched into the more fragile skin on the inside of his forearms definitely ran deeper than the others. These must have bled.

God, he should have said something!

But what could he have said? He most likely hadn't wanted to make her feel the remorse that had now come over her.

Scowling slightly, she twisted her lithe body around to smear more ointment on her fingers.

Red's eyes caressed over her as he watched her move, as she stepped a little closer to trace her fingers up the inside of his left arm, gently massaging more medicine into the particularly deep scratches.

As one of her palms shifted to support the back of his arm, her soft touch moving up and down, he couldn't help but notice how tender she was...and how very aware he was becoming of the heat of her body...how it was radiating through the thin material of the shirt, how the fingertips of his hand brushed achingly close to the warm tip of her breast. If he pitched forward just a little, the heavy swell would undoubtedly fill his palm.

If this situation they found themselves in had come about during any other time, he would have done it, would have squeezed her gently there through the slightly sheer fabric of the shirt, would have teased that firm, dark nipple with his thumb, pleasuring her....

His cock twitched.

Red took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, wrestling with his sudden and aching desire to show his love for her in such a physically intimate way.

She wasn't ready. He knew that.
And he certainly would not push her.

So he contented himself with standing close enough to inhale her clean scent. He took pleasure in gazing admiringly at her, in catching glimpses of her lightly bobbing breasts down the V of the shirt, in seeing the way the material tugged around the slight mound of her nether regions, in watching how the black cotton of her panties poked out from beneath the hem as she raised her arms slightly to move her hands further up his bare skin...in feeling her fingers lightly caressing while she spread the salve around.

Red felt his flesh stiffen, lengthening.

Sighing almost in resignation, he shifted slightly. The heavy weight of his obvious erection stretching his drawers finally drew her eyes down.

He saw them widen in--surprise? Shock? Thankfully not revulsion. The fucker hadn't scarred her so deeply that he'd made her fear his body.

But her fingers grew still and he observed heat rise in her neck to flood her cheeks with ruddy color. And it wasn't the charming blush that tended to accompany her desire. This was a flush brought on from nervous anxiety.

He needed to soothe it away, and quickly.

"Lizzy," he murmured.

Her beautiful eyes darted uncertainly up into his.

"I know you're not ready for intimacy," he told her gently. "And I promise you that I'm not pushing you into it. This," he gestured down at the hard bulge, "is just my body reacting to my enjoyment of your touch." He gave her a small, hopefully reassuring smile. "That's all."

She searched his face silently for a moment before dropping her gaze to his bandaged hands. He could tell from the quietly grateful light in her large, expressive eyes that his honest and straightforward words had alleviated some of her unease.

But...he could still sense she was embarrassed. Not because of his arousal, which was now fading, but because of something else...something she was feeling about herself.

Red wouldn't be able to help her with that. Not unless she opened up to him. And he could read her well enough to know that now was not the right time.

But when she was ready....

He reached out and gently touched his fingertips to her hair, tucking a lock behind her ear.

He would be there to help her.

Taking her small palms in his, he gave them a soft squeeze. "Thank you for helping me with my hands, Lizzy."

A faint smile touched his lips as he felt her squeeze his fingers back while whispering, "You're welcome."

Together, they cleared the counter of the unused gauze and medical tape. She put the salve away in the medicine cabinet while he wrapped the bloody hand towel in on itself and placed it in the
The remaining steam wafted out of the bathroom when Red pulled the door open the rest of the way. He solicitously gestured for her to precede him into the bedroom and she was about to pass him...when she paused.

Elizabeth lifted her eyes directly to his. "Did you kill him?"

Her quiet, dark voice was strong.

He regarded her silently, schooling his expression to something inscrutable, opaque.

Intuitively, he knew he shouldn't be quite so taken aback by this question. Really, hadn't he known it was coming since she had slipped into the bathroom? Hadn't his suspicion that it was looming between them been confirmed when she had given him that piercingly indescribable look earlier?

He wouldn't affirm what he had done. He couldn't.

But he also wouldn't lie to her.

"Come on, sweetheart," he finally murmured. "It's been a long day. Let's go to bed."

Her sapphire eyes gleamed fiercely up into his for another moment before she lowered them to walk passed him into the bedroom.

Perhaps she suspected. If she did, then it was very likely she was angry with him for not directly verifying that the suspicions she harbored were true.

But later, as she turned to him in the dark, curling herself into the protective shelter of his arms, he knew that despite his pointed evasiveness, despite the justice he had exacted that was an unforgivable crime in the eyes of the law, he hadn't lost her trust.

His soul was already damned. What was one more piece of himself lost with another life he'd had to take? He would engage in that violence over and over again if unleashing such savagery kept her safe from harm. The fact that she suspected what he had done and still turned to him in surety was an unexpected gift that he wouldn't squander.
I don't tend to like switching narrators in a chapter...jumping between Lizzy’s mind and Red's can be difficult and jarring to me. But for this particular chapter, there wasn't any other way to get what I wanted to convey across...so I had to play leap frog a bit. I tried to make the transitions as smooth as possible :)
Thank you always for your kudos, comments, and support! ❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use without my permission. Thank you!
Red grimaced as the alcohol he had just thrown back sloshed against the ragged irritation on the inside of his cheek. Christ, how it burned! Wincing, he ran the tip of his tongue along the puffed flesh, trying to soothe it.

He'd bitten it hard last night, either when he'd been restlessly dreaming or when he'd started awake hearing Elizabeth's violent, gasping sobs.

Or it had been when her hand had accidentally struck his cheek in her haste to get closer to him, the fragile skin probably catching on his teeth as she'd shakily wrapped her arms around his neck, clutching him tightly in distress as he'd murmured gently in her ear and had rubbed her back, attempting to console her with both his voice and touch.

Sucking lightly on the tender side of mouth, he glanced toward the darkened hallway that led to the silent bedroom. She was still peacefully asleep, and had been for the last couple hours.

He hoped to God she would remain so for the rest of the night...but the pragmatic part of his mind knew better.

And how he wished he could join her there in bed...curl himself lightly around her and lose himself in oblivion while she slept.

But his thoughts wouldn't shut down. They were like high-strung, restive creatures, sometimes galloping headlong around and around in his mind, and, at other times, dashing nimbly to and fro, leaping willfully from one topic to another.

The last few days had blended into a seemingly timeless stream of moments...moments of working as quickly as possible by phone when Lizzy managed to fall into a dreamless sleep, of comforting her when she jolted awake to escape the night terrors that stealthily invaded her mind more often than not, of coaxing her to eat even when she stubbornly insisted she wasn't hungry, of encouraging her to soak in a relaxing bath every evening, of wiping the sometimes loud, sometimes silent, tears from beneath her troubled eyes.

He hadn't seen such varying expressions of anxiety and fright in her gaze since the night of the fire--since those disastrous, dark hours in December when her lethal actions, as well as the destructive decisions of others, had obliterated the stable life she had known and had shattered her innocence.

Red desperately hoped that this horrible onslaught of nightmares wouldn't stir the demons violently born from that night slumbering deep down in her subconscious like they had awakened his.

He was already prone to not sleeping well. But having the memories of that dreadful night dragged to the forefront of his consciousness by her cries, her whimpers, her tears...by her numb and shaken expression.... God. There were times when he wasn't sure if he held the child or the young woman in his arms, so similar was the trauma she was now suffering from to the one she had succumbed to then...before he had stolen her memories.

Of course, remembering what he'd subjected her to then, when she'd been four years old, as well as continuously seeing the vulnerable, round-faced little girl shivering despondently in her sharply slender, matured features roused the merciless guilt for the part he'd played in her earliest years.
Those intensely strong and familiar feelings of self-condemnation agitated the ghosts of the past to where they ruthlessly harassed him.

All of this—on top of the fury and remorse he felt for not being there to prevent Forman's attack on Lizzy's person...on her sensitive soul...and his enduring concern for her and the traumatized state of her mind relentlessly plagued him to the point to where he was emotionally strung out.

Exhausted physically and mentally.

But sleep continued to doggedly elude him.

And so here he was, grimly nursing a drink alone in the shadows in the middle of the night, with only one lamp glowing beside him. The warm, somewhat comforting light just barely bursted over him...tricking him into thinking that he wasn't existing in complete and utter soul-darkness.

Something akin to a self-deprecating smile twitched at the corners of his mouth and he shook his head slightly at himself, aggravated.

Some things never changed.

If he couldn't sleep, then he needed to turn his mind to productivity rather than drink to dull the pain that stewing upon the two pasts he certainly couldn't change inflicted upon him.

He needed to gravely consider how to continue to help Lizzy move forward through her emotional upheaval.

His eyes lifted to the dark fireplace and then to the bookshelves lining the wall on either side of it across from him. Perhaps he would read. He'd heard once, when he'd been a young man attending the university, that Winston Churchill had read a book every night. Even during the Blitz. According to the stories, Churchill had said that reading so voraciously had made him think better.

The man had undoubtedly touched on a brilliant, universal truth.

Red set his glass down on the table and was about to rise from the sofa to peruse his impressive collection when he heard a soft, hesitant shuffling of bare feet against the area rug off to his left.

Without a word he extended his hand in an invitation for her to join him on the sofa.

Within moments Lizzy was tucked under his arm and against his side, knees resting on his thighs, her head a gentle weight against his shoulder as she cuddled up to him as closely as she could, seeking serenity and safety from the lingering, sticky tendrils of the nightmare that had just tormented her.

"You dreamed again, honey?" he asked gently, stroking the small of her back. He already knew the answer—her pinched expression and bloodshot eyes had revealed the truth before she had hid her face from him.

She hesitated, and he sensed that she was considering lying to him, if only to attempt to recover a shred of her own pride.

He was actually a bit heartened to perceive that she wanted to evade the truth. She knew that he certainly didn't hold any judgement against her for reacting to the night terrors that plagued her. But if she could feel her dignity smarting, it meant a bit of her old fire was beginning to flare within her again.

He did hope, though, that she wouldn't lie to him.
"Yeah," came her resigned whisper.

*That's my sweet girl...*

Red exhaled slowly, tightening his hold on her as he felt her ashamedly hunch into herself. "It's okay that you came out here with me, sweetheart," he reassured her softly. "I'm sorry that I wasn't with you when you woke."

It pained him to feel her shrug a shoulder in embarrassment and feigned nonchalance. "I'm okay, Red."

No, she wasn't. But he spanned his hand over her hipbone to give her an encouraging squeeze.

"What are you drinking?" she asked, pointing a pale finger at the glass half-full on the coffee table in front of them.

"Single malt Scotch."

"Can I have a sip?"

Red hesitated. He didn't want to encourage her to form the habit of drinking to drown her emotions, whether they took the forms of anxiety, sorrow, or fear. He had cultivated the addiction to use spirits to suppress emotional pains when he'd been younger and had never been able to break it.

Obviously.

It was a dreadful habit to excite and the very last thing he wanted in all the world was for her to become more like him.

As if aware of his train of thought, for he had lectured her on the dangers of emotional drinking one too many times before, she said quietly, "Just a sip, Red. I just want a little bit to shake the...the icky feeling. That's all. I promise." Her honest and slightly tremulous voice beseeched him.

Red sighed at that. She knew all too well how to appeal to his sympathetic side.

*Damn.*

Jaw working soundlessly, he shifted to lift the glass off of the table. Lizzy sat up a little straighter and glanced at him as he reluctantly handed it over.

"Not too much now," he warned. "You haven't eaten in the last six hours. I don't want you to get sick."

"I'm not going to get drunk on a sip," she grumbled before raising the glass to her lips.

Her tone had just enough asperity in it that he gave her a stern look.

"I know," he growled lightly, watching intently as she lowered her eyes to the amber liquid, tossing a bit back. "But this particular brand packs quite a punch," he explained over her sudden, gasping cough.

"Shit," she wheezed, nose wrinkling in distaste. "This stuff could melt your teeth!"

But instead of thrusting it back at him in disgust, she took another, more careful drink. She swished the alcohol around in her mouth, watering eyes darting defiantly to his as she finally swallowed.
He gazed at her, his expression tenderly amused.

Grimacing, she handed it back to him. "It's gross."

"You're the one who wanted to try it," he teased gently, taking a healthy swig himself--and ignoring the stinging sensation on the inside of his cheek--before resting his arm on the edge of the sofa, his right hand lightly cradling the glass while his left settled back down against her hip.

Her indignant huff brought a smile to his lips as she snuggled up to him once more.

Once she was settled comfortably, it was his turn to relax back into the plush cushions of the sofa. Her calm, even breathing, the sound of it, the feel of it, was soothing. Her long hair, which she had tied back into a loose braid, was soft against the skin of his arm. He gazed down at her smooth, bare legs and resisted the temptation to run his hand over them--not with the intent to arouse her, just to enjoy the sensation of touching her with affection. But he didn't want any misunderstandings to crop up between them, so he kept his fingers draped over her side. As his thumb lightly rubbed back and forth against her hip, he could feel the elastic of the tiny pajama shorts she wore...and the jutting bone just beneath.

He frowned, coming out of his somewhat detached musings, and purposefully moved his fingers gently around the area. He could feel too many bones.

Lizzy had always been a slight girl. But now she was bordering on becoming too thin. Her weakened physical state reflected the state of her hurting and unsettled mind. Red knew that and reminded himself to be patient.

Her healing would take time.

But he vowed that starting tomorrow, he would encourage her to begin stretching. He hoped it would eventually prod her forgotten interest in yoga. Perhaps once she wasn't as sore, she would rediscover her enjoyment of it, especially if she would already be working on limbering up her body. He also promised himself that he would set more food out in front of her during mealtimes. Not too much. Her system had grown used to consuming less food over the last five days and he didn't want her stomach to rebel. But soup, crackers, and the occasional pieces of bread just weren't enough anymore. She needed to start eating foods of more substance.

Since the health of mind and body went hand in hand, perhaps if she began to improve the state of her body, those efforts would pave the way for her mind to follow.

"Red?"

Her quiet voice brought him out of his winding thoughts. "Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can." But Red braced himself, his mind already shrewdly whirling with what he could say if she asked him once more about his role in the fate of Grady Forman.

She had only confronted him the night he'd come home with bloodied hands and an exhausted heart...and she hadn't brought it up to him since.

Not even when she had received the news of the rapist's death from the FBI.

The only sign that Red had observed that had betrayed her suspicions was when her shuttered eyes had pierced his for the briefest of moments when she had been on the phone. After seeing that look,
Red had expected her to pointedly ask him again if he had killed Forman once she'd hung up, but she hadn't.

"He's dead," was all she had said in a low, distant voice, her eyes glittering peculiarly.

Then she had turned away from him and to rinse her dishes from lunch, falling instantly back into her normal, daily routine as if she hadn't just answered her phone for the first time in days, as if she hadn't just heard that the man who had tried to violate and murder her had been found dead somewhere in the grand city of Seattle.

But Red hadn't been fooled by her impassive demeanor. He could sense the severely potent emotions roiling just beneath the surface--barely hidden by the veil of dispassion she'd drawn over her gaze.

A part of him had wanted to ask her if she'd needed to talk about it, but then that would have meant inviting the damning question to be voiced.

Viciously berating himself for his cowardice, he had instead come to stand close at her side and had wordlessly stilled her bustling movements by placing a hand over hers that had been washing the soup bowl. The bubbles from the Dawn soap had squished between their fingers as he had lowered the dish to set it carefully down in the sink. The scrubber she'd been using clinked against the porcelain as it had joined the bowl.

Cold water had streamed over their clasped hands. She had stared silently down at them, and he had gazed down at her profile, all kinds of sentiments dancing on the tip of his tongue, but none had been uttered.

Finally Elizabeth had turned her head to look at him. The veil of her reserve had slipped slightly and he had glimpsed overwhelming relief--and fierce satisfaction?--warring with shame and fury...both of which had been directed within.

At herself.

Cold rage had abruptly suffused him at that and he had bared his teeth angrily. "He deserved to die." His voice had been harshly guttural in his sudden need to banish the needless guilt he had seen in her. "He was a butcher, Lizzy. Barbaric. You have every right to feel relieved. You have every right to take pleasure in knowing that he is dead and can never harm you again."

She had stared up at him with huge eyes, stunned speechless for a long moment.

Perhaps she had been shocked by the vehemence of his low snarl. His fury--born from his desire to protect her from the shame she shouldn't have felt--had slowly retreated as they had regarded one another in heavy silence.

Had she been so taken aback because of his startling words? Or because he had dared to say aloud what she had already felt deep within her heart?

A sudden ferocity had briefly flashed in those sapphire depths before she had lowered them. "He can still hurt me," she had finally whispered.

It hadn't been the whimper of a beaten creature, or an admittance of defeat. It had been a statement of fact, and one she had made to completely avoid the topic he had brought to the fore.

Her ability to savagely revel in Forman's physical death had obviously still been too painful for her to address directly, even to herself.
Knowing her as well as he did, Red could only assume why. But she would talk to him and most likely confirm his thoughts when she was ready. He couldn't—and wouldn't—force her to confide in him before that time.

Perhaps now she wanted to speak of it at last.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked softly.

Startled, he glanced down at the top of her dark head. That certainly wasn't what he'd been expecting.

"Do you?" he returned cautiously. He'd thought he'd known the answer to that—once. But now, in her asking the question in such a gravely somber way....

He could feel her scowl. Then she lifted her face to meet his eyes. "I asked you first."

Her voice wasn't childish, or petulant. It was quiet. Solid. It complimented the determined set of her jaw beautifully. Red knew what this particular look meant: she was looking for nothing less than honesty from him.

And he had promised himself that he would always tell her the truth.

Looking away, he took a drink. Then he lowered the glass back to the arm of the sofa, tapping the rim of it pensively. "I believe there's something greater than us. Call it fate, call it the divine, call it God...." He met her eyes again. "I believe it exists."

"How?" Her eyes were troubled.

He cocked his head slightly in question.

Her nostrils flared impatiently. "How can you believe it? When there's so much darkness...so much evil in the world. How?" Beneath her irritated confusion implored a hurt and grieving soul whose entire world had been so shaken to its core that she was searching desperately for answers so she could make sense of what had happened to her.

*Christ.*

He had to tread so carefully now. So very carefully.

"Don't you believe in it? You used to," he murmured softly, trying to grasp a sense of where she stood on this deeply philosophical topic now that she was older.

Sam hadn't been an overtly religious man. More...privately spiritual, like himself. Sam had sent Lizzy to their small town's local Sunday School a few times during her early childhood. He hadn't gone to the church himself, finding the hypocrisy of organized religion too much to stomach, but he hadn't seen the harm in sending his little girl to the children's classes. He'd really done it as part of her socialization and integration into the Nebraskan country lifestyle—and if she learned lessons in morality in addition to making friends and learning how to participate in group activities and games, then all the better for her.

But those trips had come to an abrupt end when she'd dashed down the church's steps one Sunday afternoon and had thrown herself into Sam's waiting arms, weeping disconsolately and gasping out between heartrending sobs that she'd been told she was going to go to Hell since she had never been Baptized. Sam had told Red over the phone later that he'd felt himself go white with rage and in that instant sworn never to send Lizzy back there ever again.
And he hadn't.

So Sam had been the one to teach her her childhood prayers and explain right from wrong using a blend of his own experience, beliefs, and variations on the morality taught in religious texts and essays by enlightened authors, both classical and modern. Not that Sam had pretended he had known all the answers to everything. In fact, he had imparted to Lizzy long ago how dangerous a trap it was for a person to delude himself into thinking he arrogantly knew all.

Elizabeth shrugged a shoulder, unwilling to commit to an answer. Her mien was intent as she continued to stare expectantly at him.

He wouldn't push her. "I don't have all the concrete answers you want, honey."

"I know. I just...." She paused, the fierceness in her eyes easing into a more thoughtfully searching expression, and he wondered if she were thinking just how much he'd sounded like Sam just then. "I want to know what you think."

Red lifted his glass to his lips again and sipped, more to buy himself some time to come up with the right words than because he wanted to drink. "You want to know why I think evil exists in the world? Why I think God allows it to spread, like a grievous infection?"

She bit her lower lip and nodded slowly.

"I don't think He allows it so much as He has given us the ability to choose it." He met her eyes.

"Free will, Lizzy."

"But...." Her brows knit together uncertainly. "Why would He want to give us that choice when--when people can choose to be evil?"

"If we weren't able to choose, then how would we be free?" he asked gently. "Living would be meaningless if all we were were puppets being yanked this way and that, being told how to feel, what to do and when to do it--and we'd do it unquestioningly. We'd be slaves. Benevolent slaves, sure, and incapable of evil. But slaves all the same."

She frowned, considering what he'd said. "We'd be existing, not living."

A slight smile touched his lips at that. "Exactly my thought as well."

Her eyes flickered to his.

"Free will makes evil possible." Red observed her expression darken with the memory of what she had suffered through at the hands of that monster. "But," he added quickly, desiring to lift the threatening fog of depression from her, "it makes good possible too. It makes all good things in our lives...joy, love...." he lifted his hand from her hip and caressed her cheek, "....worth having."

She leaned into his touch. "Worth having?"

"Mmm. Think back to when you were a little girl--and in trouble."

A small, teasing grin tugged at his mouth as she wrinkled her nose at him.

Then his expression and voice slowly became quietly serious again. "Think about the times when you apologized to Sam."

Her own expression grew reflective.
"Which apologies meant more to the both of you: the ones that he forced you to say, or the ones that you willingly gave?"

By the light glinting in her eyes, he could see she understood what he was getting at. "The ones I gave him."

"Right." He stroked a few stubbornly wayward tendrils of hair back into the thick braid hanging over her shoulder. "If you were told to love me, would the emotion mean as much to either of us?"

She shook her head. "Because then I wouldn't have chosen to love you myself. But--I do love you, Red." Her tone was earnest.

"I know, Lizzy. And I you," he reassured her with a smile. "It was just an example. But do you see what I'm getting at?"

"So God..." she hesitated, studying her clasped hands in her lap. "You think He created the possibility for evil. And our choices, as people who have free will.... Well, if we make bad choices, we create evil?"

"Mmm."

"Do you think some people are born evil, Red?"

He knew she was specifically thinking of Forman. "I think," he said carefully, "that people are born with inherent behaviors. And that certain behaviors are triggered as they move through life. Some are good. Some are bad."

Lizzy looked at him, and he could almost see her pushing the agonizing memory of Forman away from herself. "It came up in Psychology a lot. Last semester, I mean. The nature versus nurture debate."

"And what are your thoughts on it, sweetheart?"

"I think I kind of lean towards what you believe. It makes sense." She hitched a shoulder. "And there has been a lot of scientific research published that supports the two going hand in hand."

As she spoke, Red could see a glimmer of her old passion for school and the subjects she studied resurfacing. To encourage it to grow brighter, he asked, "If you have bookmarked any of those articles on your laptop, could I read them?" Chances were that he'd probably read a few--if not all--of them before, especially if their time of publication predated her birth by some years. But if reading, studying, and contemplating the debates within the psychological sphere would bring her out of her shell, he would do anything he could to aid in that.

"Sure." She gave him her best unsure-but-game smile, and his heart twisted a little in his chest. God, he loved that smile. He hadn't seen it in a long while.

Too long.

Leaning forward, he dropped a light kiss on her brow. "Thank you."

Their eyes met as he pulled back to gaze down at her and he felt one of her hands move to grip his shirt. The sharp look in her eyes was...peculiar. Puzzled, he tilted his head slightly in unvoiced question.

"You can kiss me, you know."
Before he could school his face to immobility, a brow rose in surprise at her half-resentful, half-longing tone of voice.

"I'm not broken," she added unsteadily, defiantly.

"No one said you are, honey," he replied gently, running a hand down her back. No one except, perhaps, herself. "I certainly don't believe that."

"Then why...." her voice trailed off and she flushed, both embarrassed and obviously upset.

"Why haven't I kissed you?"

Her jaw clenched and her cheeks burned with an even deeper, ruddier color as she shot him a fierce glance. But beneath her pique he could sense the insecurity she deeply felt in herself. God, he hoped that she didn't think she wasn't desirable!

"I didn't want you to feel pressured, sweetheart," he explained softly.

His words mollified her somewhat. "I..." She cleared her throat uncomfortably, attempting to sound poised. His sweet, brave girl. "I appreciate that. But....kissing's okay."

He set his empty glass down on the table. Then he caught her nervously shifting eyes and held them as he pressed a large, warm hand to the small of her back. The other that had held the drink settled on the cushion just under her legs as he turned his body toward her. Her tee had ridden up her spine and he could feel her skin beneath his fingertips. Unable to quite keep his fingers from rubbing her there, he inclined his head, lips first seeking and then brushing against hers softly, delicately.

Achingly familiar, silvery heat blossomed between them. It was incredible how such an innocent kiss could quicken his body. And when her lips parted invitingly, drawing him in further, he felt desire thrum deliciously through his veins. It was a heady sensation, and for a short time he lost himself in its vibrant current.

When Lizzy finally pulled back, her vulnerable gaze hazy with slightly reawakened sensuality, he cupped her face in his palms and smiled tenderly at her. "Beautiful girl."

She blushed, pleased.

Slowly he let his hands fall, one settling back on her hip, the other draping over those smooth knees of hers. "Since we both will probably be up for a while longer, will you join me in the kitchen for a midnight snack?"

Red watched as she thought it over for a moment before reluctantly agreeing. At least she had acquiesced. He was proud of her, and not just for that, but for the other difficult hurdles she'd challenged tonight. He let his regard for her show through in his smile, in his eyes.

Elizabeth had such strength in her. As the days wore on she would gather it, little by little, like she did tonight, and she would get through this.

Chapter End Notes

I really took my time with this chapter. It was an important one.
I hope you enjoyed it :)

Thank you for reading!
You idiot, Elizabeth thought scathingly to herself as she stared angrily down into the kitchen’s trashcan...at the dark pink watermelon chunks sliding down the crisp lettuce leaves and tender shredded chicken pieces to pool in a crevice of raw nuts and other garbage made by the weight of the slick watermelon's shell.

While she'd been asleep in the morning, Red had prepared all of this food for her before he had left for his business meetings. True to his routine of the last four days, he had left it all in the refrigerator in various glass containers. Each bowl or jar had a slip of paper taped to the front with a time written on it to remind her when she should eat whatever resided within.

He'd watched her as a keen-eyed hawk scrutinizes its young—or prey—over the last few days to make sure she had eaten everything, and on schedule. Today was the first day that he wasn't hovering over her, regarding her with those sharply observant eyes of his, verifying that she ate every bite of food he set out in front of her.

So she had defiantly taken advantage of his absence by listening to the slithering voice coiled treacherously inside of her that slyly reminded her of how her body had failed her when she had needed it most.

Shame flooded her as the memory of how Forman's heavy weight had pinned her down on the wet, cold cement, shutting out the air from her crushed and burning lungs, rendering her completely helpless. She remembered how his sordid hands had held her in a vice-like grip...and how much he had hurt her as she had struggled to escape him.

Sure, she had scratched him, had clawed at him like she'd been a wild animal, possessed by some howling, primal instinct that had been triggered and brought immediately to the surface of her conscious mind by her desperate will to survive.

But all he had done was laugh in vicious amusement and had then balled his hand into a mean fist and had punched the side of her head, the agonizing blow causing stars to explode behind her eyelids, causing her brain and body to shut down even more...until she had been lost in oblivion.

Liz shuddered, mentally shoving those vividly insidious flashes of memory aside and instead refocused her eyes on what she had just done. Her stomach growled lowly, insistently, at the sight. You ungrateful chit. She bared her teeth in a silent, disappointed snarl at herself—and down at the food she'd tossed away.

Intellectually, she knew that Red was trying to help her rebuild her body's strength by giving her fruits, vegetables, and proteins that were easy to stomach.

Intellectually, she knew she should eat.

But...she didn't deserve it. Her body didn't deserve the nourishment. It had betrayed her!

You're letting Forman win if you persist in this ridiculous hunger strike, the rational part of her mind whispered in disgust.

Forman's dead, she thought back at herself savagely. He can't "win"--and he has nothing to do with...
Doesn't he? that calculating voice deep within asked her shrewdly.

Liz shook her head fiercely at herself in denial and hastily grabbed the newspapers off of the counter. Red had already thumbed through and read them so they wouldn't be missed. Why the man didn't just use the Internet, or television, to check the news...she didn't understand. But his old fashioned ways came in handy sometimes--like now.

Swiftly--guiltily--she shoved the newspapers down on top of the food to hide the evidence of what she had done. Then she gathered all the glass containers together and placed them in the sink.

Trying to ignore the fuzzy, achy feeling in her head that had been steadily growing all day, she glanced up at the clock. Four-thirty. She should've made this decision to not eat much earlier instead of waverind indecisively for so long. Red could come home any second and wonder--no, he would just flat out ask her why she was doing all the dishes now when it was her normal behavior to clean up after each meal. Turning on the faucet, she began to hurriedly wash out each container before placing them all in the dishwasher.

She had just shut its stainless steel door with a click when she heard the key turn in the lock to the front door. Heart pounding, Liz rushed to the suede sofa in front of the television and plopped down on it. She scrabbled for the remote, a magazine, a book--anything--ah, the remote!

The television flicked on just as Red walked across the threshold.

"Hi, Red," Liz called over her shoulder, and she winced at how shrill and breathless--and guilty--her voice sounded.

She heard him approach her from behind and felt him press a kiss to the top of her head. "Sorry I'm late," he murmured in her ear.

"You're late?" she asked, curious despite herself, craning her head back to look up at him.

"Well, I'd wanted to be home sooner," he smiled down at her, lifting a hand to stroke the backs of his fingers down her cheek, down her exposed throat, stopping to hover just above her heart. Her toes curled in anticipation as he lowered his lips to hers.

The kiss was languid, deep. His mouth was soft, and yet as it artfully caught and released hers slowly over and over again, she could feel the strength he kept in check behind his languorous sensuality. She shivered as his warm fingertips trailed back up the line of her throat to lightly cup her chin. He tasted like wintergreen mints and she idly wondered if he'd popped a few in the elevator in preparation for this moment. As the tip of his tongue gently caressed hers, she could feel the amorous stirrings of passion heating her blood.

It was a passion she missed and yearned for...but she wasn't quite ready to thrust herself back into it yet.

In reaction to that thought, her body stiffened slightly. But before she could pull away, Red considerately lifted his head to gaze knowingly down at her. His tender expression was so full of understanding that she had to look away self-consciously.

God, she didn't deserve his compassion, especially after throwing the meals and snacks he'd prepared for her away.

"How was your day?" she asked him after a beat of guilty silence.
"Extremely busy." Unaware of the conflict whirling within her, he shrugged out of his jacket with a sigh and laid it over the back of the sofa. "I'm very grateful it's over and done with."

Red's tone was so adamant that she glanced back up at him sharply. He did look tired. By the way his eyes began to pointedly search her face, and as a line she'd come to recognize as concern creased between his thick brows, she knew she probably looked the same, if not worse. The horrible, purple and black bruise on the left side of her face had faded to a mottled, sickly yellow color, and there were still dark circles shadowed under her eyes from continuous nights of fretful sleep. On top of that, she felt rather weak from not eating.

God, she hoped he wouldn't be able to tell.

"Did you do your stretches today?" he finally asked once he was done carefully inspecting her.

"Yes."

"Mmm. Did you eat?"

She met his eyes directly. "Yeah," she lied.

A brow rose at her defensive tone.

*Shit. Subtlety, Liz. Subtlety,* she cautioned herself. "If you don't believe me, check the dishwasher," she huffed lightly, looking away toward the television with a forced calmness she certainly didn't feel.

She was aware of him regarding her closely for a brief moment before he let out a breath, stroking a hand down the heavy fall of her hair. "I'm going to go change. I'll be right back."

"Okay."

Once the sound of his footsteps faded down the hall, Liz released a nervous sigh she hadn't known she'd been holding in. For a moment there she had really thought he'd check the freaking dishwasher.

She frowned, rubbing the sides of her pulsating temples in slow, even circles. Her headache was growing worse. She wasn't an idiot--she knew it was due to the fact she hadn't eaten at all today. It was incredible how quickly her body had gotten used to consuming heavier, solid foods again.

Scowling, she rose to her feet to get some aspirin and water....

Suddenly, a flickering and dazzling darkness began to cloud her vision.

Her hands were shaking.

Her knees were unsteady.

Her head felt like it had been abruptly cut off from her spine.

She was floating.

She was falling.

"Elizabeth!" A shocked exclamation.

Strong hands caught her beneath her armpits.
She hissed in pain from the jarring, clenching grip of his fingers as Red haphazardly lowered them both down onto the sofa as smoothly as he was able. Dazed, Liz shook her head fiercely, trying to clear her eyes of the flashing blackness. But those jerking motions only seemed to make things worse.

"No sudden movements," he admonished tightly. "Hunch over and put your head down and allow yourself time to adjust. Naturally," he stressed.

Baring her teeth in embarrassed pique, she did as she was told. And after a few moments, as her vision cleared and she finally came back to herself, she became aware of his hand rubbing over the arch of her back in soothing motions.

"I stood up too fast," she muttered, hoping to explain away what had just occurred.

Red didn't reply, but continued to smooth his palm over her back. Despite the gentleness of his touch, she could now sense a tension in him that hadn't been there when he'd come home.

Dread filled her and she dared to open her eyes and glance furtively up at him.

His own gaze pierced hers.

Her breath caught anxiously in her throat. God, he knew.

"You lied to me." His voice wasn't angry, but it was perhaps a little hurt. And very quiet.

Unable to bear his perceptive gaze a moment longer, Liz looked down at her tightly clasped hands. As she slowly sat upright, she felt his fingers fall away from her. But instead of moving to put distance between them like she thought he would, he actually shifted closer.

"Why, Lizzy?"

Tears of embarrassment, of shame, filled her eyes at the softness in his tone, and her jaw tightened reflexively as she attempted to hold them back. But it was too late--they were already trailing down her cheeks.

"Talk to me, sweetheart," he coaxed gently. "Tell me why you didn't eat today."

She wordlessly shook her head.

"Are you afraid I won't understand?"

Hitching a shoulder, she lifted her fingers to her cheeks and scrubbed the tears away in frustration. God, she wasn't some hormonal teenager anymore but the waterworks came so readily nowadays--no matter what emotions, conflicting or not, were running through her, crying seemed to be what she defaulted to to let them out.

Red watched as she hastily wiped at her tears. She was embarrassed, that much was clear. But it wasn't just because she'd been caught in a lie.

As Lizzy's eyes flickered hesitantly up to his, he gentled his expression as he gazed back at her.

He'd been wrong.

It was humiliation, an emotion that ran much deeper than embarrassment, that twisted her beautiful face.
It was incredibly painful to see.

He reached out and laid a hand over both of hers. Christ, he could feel the tension thrumming through her just by touching her hands. The jagged edges of her distress needed to be soothed before he could expect her to open up to him.

Giving her fingers a compassionate squeeze, he slowly edged back into the plush cushions. "Come here, sweetheart," he murmured, settling his arm atop the back of the sofa to create an opening for her to cuddle into—if she chose to accept his offer.

Lizzy considered him for a brief moment before she cautiously leaned back. He waited patiently as she settled herself against him the usual way, by tucking her knees up to rest on his thighs, by laying her head against his shoulder. But instead of allowing her hands to fall close to his body like she tended to do, she crossed her arms tightly over her chest.

It was an obvious sign that she was still quite discomfited. Perhaps she was anxious because she thought he was angry with her for throwing the food away, for that's what she must have done. He wasn't irate about that. What bothered him more was that she had told an untruth—that a part of her didn't trust him enough to be completely honest with him.

But Red knew there was even more to her dishonest behavior than that. She was struggling internally. He could discern that she was grappling with herself, for he recognized her pains. The harsh toll they were taking upon her was clearly written across her strained features, glistening in her sad and confused eyes.

He needed to let her know that he wasn't angry...that he wasn't going to verbally assault her once she let down her guard.

So Red dropped his arm to tenderly encircle her, his fingers finding and continuously caressing through her dark tresses in long, slow strokes. She really did have such lovely hair. The dark burgundy lowlights he knew she enjoyed having were fading. Perhaps in the next couple of weeks he could coax her into going to the salon. Over the last week, it had been very difficult to cajole her into leaving the suite to go walking with him around the establishment's lobby, so he knew exactly how she'd react if he mentioned the idea of actually leaving the premises she was finally growing more comfortable with again.

One thing at a time....

It took longer than he thought it would, but eventually he felt his soothing touch take effect. The wary tautness in her body began to ease, as did her agitated breathing. Once she finally uncrossed her arms and allowed her hands to drift to his shirt, fingers lightly wrapping themselves in the material there, he knew he could speak and she'd hear him.

"When my wife and daughter died," he began quietly into the silence, "I felt similarly to how, I think, you're feeling now."

Red felt her grow very still. It was rare for him to ever mention his life of before, and he could sense her attentive ears hanging on his every word. It agonizingly cut his heart for him to bring the memories of his family...of his other life...out into the open like this, but he would do anything within his power to help Lizzy overcome the trauma haunting her.

"I blamed myself," he continued softly. "I became consumed with guilt. Shame. I couldn't sleep through the night. I stopped eating. I existed on alcohol, rage, and the humiliation I felt in myself."

He stared unseeing at the muted, flickering television as the memories took hold. "I told myself I
didn't deserve to eat. Why should I reward myself with life when I had betrayed my family by not being there to protect them?"

He felt Lizzy lift her head to look intently at his profile.

"I lost myself for a time. It was a dark time, Lizzy. I don't remember much of it. But... I do remember you."

She blinked in shock. "Me?"

He turned his head to look at her. "You." His expression was affectionate. "I came to stay with you and Sam soon after they...after they died." He paused, eyes searching her attentive face. "You were just a little thing back then," he reflected nostalgically, stroking a lock of her hair behind her ear. "My arrival in the middle of the night must have woken you. And you, devious minx that you were," an amused grin tugged at the right corner of his mouth, "waited until Sam was sound asleep again before coming downstairs to see me."

Elizabeth bit her lower lip against an answering grin and shrugged, cheekily diffident.

As he gazed at her, his expression slowly grew serious once more. "I remember being devoured alive by my sorrow and self-loathing. But then you came into the room. You knew I was grieving, and even though you didn't understand why, you hugged me. You let me hold your favorite stuffed animal. You even read to me--until you fell asleep in my arms." At this last, slight tease, he gently tweaked her nose, which she promptly wrinkled at him. "That night, I realized that punishing myself wasn't the route I should follow. I realized that I had more to live for." He stroked her cheek, meeting her eyes again. She had certainly been one of his reasons. "I slept through the night for the first time in weeks. And I ate my first meal in a long, long while the next morning--pancakes and fruit, by the request of a certain little girl. I remember sneaking chocolate chips into yours when Sam wasn't looking."

She smiled at him. It was a genuine smile. A beautiful smile.

He wanted to see it more often.

"There you are," he smiled softly back, tracing a finger over her right dimple. "Lizzy, I want you to tell that voice inside of you--the one that tries to convince you that you're weak and insignificant, that tells you what happened to you is your fault, that takes this lovely smile away from you--I want you to tell it to fuck off."

Her eyes widened slightly at the sudden vehemence in his tone before she glanced down uncertainly.

Touching his fingertips to her chin, he brought her gaze back to his. "You," he firmly told her, "are not weak, or worthless. You have much to live for, Lizzy. You deserve life."

"It's...it's hard," she whispered.

"I know it is, honey. I know. It's easier said than done." He let his hand fall to hold one of hers. "I know how reasonable and convincing that voice can sound."

She nodded slowly.

"But you're stronger than that voice."

Her lower lip trembled slightly. "I wasn't today," she admitted regretfully.
"We all have our lapses, Lizzy. We aren't infallible, but that doesn't mean we aren't strong."

She looked at him, her downcast expression turning pensive.

"If you find your resolve weakening, remember what we talked about tonight and reaffirm your strength to yourself."

She nodded, moving closer. He considerately shifted to accommodate her as she rested her head back down against his broad shoulder.

Silence settled between them for a time, but the undercurrents of anxiety and shame that had tinged it earlier were no longer there. Red allowed his hand to wander caressingly down her back again, threading his fingers through her hair, enjoying the silken feel of it against his skin.

"That feels nice," she murmured after a while.

"It certainly does," he smiled, kissing the top of her head.

"Red?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm sorry I threw away the food you made me."

"It's--"

"No. It's not," she interrupted, fingers tightening resolutely in his shirt. "I promise I won't do it again."

He squeezed her lightly against him in answer.

"And...and I'm sorry I lied to you," she whispered, tone slightly tremulous. "I shouldn't have done that either."

Red gathered all her hair in his hand and very softly pulled on it once, in gentle request.

She lifted her head to look into his face.

"You can trust me, Elizabeth," he told her, eyes steadily holding hers. "With anything."

"I know."

"If you need to talk about any of this...anything at all.... I'm here."

Bracing her slender hands against him, Lizzy lowered her gaze and leaned forward. Red wrapped his fingers around her sides to steady her as her lips met his in an honest kiss that expressed her contrition, her appreciation, and her love for him. It was the first kiss she had willingly given him herself since she had come to stay with him, and it warmed him through and through.

When she finally pulled away, he cupped her face in his palms and pressed his mouth to her brow in affection. "Lizzy...."

"Mmm?"

"I'm a little hungry." He looked down at her. "And you know how I hate to eat alone.... What would you say to pancakes and fruit?"
"For dinner?" she asked in surprise.

"Mmm. We both should probably eat the fresh fruit I'll cut up first. We need to have something of substance in our stomachs before we have pancakes. What do you think?"

Her eyes were alight with interest. "Could you...." her voice trailed off hesitantly.

"What, baby?"

Her expression was suddenly rather wistful. "Could you put chocolate chips in mine?"

Red grinned down at her, elated that she actually wanted to eat. It was certainly a positive step in the right direction towards her physical and mental healing. "As long as you eat your fruit first."

Her blue eyes glinted at him. "Deal."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading ❤

Lizzy does not have an eating disorder. She's struggling, as was explained in this chapter and hinted at in previous chapters, and her inner conflict has affected her appetite and views on food for a short time.

For more information on eating disorders, please visit this website:
https://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/types-symptoms-eating-disorders
"How did the shower feel?" Red asked, looking up from his newspaper to smile at Lizzy as she walked into the kitchen.

"It felt great," she replied brightly, returning his smile as she breezed passed him to the refrigerator. His eyes furtively traced down her body from over the top of the paper as she opened the tall, stainless steel door to retrieve the orange juice carton.

Elizabeth was still pretty thin, but from knowing her face and form as well as he did, he could actually tell that she had put on more weight since their talk a few days ago. Her clothes were fitting her better now than they had a week ago. They weren't hanging shapelessly off of her any longer. Her figure was returning. The dark blue skinny jeans that currently hugged her legs did not show excess material blousing about her waist or knees, which meant that the curves of her hips, ass, and thighs were obviously rounding out.

The shadows of fatigue and stress still lingered beneath her eyes, but her cheeks, while sharper than normal, certainly weren't as gaunt as they used to be. Her face was finally beginning to fill back out into its natural heart-shape and her fair skin was taking on a healthier glow.

He was so proud of her for not only making the conscious effort to eat on a regular schedule, but to stretch and engage back into Pilates and yoga. In fact, that was what she had just finished about twenty minutes ago--her morning exercise routine.

Elizabeth felt rather self-conscious about him being around when she exercised, so out of respect for her desire for privacy, he would sequester himself in the living room by the fireplace or in the kitchen, like he did this morning. Due to the open floor plan of the penthouse suite, he was actually still very nearby, with perhaps a half-wall or counter separating him from where she was languidly moving on her mat. Sometimes though he couldn't help but glance up surreptitiously from his reading or paperwork to watch her for a moment, to make sure she was doing all right, and, well...to admire her.

He had to admit, it was incredibly fascinating to him how she could smoothly bend and twist her limber body into the various poses. In a way, yoga was almost like an elegant, interpretive dance to the rippling beat of her heart and the steady rhythm of her controlled breathing. She made it look so easy, but he knew how much intense concentration it took on her part to arch and curl her lithe body in those ways. He was thoroughly impressed by her ability to do so.

Earlier this morning, he'd stared in amazed astonishment as she had slid into the downward dog position, then fluidly slipped into the camel before bending over backward, supporting her weight briefly on her hands and feet. Then she had flipped those long legs of hers over, one at a time, her body flowing like water until she had ended up in the downward dog once more.

Then she had held that position, no doubt stretching her back and hamstrings. But his eyes hadn't been focused there...they'd been fixed raptly on her ass, which had been sticking straight up in the air. Those tiny, skin-tight shorts had left very little to the imagination, and Red had felt his body stirring in keen interest at the arousing sight.
He had suddenly found himself vividly imagining Lizzy holding that position, but for a very different reason.

Naked.

On his bed.

With him slowly stroking one of his hands up her smooth back, while the other positioned himself to slide effortlessly into her.

They'd never made love in that way before. Lizzy had never shown much interest in it, for she'd always made it clear she preferred missionary, or to ride him. He was one hundred percent certain it was because both those positions hit her just right, and he knew for a fact that she also enjoyed looking at him sometimes while they loved. That wasn't to say he didn't enjoy that aspect of their lovemaking as much as she did. It was incredibly stimulating to see her sapphire eyes darken with desire, or glitter with lust and pleasure and joy and too many other emotions too complicated to put a specific name to.

But, God, how he'd love to have the opportunity to show her that pleasure could be found in other ways. Maybe, if he could find the right words to gently ask her if she'd be willing....

Then Red had felt his pants becoming uncomfortably tight from having such ardent thoughts, and he had angrily shaken himself from the fantasy, viciously berating himself for allowing his mind to travel down those sensual paths it had no business roaming.

Not now. Not yet.

She would reach for him when she was ready. Until then, he would continue to be her companion and confidant...and her lover in all ways except for what happened between the silken sheets of the bed.

Unable, and unwilling, to completely tear his eyes away from her, he had instead focused on the curve of her back, on the intricate straps of the spandex bra she wore that whimsically criss-crossed in something akin to a Celtic knot across her shoulder blades and upper spine, which had been glowing with a slight sheen of sweat....

It had all been too erotic.

He'd finally had to force himself to look away from her, blindly reaching for his coffee. Not that drinking a stimulant had been ideal in such a situation. It certainly hadn't quite helped matters, but he had needed to focus his thoughts on something besides his darling girl writhing sinuously on the floor wearing next to nothing.

Of course, Lizzy wasn't clad in any of that now. Red took note that she had forgone donning the oversized, slouchy hoodie she'd worn almost every day since coming to stay with him. In a way, that article of clothing was almost like a security blanket for her. In his opinion, for her to not wear it was a good sign.

It meant she felt like she didn't have to hide from herself anymore...that she was growing more comfortable in her own skin again.

She instead had chosen to wear a loose white tee tucked into the front of her denims. It looked very soft. It was a wide V-neck, which was always a flattering cut on her. The shape drew all the attention to her beautiful face, her pronounced collarbones, the long, delicate line of her throat, and the milky skin of her décolletage.
"You're staring at me."

Red blinked, coming out of his private musings.

"Do I have something on my face?" she asked worriedly, bringing one hand up to scrub over her nose and cheeks.

"Mmm." Since she wasn't exercising right now, he wouldn't hide his admiration. His gaze caressed appreciatively over her again. "Just admiring you, beautiful girl."

Her lovely eyes flickered shyly away from his and she took a long sip of orange juice to hide the warm blush that suddenly colored her cheeks.

Red was delighted to see it.

When she finally lowered her glass to the counter and dared to glance his way, he caught her eyes and gave her a slow, lazy smile that was just slightly suggestive—enough to let her know he found her desirable.

Lizzy wrinkled her nose at him, but he could tell she was pleased by the gently flirtatious attention. Then she slid onto the bar stool next to his, propping her elbows up on the granite counter. "Weren't you going to get muffins for us this morning? The cinnamon crumble ones from Starbucks?" They were her favorite. "I didn't see any in the fridge."

Red set down his newspapers. "I know I promised I'd get them for you. But...I have a much better idea."

She raised a querying brow.

"It's a fine day outside. Beautiful. The rain stopped early and the sun is shining. It's crisp...clear.... The picture-perfect morning for a stroll." He smiled at her. "Why don't we both go down to Starbucks?"

He sensed the fierce tension thrumming through her almost immediately after he'd finished speaking. He knew that she'd react this way. She hadn't gone outside since she'd come home from the hospital about two weeks ago.

Red well understood that people who had experienced something traumatic had this near-overwhelming desire...this need...to stay within the boundaries of someplace they considered safe. While Elizabeth was slowly coming to terms with what had happened to her, and even though she had made strides in beginning to recover her inner strength and sense of self-worth, Red knew she was still suffering from emotional trauma. She may not be weeping disconsolately into his shoulder as often as she had used to upon waking from her nightmares, but fear still seethed in her heart, rearing its ugly head in the form of night terrors, and at times revealing its debilitating self in her eyes and behavior...like in her fervent unwillingness to leave the predictable safety of the suite.

Last week he'd managed to cajole her into going down to the hotel's expansive lobby with him to walk around for a bit, order a couple of sodas from the bar down there (her preference was coke and his was root beer), and then recline for a while on one of the many sofas to enjoy the echoing murmur of the fountains. Lizzy had often mentioned how much she missed the sound of rushing water, having grown up constantly listening to the creek babble cheerfully outside her Nebraskan home, so Red had managed to convince her to stay a little longer each visit downstairs by guiding her to the fountains before she could bolt for the elevator. During each cautious venture, she'd become more and more relaxed as they had sat together, watching and listening to the fountains
cascade and bubble.

But when he'd tried to take her out on the street during their fifth trip downstairs, she had balked fearfully, forgoing her time near the fountains to immediately retreat back up to the suite.

She had been out of sorts and withdrawn for the rest of the afternoon...and Red had been furious with himself for misgauging her state of mind.

He had approached her later and had apologized to her. In return, she had explained that she hadn't been irate with him--that she'd actually been angry with herself for giving in to her panic. She had explained to him in a very vulnerable voice that she knew deep down it would ultimately be good for her to go out into the city and be amongst people again, especially since classes would be starting soon.

"But," she had breathed, tears pricking her tired eyes, "I'm scared, Red."

She didn't need to explain herself further. Red understood her fear of the unpredictability of the world...of the possibility that someone like Forman could hurt her again.

He had murmured that perhaps they could try again on a day when she was feeling stronger? Then he had watched as she had briefly considered his question before she had agreed, tone both tentatively hopeful and hedgingly reluctant at the same time.

And after carefully observing her this morning, after watching her move with such confidence on her yoga mat, after noticing how she was finally wearing a shirt that didn't completely hide her body, Red knew that today was the day when he would encourage her to try again.

"It'll be a quick trip, Lizzy," he smiled reassuringly. "We'll be there for just a little while. Long enough to get our pastries and coffees to go." He kept his tone light to try and ease the anxiety he saw gleaming in her eyes. "I'd love your company, sweetheart. I've missed our visits into the city together."

"I'm not...." She glanced down at herself in apprehension. "I'm not dressed to go out."

Red watched as she winced at her own weak, nonsensical excuse. She had to be aware of just how well she looked--the best she had looked in days. The expression in his eyes when hers darted skittishly to his face was compassionately knowing.

And it made her open up to him.

"I'm.... God, Red, I'm so afraid." Her cheeks flooded with an embarrassed, ruddy color. "How stupid is that? I mean, it's Starbucks, for God's sake. I love Starbucks."

But they both knew that it wasn't Starbucks she was afraid of.

"I'll be right there with you," he assured her gently, choosing to sidestep her comment about the coffee shop. It wasn't relevant to the real issue at hand. "I'll be beside you the whole time."

Elizabeth forced a laugh and it came out harsh and self-deprecating. "To protect me from all the murderers and rapists?" She swiped a self-conscious hand nervously through the top of her damp hair, fingers catching painfully in the loose braid she'd forgotten she'd woven.

"So that you're comfortable," he stressed, tone just firm enough to where she was startled from her own anxious shame to look at him. "Although," he continued just as seriously, now that he had her complete attention, "if any jackass tries to lay hands on you, I'll immediately bring him to his knees."
She blinked at his fierce and vehement promise, then looked down uncertainly. The fact that she hadn't outright denied his invitation to join him was definitely an indication that she was feeling strong enough today to even consider the idea of emerging out of her comfort zone.

He had read her correctly earlier after all.

Reaching out, he rested a large hand over one of hers that was curled into a loose fist on the counter. He gave it a tender squeeze and her gaze flicked to his. "Come with me?" he asked again, coaxing tone soft and deep.

Lizzy took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before nodding in a silent reply.

Red smiled proudly at her, lifting her hand to his lips to press a light kiss to her knuckles. "Go grab your shoes then. I'll meet you by the front door."

She had ended up putting on more than just her shoes. The jet-black, slouchy sweatshirt was once more draped down her slender torso. Masterfully hiding the brief flash of disappointment he felt, he gave her an encouraging smile. If she really needed to keep wearing that hoodie for a time, if it aided in giving her enough confidence to actually go outside, then he fully supported her choice.

But he hoped that the more they worked together to widen her perimeter of comfort, she wouldn't feel like she needed to wear it to hide from herself and other people.

"Ready?" He offered his hand to her.

Her fingers struck out, lightning quick, to grasp it. Her own hand trembled slightly, and her face was rather pale with fretful unease, but there was a determined set to her jaw that Red took immediate note of and admired.

The walk through the lobby was calm and uneventful. When they reached the glass doors and crossed the threshold of the hotel to step outdoors, Lizzy's grip on his hand tightened. As he lead her slowly down the roundabout sidewalk to the bustling Seattle street, he could feel her palm growing clammy against his. He stroked his thumb in soothing circles against her knuckles as he began to speak softly, pointing out to her the beauty of the sunlight reflecting off the puddles on the sidewalk, making them gleam like molten gold. Then he gestured amusedly with his other hand at the small child ahead who was shrieking with happy laughter as he splashed unabashedly through them, much to the chagrin of his exasperated mother.

The boy's playful antics managed to bring a weak but genuine smile to her face.

It wasn't too far of a walk to Starbucks, for it was only two blocks away. But for Lizzy.... Red could tell that it was almost too long of a jaunt for her. He had managed to steer her clear of couples or groups of people that could have jostled her, but their very presence and the cacophony of the city--cars horns honking, tires squealing on the wet pavement, store bells dinging or jingling, cell phones going off, the various voices of people talking, yelling, or laughing, their footsteps slapping or clicking on the cement--was almost too much physical stimulation for her. He could tell how hard of a toll all of it had taken on her by the wan pallor of her face and the exhausted look in her eyes when they entered Starbucks.

But she had made it. That in itself was a victory.

Luckily they were able to walk right up to the cashier without having to wait in line. Red placed their to-go order for a couple bags of the cinnamon crumble muffins, some for today and some for tomorrow. Then he ordered a black coffee for himself and a nonfat toffeenut mocha for her.
"Do you want whipped cream on that, hon?" the cashier asked in a sweetly chipper voice, looking directly at Elizabeth.

"N-No. Thank you," she stammered, then flushed in embarrassment for stumbling over her words.

Red's heart went out to her. He squeezed her hand, letting her know through his touch that she was doing more than great. Then the door suddenly chimed, raucous laughter tumbling inside and shattering the peaceful quiet of the shop. He instantaneously felt her edging closer against his body uneasily as a boisterous group of five people got in line loudly behind them.

Releasing her hand only to wrap his arm supportively around her waist, Red quickly paid the cashier, tipped the barista team generously, and then guided Lizzy to a small table tucked away in the corner of the shop near the bags of freshly ground coffee beans and far from the other customers.

"How's this?" he asked just as she quickly slid onto the bench. Well. He smiled down at her. That answered that!

Once he had lowered himself comfortably beside her, she immediately curled up against him in her usual way, fingers sliding across his chest to tightly clutch the lapel of his jacket.

Christ, she was so tense. He curled an arm around her narrow shoulders, bringing her in closer against him. As she rested her head against his chest, he began slowly caressing his thumb up and down her bicep in an attempt to soothe her obvious stress.

Red glanced furtively down at her, observing how her eyes flicked restlessly around. He needed to engage her attention to get her mind off of her anxiety. Bringing up pleasant memories of her youth would undoubtedly do the trick, since speaking of them had worked before in bringing her cautiously out of her shell.

"I remember the first time you ever had coffee," he remarked with a smile.

Lizzy tore her apprehensive eyes away from her unfamiliar surroundings to glance up at him. "You do?"

Good. She was listening.

"Mmm. You were fourteen--"

"Actually...."

He raised a curious brow to prompt her to continue when her voice trailed off.

"I think I was thirteen," she corrected him with a hesitant smile.

He squeezed her gently against him. "Thirteen," he amended. "So young to start such a bad habit of being dependent on caffeine," he teased.

"Says the man who brought me to a coffee shop today."

"Ah, but that's different," Red grinned, thrilled by the fact that she was actually bantering with him. A bit of her old self was resurfacing and it was beautiful to see. "You're an adult now."

"Sure," she agreed with a small grin of her own. It was quite faint, but again, like earlier when she'd watched the young boy play in the puddles, it was genuine. "But it's not like you did all that much to stop me when you caught me sneaking some that morning all those years ago--and all the mornings
"after when you visited!"

"True," he chuckled. "I certainly encouraged the habit, didn't I?"

"More than you know," she groused, but her tone had a lighthearted lilt to it. "To this day I need a cup of coffee every morning to function. And I still won't drink it without cream and sugar--but you knew that."

"I remember you took one sip of the black roast you brewed--and brewed well, by the way, for never having done so before--and the face you made...." He chuckled in fond amusement. "I don't think I've ever seen a face squish so quickly in disgust in my entire life!"

"You're exaggerating!" she huffed, but he could tell by the glint in her eyes and her slowly loosening fist that she was enjoying his teasing.

"You made a face like the Grinch does when he gets that 'awful, wonderful idea.' Except you didn't smile."

She wrinkled her nose in playful indignance at him.

"And then you demanded to know why adults loved coffee so much when it tasted like.... How did you put it?" His eyes gleamed down into hers. "'Sour dirt'?"

"Well, it did!"

"Until we fixed it with a few heaping tablespoons of sugar and more than a few splashes of cream. In fact," he reflected slowly with growing amusement, "I seem to remember that by the end of our doctoring, your drink consisted of more additives than actual coffee. Kind of like the coffees here," he jested.

"These are real!" Lizzy protested, making a face at him.

He smiled affectionately at her, reaching out to caress two fingers under that defiantly jutting chin of hers. He loved seeing her animated spirit flare. It had been revealing itself more little by little this week, and he was gratified to see it sparkling in her eyes here in this place.

"Elizabeth!"

She abruptly tensed at the jarring sound of her name being called by a stranger, the intimate ambiance between she and Red shattering. They both turned their heads toward the voice. It was the barista--their order was ready at the counter.

"I'll get it," Red offered, meeting Lizzy's eyes. Her agitation had returned, for the barista's call had sharply reminded her that they weren't holed safely up in the penthouse, but were actually out in the city, surrounded by strangers--strangers who were unreliable and unpredictable. He slowly reached out and tucked a stubborn flyaway back into her loose braid, keeping his expression calm for her sake. "Then we will go home, okay?"

"Okay," she breathed, reluctantly releasing her hold on his jacket's lapel.

Red slid off the bench and made his way to the counter. The barista smiled brightly at him as she handed him the two bags of muffins and the drink carrier.

"I put a couple extra sweets in there for you," the young girl told him in a hushed whisper, gesturing at one of the bags. "That was the biggest tip we've ever seen! Thank you! And--please come again,"
He inclined his head with a polite smile and a thank you just as the bell over the door rang cheerfully, announcing the presence of a new customer.

As Red turned around with their snacks in his hands, his gaze immediately fell on Elizabeth--and was utterly shocked to observe her completely bleached of color, eyes wide and gleaming with panic.

Alarmed, he rushed to her side. "What happened, Lizzy?" he demanded, quickly setting everything down on the tabletop to take her trembling hands in his. "What's wrong?"

Her fearful eyes darted to the place behind his shoulder.

He whirled around, mental hackles bristling aggressively as he searched for what--or who--had terrified her so.

But all he saw was the man who'd come in not even a minute ago chatting cordially with the cashier as she competently rang him up.

He turned back around to look down at Lizzy, who was still staring mutely at the man neither of them knew, horrified, as if he were a monster ascended from the very depths of Hell. And that's when the realization crashed heavily over him--that man had the same build and coloring as Grady Forman.

"Lizzy." Christ, her breathing was becoming too fast--and much too shallow. "Lizzy, it's not him." Her pupils were now so dilated that her eyes were almost black. "Lizzy," he called to her in a fierce murmur, squeezing her hands as he knelt down beside her. "It's not him. You're safe."

Somehow the familiar and comforting mantra got through to her because she blinked once. Slowly.

"You're safe," he repeated in a strong, quiet voice, relieved when her stark eyes finally flickered to his face. He watched intently as she grounded herself in his presence, in his eyes. As her breathing slowed, the yawning blackness of her own eyes began to recede until he was finally able to glimpse glints of her familiar, sapphire color.

"He's...." Her voice was so faint he almost couldn't hear it. "He's dead." The words were spoken almost as a question as her gaze searched his, desperately seeking reassurance.

"Yes. He is. That man," Red jerked his head to the oblivious stranger behind them, "is not him. You're safe, Lizzy."

"I'm never safe from him," she rasped. "He still haunts me. In my thoughts, in my dreams...." She clenched her jaw tightly shut against the sudden tears that filled her eyes, and she swiftly bent her head to hide them from him--and from the nearby onlookers who were gaping curiously at them.

Keeping hold of her hands, Red twisted his head around to give the entire group at the table across from theirs a ruthlessly hostile stare from his crouching position on the floor.

Mind your own Goddamned business! he snarled silently at them all, using every muscle in his face and all the rage frothing within to clearly deliver the message.

They immediately received it, for the lids on their coffee cups were suddenly extremely captivating and deserved a thorough inspection.
When he turned his full attention back to her, she had bravely regathered her outward composure and was gazing wordlessly at him. Her face appeared still and calm, but her eyes, those beautiful, blue eyes, were burning too brightly with humiliation and such pained fragility.

He needed to get her home.

Slowly he rose to his feet, bringing her with him. He wanted to say to her that, with time, Forman’s phantom would fade and that her fear of him would lessen until it was non-existent. He smoothly hung the bags of muffins off of his forearm and took up the drink carrier in that hand while his other wrapped itself snugly around her waist. How he desired to reassure her in that way! But they both knew that those words would be false. Forman's ghost would never fully disappear, and she would always remember the terror she had experienced.

Elizabeth had to learn how to live with the scar this traumatic event had left on her sensitive soul. Feeling her head coming down to rest against his shoulder, Red glanced in tender concern down at her as they stepped back out onto the busy city street. It wouldn't be an easy journey for her. It already had been, and was still, so difficult.

But he would continue to help her by reminding her--in various ways--of the strength she had brimming within herself, waiting to once again be acknowledged and fully embraced.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you always for reading and your support :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"You're home late," Elizabeth murmured sleepily from the bed. Red winced guiltily at the sound of her voice as he turned around, shirt untucked from his trousers and half-unbuttoned. He could just make out the whites of her eyes gleaming in the darkened bedroom as she sat up. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," he replied contritely. "The dinner meeting ran later than I thought it would." Too long, really. It was eleven forty-five and he should've been home three hours ago. "I'm sorry for waking you."

She stifled a yawn as she reached over to flick on the bedside lamp to dim, blinking bleary eyes up at him as he approached her. "I was already kind of awake."

He looked down at her in concern. "You dreamed?"

"No." Lizzy shook her head, dispelling his growing feelings of dread and replacing them with relief. Then she gave him a hesitant smile. "I just.... I sleep better when you're home."

"Well, I'm home now," Red returned her smile. "Go back to bed, honey. I'll be along to join you in a bit. I'm going to take a bath first." To soak away some of the Goddamned stress of the meeting.

"Rough night?" she asked softly.

"Mmm. How'd you know?"

"You only take baths when you.... Well, when you need to relax."

He gave her an appraising look.

"You look surprised." Her eyes glinted with amusement up into his. "We've been together long enough for me to pick up on some of your habits, Red."

He leaned down to drop a gentle kiss to her lips. "I'll try to be quieter when I come back."

"Actually...." She paused, worrying her lower lip briefly between her teeth before she asked, "Can I join you?" Her tone was rather wistful as she added, "A hot bath sounds really nice right now."

"Of course you can," Red encouraged without hesitation, hiding his shock--and delight--behind unbuttoning the rest of his shirt.

It was the first time she had shown any interest in bathing with him since the incident. Honestly, it was such an intimate activity...as intimate as lying in bed together without a stitch of clothing between them. Lizzy had been avoiding those types of situations since coming home from the hospital. Red had been understanding of why, and still was.

But wanting to slip into a bath with him? Naked? It was certainly an excellent sign that she was becoming stronger, more self-assured.

Peeling off his undershirt, Red dropped it in the hamper before kicking off his pants and boxer briefs. He could feel her eyes following him as he padded his way around the room, his underwear following the path of the white tank before he folded his pants over the hanger to be dry-cleaned.
tomorrow.

"Lavender with rose hips or Tahitian vanilla?" he asked, hearing the rustle of the sheets as she finally slid out of bed.

"What?"

"A new shipment of bath oils came in the other day. The cleaning service stocked a whole bunch in the bathroom cabinet," Red explained. "I saw them this morning. Which do you want to try?"

He glanced her way, watching as she stepped carefully out of her ruffled pajama shorts. His nostrils flared as his intent eyes flicked appreciatively from her bared, pert breasts down her smooth stomach to the thatch of trimmed, dark curls between her legs. It had been a while since he had seen her lithe body devoid of any and all clothes.

God, she was such a lovely young woman.

"Oh." Her perplexed expression eased into a more thoughtful one. "Um....the lavender one, I guess. Is that okay?"

"Of course." As she came closer, he could see the muscles rippling faintly in her thighs, could smell the fresh and clean scent of her, could feel the heat from her body teasing his.

His mouth abruptly went dry, his purposefully and carefully suppressed desire for her stirring unexpectedly to life as he suddenly and vividly imagined reaching out to run his large fingers up those silken legs of hers to gently cup the crisp triangle of her sex with one hand while the other reached around to knead her ass....

Lizzy shifted, wrapping her slender arms self-consciously around her body. The movement obstructed the view of her ample bosom and it snapped him out of his passionate thoughts.

Red cleared his throat before bestowing a tender smile on her, hoping to ease the nervousness he felt emanating from her. "After you, honey," he gestured for her to precede him into the bathroom.

He tried not to stare at the attractive curves her backside exhibited, especially as she bent over the lip of the raised, white marble bathtub to turn on the water. Tearing his eyes away from her, he went to the cabinet and pulled out a few thick towels for later and a small glass vial of the preferred bath oil. After unscrewing the top, he held it beneath his nose and sniffed delicately. He hummed in pleasure before holding it out for her to smell.

"What do you think?" he asked with an enthused smile.

She breathed in a whiff, eyes slightly closing in appreciation before nodding her approval.

Red poured a little into the foaming bubbles. Once the oil swirled with the water, the whole room immediately had the pleasant but not overpowering aroma of a backyard garden in bloom.

With care, Lizzy went down the stairs of the massive tub and sat on one end of the long ledge beneath the water, the tip of her chin just brushing the reflective surface. There was plenty of room for him, but she shyly indicated for him to sit close beside her.

He couldn't help but let out a quiet moan of delight as the hot water slowly enveloped his weary body as he sank down next to her. Then he propped his elbows up behind him on the smooth lip, letting his hands dangle lazily in the water as he allowed his head to fall back so he could stare at the steam wafting carelessly up to the arched ceiling.
"What did you do while I was gone this evening?" Red asked her after a comfortable moment of silence.

"I brushed Bronn and then walked him quite a few laps around the veranda. You know, to toughen up the new skin on his paw pads."

He nodded.

"It was slow going but I've seen a lot of improvement in his stride this week. He's finally putting more weight on his front feet." She smiled in loving affection for her dog. "Then I ordered my textbooks for the semester. Oh! I got my official class list emailed to me an hour after you left. That's why I ordered my books."

He lifted his head to look down at her, green eyes alight with affectionate pride. By the enthusiastic way she spoke, it was almost as if she were her old self again. It had taken much mental effort on her part to reach this point. He knew that not only did adhering to her daily schedule help her by keeping her body and mind active and thus restoring her sense of self-worth, but the trips they made together down into the lobby and city had increased in number over the past few days, and those excursions had been giving her more and more confidence in herself.

-It's wonderful to see your princess out of her tower,- Baz had sent Red earlier, his tone over text a little impudent, but it had also held genuine pride in the girl.

Red had been so gladdened by her disciplined efforts that he hadn't even minded the younger man referring to her as "your princess."

Elizabeth hadn't experienced any panic attacks since the first time they'd gone to Starbucks. She still wore that black, oversized sweatshirt whenever they went out, and she still held his supportive hand tightly in discomfiture whenever they moved around and through large groups of people, but her intensely anxious fear was finally ebbing while her rediscovered, inner strength was blooming. It was beautiful to see.

"Did you get all the classes you wanted?"

She nodded happily, long hair floating around her shoulders as she moved. "I got lucky this time around."

"Law and Psychology, right?"

"Yeah."

"Dance?"

"Dance?" Her brows drew together briefly before comprehension dawned in her eyes. "Oh, no. The hip-hop class I took was run by a private company. It wasn't put on through the university."

"Do you think you'll join back up?" he asked, watching her face. "I seem to recall that you really enjoyed it."

Lizzy shrugged a shoulder uncertainly, the mound of it jutting up above the water. "I'm not sure, Red."

"Why not?"
And just like that, the apprehensive fright was back, gleaming in her beautiful eyes. "It's too much," she blanched, voice a whisper.

"Too much what, sweetheart?" Red questioned just as softly.

"Attention," she shuddered. "Attention on me."

Ah. "You mean people...mainly men...who see you dance, whether they're in your class or in an audience, will notice you as a woman."

She nodded slowly, flushing uncomfortably.

"And you don't want to be noticed."

She looked down, crossing her arms tightly--defensively--over her breasts. "It's what drew...Forman...to me."

It all made sense: why she refused to wear clothes that accentuated her attractive figure out in public, why she always defaulted to covering herself in that damned, shapeless hoodie, why she clung timidly to him whenever large groups with men in them passed by, even why she hadn't expressed interest in making love with him, a man she trusted and loved....

The suspicions he'd harbored for a while now had just been confirmed. She was trying to hide from and avoid her own sexuality.

"It was raining that night." Her voice was barely a breath above a whisper. "Did I ever tell you that?"

Red went still, eyes fixed on her pale face. He had known it had been raining from Baz and Aaron, but not from Lizzy. She had shared with him the bare bones of her story over the phone when she'd been in the hospital, but only to give him a sense of what had happened. When she had reluctantly spoken of it then, the events had been jumbled and out of order due to her heightened anxiety and distress. But he'd been able to piece together what she had gone through.

And as he'd watched over her during her convalescence, he had realized that he hadn't needed to know every sick and grisly detail of that night to understand the severity of her trauma. Even though he had known it would aid in her psychological and emotional recovery if she did open up about what had happened--if she really confided in him--he hadn't pushed her to. He had told himself to be patient, that she would reveal what she had gone through, in sequence and more detail, when she was ready.

Perhaps now, after almost two and a half weeks, she finally was.

Her gaze flickered to his, and he shook his head slowly in answer to her question.

"I.... I heard her scream. Lauren. I heard her. At first.... At first I thought her cry was the storm. But then I heard her again and I knew it was a person."

Her eyes were glazed and unseeing as she reached for that memory and followed its murky and twisting trail down deep into her consciousness.

"I went outside to help her. It was such a...such a stupid thing for me to do. To run outside toward the sound of that....of her scream. But--I thought I could help." This last was said in a rush as her eyes deeply implored him to understand even as she tried to rationalize her rash behavior to him...to herself.
Red's expression was compassionate as he reached out beneath the water and found her hand. She wouldn't be the girl he loved if she hadn't tried to help. He smoothed his thumb over her knuckles as she continued to haltingly purge her soul of the harrowing incident.

"When I saw her, I knew she'd been...she'd been raped before she died." She suddenly jerked her head angrily. "No. Before she'd been murdered."

The distinction she made between dying and murder wasn't lost on him.

"It was so...so frightening."

Her eyes glittered uneasily as the disturbing scene flashed through her mind. Christ, how many times had she relived it? In seeing the pinched look on her drawn face, he knew it had been too many.

"I remember thinking...this is what evil looks like." Her voice caught on the word evil and she shivered.

He squeezed her fingers gently, moving closer to press his side comfortingly against hers. Despite the heat of the water, goosebumps had risen all over her flesh.

It was a physical reaction to her obvious mental distress.

Upon feeling it, rage reared up and surged fiercely through him. Silently grinding his teeth, he savagely grasped it before it could escape in the form of snarling curses and forcibly confined it to the deep recesses of his mind so that she, sensitive girl that she was, wouldn't be able to sense it.

She didn't need his fury now.

She needed him to listen.

She needed his understanding.

"I was in this weird state of shock, Red," she confided quietly. "I could think clearly even though I was s-so scared. And I...I wrapped her hands in my hoodie because I saw blood under her nails. I thought it could be used. By the police. To get him."

Red had known that. Despite his simmering anger, his heart swelled with the familiar feeling of pride for her quick and collected thinking. It was truly admirable considering the terrorizing situation she'd been in.

"But then I-I panicked," she whimpered, expression twisting with remembered, overwhelming fear. "I tried to scream for help. And t-then he...he tackled me to the ground. I hit my head pretty badly. I couldn't see." Her breathing hitched quickly. Too quickly. "I couldn't breathe."

Her eyes were huge, pupils dilating. God, they were suddenly so black. So round and so very dark, reflecting the terror she had felt in those horrific moments. If he looked closer into their frightened depths he would undoubtedly find her buried rage there. If he wanted, he could bring it, viciously howling, to the surface to mingle with his that persistently stalked the back of his mind.

But he would never encourage that.

She needed to keep healing. Giving in to her lingering fury would make her feel strong for a time, but ultimately it would not help her overcome the last vestiges of her trauma. If she used her anger to cover her fear, it would contort her, warping her sweet vitality into paranoid bitterness.
"Lizzy," he murmured sharply, not to stop her from communicating, for she needed to keep releasing this poison from her soul through speech, but to prevent her from losing herself in those blindingly powerful and dangerous emotions.

His steady and commanding voice had the desired effect.

She blinked once, coming back to him. Their eyes met, hers were still wide with disquiet, but his were calm. He steadfastly held her gaze as he slowly brought their intertwined hands up from the water into the air. He rested her palm against the bare skin above his beating heart, placing his large one over it. God, her hand was so small beneath his, so perfect...the skin so smooth, the shape so fine, all joints virginal, never once broken. Not even after Forman had slammed them into the cement. Not even after he tried to crush them in his tormenting grasp.

Red gently rubbed his fingers over the back of her hand in soothing motions, keeping his gaze unwaveringly locked on hers until she was fully aware of herself--and him--once more.

"H-he pinned me down," she finally continued into the stillness between them, her quiet tone as low as she could make it to desperately try and hide the depth of her emotions. "He was so...so heavy. But--I tried to fight him." As her gaze flickered to his again, she couldn't conceal them any longer. Tears of shame, of anger, of grief, filled those troubled, sapphire eyes, glittering in the hazy light as they trailed unchecked down her cheeks. "I tried, Red."

Seeing her cry ignited the rage he had tried to keep leashed so tightly within his mind. It flared once more up and out of his grasp, and his eyes flashed with it as he looked down into her sweet, beautiful face. "You did more than try," he growled low in his throat, gripping her hand firmly with his. "You actually tore into the fucker, Lizzy."

Her glistening eyes widened at his harsh tone.

He held her gaze unflinchingly, doing his damnedest to clamp down on his seething temper so as not to exacerbate her own, roiling emotions. "You made him bleed. You did hurt him, Lizzy." Red emphasized the importance of his words by speaking slowly and with strong emphasis.

"Not enough," she whispered, humiliation reflecting in the fresh tears that gleamed in her eyes. "He actually laughed at me. Called me something. A name. And h-he hit me, Red. Here," she gingerly touched the fading welt on her left temple.

He brought his other hand up to very gently stroke the curling baby hairs near that spot, replacing Forman's evil, phantom touch with his own, loving caress.

"And he..." Lizzy veiled her eyes behind her lashes, briefly hesitating before pressing bravely on. "That's when he started to tug at m-my clothing and he spread my legs and--and unzipped his pants...." She paused again for a long moment, swallowing thickly.

Red continued to trace his fingers over those fine hairs, letting her know through his touch that he was there with her.

That she wasn't alone.

Her jaw worked soundlessly for a time before she took in a deep, controlled breath, letting it out slowly. "And then," she continued, voice stronger than it had been before, "that's when that--that Good Samaritan came out of nowhere and tackled him. Got him off me." Her brows drew together. "I wish I could remember what he looked like." Then she turned her clear and piercing gaze to Red. "They never found him. The police. The FBI. They never found that man who saved me."
Her gaze intently searched his attentive one.

"Do you think he's okay, Red?"

The look in her eyes was sharply penetrating.

Red returned her look composedly, wondering just how much she guessed at. Did she think he found her "Good Samaritan"? Did she think he might know him? They both were teetering on a dangerous ledge now and he had to tread extremely carefully.

But he wouldn't lie to her.

"I'm certain," he answered slowly, his tone mildly reflective, "that he's okay."

"How can you be sure?" she pressed, using her free hand to wipe away the lingering tears from her cheeks.

"The law enforcement agencies never found his body, did they?"

She shook her head thoughtfully.

He smiled at her.

An answering smile flickered hesitantly at the corners of her mouth before it faded, her expression turning pensive. "That man...my Good Samaritan...he moved so quickly." Her fingers tightened slightly around Red's. "My sense of time...it was distorted...but...I think he broke something of his within—within mere seconds, Red."

There was a note of awe, of longing, in her voice.

"You could move like your Good Samaritan, Lizzy," he informed her with surety. "With the right training, you could protect yourself like he protected you."

"But, you taught me--"

"I taught you how to fend off an asshole date who, hypothetically, wouldn't keep his hands to himself," Red interrupted, green eyes gravely serious. "I did not teach you how to kill a man."

"K-kill?" Lizzy stared at him in shock. "I don't.... I don't think I could...." She licked her lips nervously. "I don't know if I could actually do that. Kill someone. On purpose."

"If the situation warranted it, if you had the right training, I believe you could," he disagreed quietly.

She nibbled uncertainly on her lower lip.

"You have such strength in you, Lizzy. A spirit of fire."

She flushed, lowering her eyes self-consciously to the rippling water around them.

Releasing her hand, he reached out to run a fingertip under her chin, bringing her gaze back to his. "You don't believe me?"

Elizabeth hitched an ambivalent shoulder.

"You should."
"It's...it's a frightening thought, Red," she half-deflected. "Killing someone."

"Think of it this way," he told her, expression and tone unrelenting. "If you found yourself in a dangerous situation and you were given a choice: either you are the one to walk away alive, or another man like Forman, who would you want it to be?"

She didn't even think twice. Her blue eyes flashed resolutely up into his. "Me."

Red bared his teeth at her in a smile of fierce satisfaction. "Then let me help you."

"You'll teach me?"

He contemplated her earnest face for a moment. "No," he finally decided. "Not me."

She frowned up at him, body tensing in trepidation.

Hoping to ease her feelings of consternation, he traced his wet fingers along her jaw to tuck a damp lock of soft hair behind her ear. "I have someone in mind. Someone who is far better than I am at this sort of thing."

Lizzy pursed her lips. "I'm sure you're pretty good...." she hedged loyally.

He chuckled at that, touched by her staunch devotion. "I am 'pretty good' at self-defense. But he is better."

"He?" she asked nervously.

"He," Red confirmed patiently. "You deserve the best teacher and he's the best I know." At her anxious glance, he offered her a gently understanding smile. "I trust him implicitly, sweetheart. There's no need for fear."

She wasn't completely convinced—he could tell by her sudden unwillingness to look at him.

"Lizzy."

She shifted restively.

"Look at me, honey."

She acquiesced reluctantly.

His expression when their eyes met was serious. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then trust my judgement in this," he requested softly.

Elizabeth regarded him intently for a moment. He could see her apprehension brought on by the thought of allowing a strange man near her warring with her desire to learn how to defend herself against the evil that she had come in brief contact with that existed in the world.

"I won't leave you alone with him, Lizzy," he reassured her in the gentlest of tones. "I'll be there in the room with the two of you every time you meet, for the whole length of every lesson."

At his sincere promise, her troubled expression eased into something a little more calm, a little more confident. "You speak as if he already agreed to teach me," she finally said.
That's my brave girl, he thought, running his hand through the floating ends of her hair, twirling them absently around his fingers.

She leaned closer at his touch. "You haven't even asked him yet. What if he doesn't want to?"

"Oh, have no doubt--he'll teach you," Red grinned, imagining how the younger man was going to react when he informed him of his new assignment.

"He'll be patient with me, right?"

"He will," he assured her.

"Is he.... Is he as patient as you?"

"He'll be a good teacher for you, Lizzy." Curling his fingers tighter in her long hair, he gave it an affectionate tug. "I promise you that." He smiled tenderly at her as she floated closer--and was pleasantly surprised when she tilted her head, lips seeking his.

Keeping one arm braced up against the lip of the tub, he moved the hand that was tangled in her hair to rest lightly against her back. Her skin was so smooth against the tips of his fingers, puckered to rough ridges by their long soak in the water. He delighted in the feel of her muscles quivering there as she gripped the ledge they sat on so that the gentle pull of the bath's current wouldn't carry her away from him. He loved the way her mouth dipped softly into his, the way she tasted, the way her hands moved to rest against his chest as he turned toward her, the way she let out a quiet sound as their lips parted just enough so that their kiss could deepen ever so slightly.

After a few long and languid moments of kissing had passed, Red expected her to gently pull away from him as had been her wont to do over the last several days. But when she shifted even closer instead, fingers sliding around to hesitantly grip his shoulders, the tip of her tongue tentatively tracing his, he was rather taken aback--and yet was very pleased.

Desiring to give her the same sort of pleasure, Red reciprocated just as gently and so very carefully so as not to startle her. This was more than she'd been willing to do in a long while and the last thing in the world he wanted was to make her feel uncomfortable.

Lifting his hand from the cool marble, he extended it to tenderly cup the side of her neck, thumb tracing the hollow of her throat above her collarbone. He could feel her pulse swiftly beating there, thrumming in time to every breath she took. As she inhaled, he was keenly aware of the tips of her breasts just brushing against the tender flesh right beneath his arm.

Christ, what a tantalizing sensation!

And it was turning him on.

All of it.

Velvet heat flooded him, sensitizing his body. He yearned to pull her closer, to delight in the feel of her body pressed against the length of his, to have those slender thighs of hers wrap around his hips, to feel the slight swell of her abdomen tightly press his swollen cock up against him, to lose himself in the delicious sensation of friction as it would naturally rub between the two of them while he buried his hands in the tangled mass of her dark hair, arching into her....but he kept his ardor firmly in check.

And as much as he wanted to continue exploring the passion shivering between them, he knew that he should probably call a halt to this before either of them got carried away and did something they'd
regret later.

Sighing, he gently pulled away, lips sliding off of hers so he could finally meet her eyes.

Lizzy gazed up at him, blushing.

Unable to stop the knowing quirk of his eyebrow from lifting flirtatiously, he smiled down at her. "Well," he murmured. "That was nice, wasn't it?"

She dimpled shyly before ducking her head to lower it companionably against his shoulder, drawing her knees up to rest them lightly on the tops of his thighs.

It was endearing that she managed to curl up in her favorite position even in the bathtub.

Red wrapped an arm around her while the other rested back on the marble lip behind him. He breathed deeply, deliberately willing his aching body and amorous thoughts to a composed indolence. Idly he caressed her hair, enjoying how the silken strands slipped through and against his fingers. They'd stay like this for a few more minutes, he decided, and then they would get out, dry off, and go to bed.

A smile slowly curved his mouth as he looked down at the top of her head. It was going to be quite a busy day tomorrow for her and she needed to lose herself in a good night's sleep for as many hours as she could in preparation for it.
Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you so much for reading, for your kudos, comments, and support :)

Just a reminder of our current timeline:

It is currently late August 2006.

Lizzy is twenty-one years old. Red is forty-six years old.

I've received some questions regarding Liz's recovery and I wanted to share my thoughts on this with you all here :) 

People who have gone through traumatic experiences recover in different ways over different periods of time. For some people, it may take years to overcome emotional trauma. For others, it may take months. It depends upon the person and how deeply what they experienced has affected them.

Nearly two and half weeks ago in Sine Qua Non, Lizzy was almost raped and murdered. I believe she is making such wonderful headway in her emotional recovery, especially when I consider her age, her temperament, and what exactly she had experienced.

Unfortunately, recovery from emotional trauma, and even physical trauma, isn't all
uphill. There are stages. A person can regain strength, then fall a little, then pick herself/himself up again, then have a moment of weakness, a setback...then find confidence once again to move slowly forward.

I couldn't write Lizzy as recovering fully from her trauma overnight, or even over the course of two weeks, because it just isn't practical. It isn't real.

I thought that, perhaps, if someone who is reading this story is also in recovery, I want them to know that it's okay to take time to heal.

It's okay.

You're strong. You're a fighter.

You will succeed within your own time.

❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Elizabeth was anxious. Red could tell by the clamminess of her hand as it tightly gripped his. He spared a brief but sharply searching glance down at her again right before he swiped his keycard through the slot and punched the security code into the shiny, newly-installed keypad on door's righthand side. Before he had looked away to focus on inputting the passcode, he'd observed that her lips were nervously pressed into a thin line, that her pulse swiftly flickered in the smooth hollow of her throat, and that her color was still off. Two splotches of red stained her cheeks, the flush quite vivid against the rest of her fretful and pale face.

But she was here.

He squeezed her hand in reassurance before he pushed the heavy door open. His pride in her welled as she took in a deep, steadying breath before following him doggedly across the threshold.

She had made great strides today in regathering her courage. First, she had agreed to start her training today. Second, she had willingly slid into the town car to come here with him. Third, she had made the conscious decision to engage in polite, albeit brief, small talk with George, Red's driver. The way her fingers had fidgeted around his had betrayed just how apprehensive she truly was, but he had recognized her efforts for what they were and silently commended her for them.

The drive to the downtown martial arts studio he had purchased solely for Lizzy to have her self-defense lessons in was perhaps a ten minute drive away, but as Red had watched her furtively out of the corner of his eye while she chatted lightly with George, he had wondered just how long the relatively short jaunt had seemed to her. The further they had moved down the street and away from the hotel, away from her comfort zone, away from her haven of safety, the more pinched her perturbed expression had become.

But despite her misgivings, she had made it downtown to this building. Her desire to learn how to defend herself against the Grady Formanes of the world had built and built in her mind and heart until it had surpassed the debilitating fears that had goaded her into staying hidden upstairs in the penthouse suite...that had incited her to draw away from life.

She'd had many seemingly small yet largely significant victories today and she needed to be reminded of that fact.

Red released her hand and paused by the empty reception desk, running his fingers lightly down her spine.

Lizzy looked at him questioningly, face half-shadowed by the dim light of the room.

"You did well," he told her with a smile.

Conflicting emotions flashed across her eyes and he waited, wondering if she would give into the temptation to be viciously hard on herself. There were times when she was so fiercely self-condemning it almost caused him physical pain to observe it in her mannerisms and listen to it come scathingly out of her mouth. But she surprised him by swallowing those harsh words that he saw forming in the back of her mind. The flinty look in her eyes softened a little as she bit her lower lip just before the left corner of her mouth slightly quirked in a hesitant, self-conscious smile.
His expression warmed as he gazed down at her, glad that she acknowledged what she had accomplished so far this morning. The fact that she refused to see herself in a negative light just now was yet another victory. "Nothing you've done today is inconsequential, Lizzy."

"Especially coming here," she rejoined. Her expression was rather timid, however...there were tentative sparks glinting in her eyes just waiting to be stoked to ignite...to burn.

Red's nostrils flared in anticipation as he inclined his head in agreement. He couldn't wait for her to rediscover that volatile, impassioned, and fiery side of herself again. She'd been resisting its pull for too long, hiding from it because of the desperate shame and near-paralyzing fear that her soul had been mired down in. It was time for her to shuck those insidious trappings and embrace that uninhibited and beautifully spirited part of herself again.

He gestured for her to proceed up the flight of concrete stairs to their left. Elizabeth gazed wordlessly at them for a moment before resolutely squaring her shoulders and determinedly marching up them. Her long ponytail swung and bounced with every crinkling, forward step she took.

Red sauntered up after her.

Those loose pants of hers would have to go eventually, as would that long-sleeved t-shirt. At least she wasn't wearing the damned hoodie. The tee was form-fitting, and certainly was a better choice than the sweatshirt, but ultimately spandex clothing was better to train in. He knew she understood that. However, he was aware of why she hadn't wanted to wear those skin-tight clothes. He was certain, though, that once she had attended a few lessons, her desire to hide her body would fade as her confidence grew, and with it, her sense of practicality.

Lizzy halted so abruptly when she reached the landing at the top of the stairs that Red almost collided into her. Bracing his hands against the railings on either side of him, he leaned forward to murmur in her ear, "Move over for me, sweetheart."

Flushing scarlet with embarrassment, she slipped to the side and slightly hunched her shoulders, edging back to stand beside him, blue eyes fixed intently on the man with long, silvering hair who stood patiently waiting in the middle of the padded studio.

"Ah, Baz!" A genuine smile split Red's face as he purposefully stepped away from Elizabeth to approach him. As he'd expected, she followed closely behind him.

"Red," the younger man grinned, meeting him halfway. "You're late."

"Your watch is wrong."

"You gave me the damned thing!" Baz protested, sticking his wrist out to prove to his employer that it was indeed the timepiece he'd been given.

Red bared his teeth, but his green eyes glinted in good humor. "It's not my responsibility to make sure the 'damned thing' is set to the correct time."

Elizabeth watched with slightly widened eyes as they continued the companionable exchange, doing her best not to stare openly at the man Red had called Baz.

And what kind of name was "Baz," anyway?

Liz slanted furtively curious eyes on him. He was taller than Red, and more muscular. Perhaps that was due to the fact that he taught self-defense.... In any case, Liz could see them shifting and rolling beneath his tight, black shirt. His shoulder-length, dark hair, which was really more gray than black,
was tied back away from his squared face. A neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard framed his wide mouth, drawing attention to his startling sea-blue eyes.

She wondered how the two men knew each other. They seemed to be fairly good friends, to be teasing each other the way they were. And Red apparently had given him that really expensive watch.... The question danced impertinently on the tip of her tongue, but when Baz finally turned his full attention to her, she nervously swallowed it back.

"And you're Elizabeth," he smiled, his tone friendly, his eyes gentle.

She wondered how much Red had told him about the assault...about her.

Shifting to stand solidly on both feet, she stuck out her hand. "Liz is fine," she told him with a shy smile as he took it. "Elizabeth can be a mouthful to say, and since you're going to be, um, training me...." her voice trailed off as she glanced uncertainly at Red.

He nodded encouragingly at her just as Baz released her hand and affirmed, "That's right. I'm to be your trainer."

When she looked back at him, he gave her another warm smile.

There was something about him that was soothing her anxiety away. It wasn't just his smile, though that was part of it. He gave off an easy-going, personable air. He was affable but not blithe. He was also calm. Steady. He had those familiar traits in common with Red.

"Red said you were the best," she offered, finding herself returning his smile.

"Red said that?" Baz asked, feigning shock even as his teeth flashed in a grin. "Do you know how long I've waited for him to admit that out loud?" His eyes glinted shrewdly as he tossed a smug look at Red. "Can I finally get it in writing?"

Liz glanced at Red, who was waving a dismissive hand exasperatedly at the younger man.

"There's even a notary down the street," she slyly informed Baz, who burst out laughing.

"Red said side are you on? But when her eyes briefly searched his to gauge his real thoughts, they were alight, pleased and glittering with amusement.

Encouraged by his positive reaction, she found herself suddenly dimpling impishly at him.

Red reached out, quickly and affectionately brushing the knuckle of his index finger under her chin. "You get on with Baz now, sweetheart. I'll be over there," he gestured to the side of the expansive second-story room where the floor padding ended and a small table and task chair were set up.

"You," Baz pointed a finger at his employer, "didn't answer my question. Don't think we won't revisit this issue," he grinned impudently before spreading his toned arms wide and wiggling his fingers at Elizabeth. "Come on, Liz," he cajoled invitingly, walking backward to the center of the mat.

After bestowing a bright smile on Red, she turned and obediently followed her teacher.

As Baz began to lead her through warming up, Red walked across the room to sit himself in front of the steel desk. His briefcase already sat beneath it, propped up against one of the legs. He reached down and released both catches on the top in two simultaneous clicks. Then he pulled out a burner phone, a laptop, a pad of lined paper, and a pen. He was planning on getting a schedule set and
ready to disperse for next week's business plans and meetings while watching Lizzy practice.

While he waited for the laptop to boot up, his eyes flicked to Lizzy, who was stretching her body to left, right arm moving up and over her head in a smooth arch. Baz was standing across from her, leaning in the same direction, and had just said something that had made her grin.

Red was delighted to see her warming up to him. He'd had a feeling the younger man would be good for her. Baz was knowledgeable, clever, truthful, plain-spoken, and at times could be sternly curt, but only when the situation warranted it. His personality had just the right amount of dark, realist sarcasm and playful, light-hearted wit that Red knew she'd like and would come to appreciate even more. Baz wasn't her age, he was actually closer to Red's, but despite all he had weathered in his turbulent life, he had a youthful heart. Red knew she'd come to appreciate that in him as well.

A part of him had been a tad apprehensive when he'd brought her here today. Even though she had told Red at least a couple times now that she hadn't been able to remember what her Good Samaritan had looked like, he'd been a little concerned that she would recognize Baz when she saw him.

But she hadn't.

As Red had warily watched her introduce herself, there hadn't been one flicker of puzzled bewilderment lighting those big eyes of hers, or any sign whatsoever of a thoughtful frown curving her lips downwards or creasing her brow. As time had progressed forward, and as Lizzy had begun to feel comfortable enough to actually join in their teasing, Red had released the tension he'd been holding within in a long, quiet breath.

The secrets that he kept from her out of necessity were still safe.

For how long? The two lives you keep are intertwining as closely as lovers the longer you remain entangled romantically with her.... Red shook his head, mentally flinging that whisper of caution away.

Instead he forced himself back into the present, focusing his gaze on them once again. They had finished warming up and now Baz was showing her how to stand properly in order to throw an effective punch.

That was just like Baz--diving right into the heart of it.

Elizabeth carefully observed how he placed his legs and arms for a long moment before copying him. She fell into position relatively easily--some of what Red himself had taught her was probably coming back to her a little bit.

The man straightened and walked around her, eyeing her form critically. He couldn't hear what they were saying to each other, but he watched as Baz lightly tapped her left shoulder, which she dutifully angled more toward the front. Lizzy was right-handed, so she had to make sure her left shoulder faced her opponent.

Then Baz gestured for her to throw a punch, most likely to see where exactly her weight fell and how far she leaned to one side or the other.

Red watched her chew nervously on her lower lip. She may be taking to the man, but that didn't mean she was entirely comfortable with him yet....not to mention that she was still dealing with residual feelings of inadequacy. Obviously embarrassed, she threw a shy, half-hearted punch. There wasn't any ferocity behind it. There wasn't any fire...any power.

Baz tsked at her, saying something with a flash of white teeth as he grinned down into her flushed
Red’s hands clenched into tight fists as the protective side of him bristled. He had gone over Elizabeth’s state of mind with Baz at least twice so that the man would understand just how sensitive she currently was to criticism. She harshly critiqued herself enough—about everything. And she certainly didn’t need a near-stranger making her feel like shit. If Baz fucking did anything to make her withdraw into herself, to set her back—

Then Red blinked in surprise, that train of thought skidding to an abrupt halt as he observed Lizzy scowl heatedly up at the man.

Unperturbed by her unexpectedly fierce censure, Baz continued to grin widely as he began to walk around her, pushing at her right side, then at her back. Red knew what he was doing. He was tightening up her form so her punches would have more force behind them.

Did he realize that his poking and prodding was pissing her off? Was that his goal? To make her angry so that she would be fierce rather than self-conscious?

Her eyes began to glitter peculiarly. Red wasn’t sure whether to be delighted in seeing her long-dormant temper flashing so quickly to the fore, or whether to be worried that her anger dwelled closely to the surface.

Baz said something as he stepped out in front of her.

And by the way Lizzy bared her teeth at him in an indignant snarl, whatever he had said had bruised her pride.

It was enough to make her want to irately lash out and defend it.

Before Red could blink, she struck, her hard fist connecting solidly with Baz’s jaw.

The man stumbled slightly back, and, utterly mortified, Elizabeth immediately straightened and reached an upturned hand beseechingly out to him, exclaiming apologetically.

But Baz was thrilled. He shook his head, denying her apologies as he laughed, wiping away a small trickle of blood from the left corner of his mouth. "That’a girl!” he boomed, words loud enough that Red could actually hear them clearly from where he sat.

He managed to cover his grinning mouth with a hand just as Lizzy hesitantly glanced in his direction. He didn’t want her to think he was laughing at her. Instead, he arched a pleased brow before slightly inclining his head in approval.

Bolstered by the endorsement of both men, she shyly permitted herself a genuine smile as she turned back to face her teacher. The newfound pride that now shone in her eyes affirmed to Red that training with Baz had been the right call for her—that, perhaps, it was the best decision she had made for herself in a long while.

Chapter End Notes

I know some of you were hoping that Dembe would be the one to train Liz, and I’m sorry if I disappointed you! But according to a timeline I found online, Dembe is only about six or seven years older than her, whereas Baz is very close to Red’s age, making
him the best one out of the two men (besides Red) to be her trainer.

I hope you enjoyed the beginning moments of the comraderie Lizzy and Baz will form throughout this fic.

While doing my research for this chapter, I found out that Baz is supposed to be five years older than Red. Whoops! Ah well. Since this is AU, I suppose it's okay that Baz is younger. ;)

Thank you for reading, for your kudos, and your comments. I appreciate your support very much ❤

(PS: the chapter that all you romantics out there have been anticipating for a while now--myself included!--is coming up....stay tuned....)
When Red walked through the front door at eight o'clock Friday night, the first thing he noticed was the lighting of the suite. The reason why he observed it at all was because it was different than the typical.

Normally Lizzy kept the suite blazing in light, probably so she could see into all the darkened corners. Tonight, all the lights were off except for the dining room's crystal chandelier, which was set to dim. Soft rainbows sparkled through the crystals as the golden light seeped outward to touch the gleaming hardwood floor, leaving the area warm and inviting.

The second thing he noticed was that the long, antique dining room table was set for a romantic dinner for two.

This special occurrence had happened only once before since he and Elizabeth had become an item.

Red pursed his lips thoughtfully. It wasn't her birthday, and it wasn't his.... And he certainly hadn't forgotten any special occasion that pertained to them and their relationship. But evidently they were celebrating something of significance tonight if the romantic setting meant anything.

Two dinner place settings of fine, ivory lace linens were laid out over the polished mahogany surface. On top of those rested cloth napkins, cutlery, and two silver chargers which cradled two large porcelain plates from a set of four he'd purchased in Venice years ago.

Around the squared edges of the plates was an intricate inlay of Venetian glass. The colors shone like rubies, sapphires, and emeralds in the flickering light of the candles that had been lit and set in a group of three between the two place settings.

A slow, delighted smile lit Red's eyes and spread across his face. No matter what they were celebrating tonight, he appreciated Elizabeth's impromptu dinner date.

"Lizzy?" he called, setting down his briefcase on the kitchen's bar before walking over to the dining room.

"Hi, Red."

At the sound of her soft voice, he turned around--and stared. "Lizzy?"

"Welcome home." She was smiling shyly at him, clasping her hands self-consciously in front of her as he hungrily took in every physical detail of beauty before him.

The sleep-deprived, haunted waif he'd become so accustomed to seeing every day was gone.

Before him stood a young woman whose emotional struggles still gleamed in her eyes, but who had made great strides over the last three and a half weeks in recovering her confidence and learning how to forgive and embrace herself again.

He was so used to observing her clothed in loose-fitting pajamas, shapeless sweats, or skinny jeans and that slouchy sweatshirt that he had almost forgotten what her feminine figure looked like in a dress.
Almost.

Though how he could nearly forget the way a dress could closely cling to her form in that sensual way? All her curves were clearly emphasized and the titillating sight made his dry tongue unconsciously roll around on the inside of his mouth.

The dress she wore tonight was new. It had to be. He had certainly never seen her wear it before. It looked like it was fairly expensive. Perhaps it was.

As his eyes traced admiringly down her slender body, he idly wondered if she had bought it on the Internet or if she had gathered her courage some afternoon recently to attempt an excursion to one of the nearby boutiques that lined the street.

The long-sleeved, black lace dress and its accompanying dark sheath underneath made Elizabeth's skin positively glow. The delicate weave lightly hugged her arms and chest only to flare out just below her natural waist, falling in gentle folds to her knees. The pointed neckline wasn't as daring as some of the other frocks she had worn before, but it wasn't entirely modest either.

Red allowed his gaze to linger appreciatively for just a moment on the slight shadow between her breasts. As his eyes made their way back up to her face again, understanding dawned on him...she had dressed this way for him.

Gone were the usual ponytails and messy buns.

Tonight, her long, dark hair was pulled back into a loose French braid that hung delicately down her back. A few tendrils had been pulled from it to drift in soft curls around her cheeks. A couple trailed artfully down her neck to rest just above the milky skin of her décolletage, making her appear very seductive.

In the past weeks, it had not been uncommon to see Elizabeth wearing the barest of cosmetics. She had tended to dust a light powder over her face, had smeared lipgloss on a few times, and had perhaps applied mascara once or twice.

But tonight she had highlighted her attractive features mostly in warm, natural hues. Her big eyes were startling under the dark shade of burgundy buffed smokily into her creases. The bold look aided in accentuating their lovely sapphire color. A slightly lighter shade had been applied to her lips, drawing emphasis...and his eyes...to her full mouth.

The pink of her cheeks wasn't all due to the blush she'd painted on, and Red's mouth slowly curved into a knowing smile as he met and held her eyes with his.

She shifted restively as he took a step closer, slowly reaching a cautious hand toward her.

Christ, he didn't know what he wanted to touch first. Her arm? To feel her smooth, naked skin beneath the lace.... Or her hair? To tuck one of those curls affectionately behind her ear.... Or perhaps her cheek, to prepare her for his kiss....

He chose the latter.

His caress was light as he leaned, lips brushing over hers in a soft kiss.

"Beautiful girl," he murmured before taking her mouth with his one more time. As he pulled back, he smiled down at her, fingering the wispy hair framing her face. "What's the occasion, honey?"

Returning his smile tentatively, she shrugged a shoulder. "I wanted to do something special. For
Touched, his expression gentled. "Thank you. I have to say, I'm enjoying it immensely so far."

She bashfully glanced down, shrugging again. Then suddenly her smile turned into an impish grin.

"I knew you'd come home dressed like that," she gestured to the charcoal-colored designer suit he wore, "so I wanted to look nice, too."

"Mission accomplished," he grinned back at her, taking in her attractive figure once more. "Room service?" He gestured questioningly at the table.

She nodded, grasping his hand in hers. Then she tugged gently, indicating that she wanted him to follow her.

Elizabeth flushed with pleasure as he graciously pulled out her chair, solicitously gesturing for her to take her seat.

"I would've cooked for you," her eyes followed him as he seated himself at the head of the table, "but you know I can't cook worth a damn," she grimaced playfully. "I should tell you, the food I ordered...it's not just your usual 'room service' fare," she made sure to clarify. "I ordered from the Chef's special menu."

He looked over the steaming platters of gourmet, French infusion cuisine in eager anticipation. "This will be the first time I've eaten this particular Chef's special." He unfurled his napkin and draped it over his lap. "They rotate, you know."

"When I called downstairs to order it, and explained when and where I wanted it delivered," a smile tugged at her lips, "the Chef himself got on the phone to speak to me," she tittered quietly. "He nearly had a heart attack when he realized it was going to the infamous penthouse suite," she told him, eyes glinting in amusement. "You have quite a reputation wherever you go, don't you?"

A smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth as he poured wine for the two of them.

"Perhaps," he conceded, raising his glass.

She quickly reached out, slipping the stem between her fingers before lifting hers as well.

Their eyes met, the feeling between them growing even more warmly intimate...and words for a toast completely failed him.

God, she was so beautiful. So dear to him.

He, who prided himself in knowing exactly what to say in any situation, couldn't find a single thing of significance to utter.

It wasn't that he didn't know how to find the words. It was that there were too many of them darting and whirling about in his mind, and he couldn't pinpoint the correct phrasing to fit this moment. Just as he thought he had found a perfect way to toast the evening...the words danced just out of reach.

This wasn't the first time he'd become unexpectedly tongue-tied in her presence. The effect she could have on him sometimes shocked and honestly astounded him.

But she relieved him of having to speak at all by giving him a soft, understanding smile that was surprisingly wise beyond her years.
Conceding, knowing nothing really needed to be said, Red smiled as Lizzy clinked the expensive stemware against his.

The wine was strong and as smooth as silk on his tongue. It would, without a doubt, be the perfect complement to this delicious meal.

However, as wonderful as this particular vintage was, he sincerely hoped Lizzy would limit herself to just one glass tonight.

Her system had been purged of alcohol for almost four straight weeks now. Her body wasn’t used to it anymore. The last thing he wanted was for her to feel ill from its inebriating effects.

Perhaps if he lead by example.... Setting his glass down, Red took a cool sip of water that was also offered, pleased to see her follow suit.

Before he could reach for the serving spoon, Elizabeth laid a stilling hand over his.

"Let me...." she offered quietly, gingerly plating the delicious assortment for him.

Murmuring his thanks, his eyes caressed up her lace-clad arm. The way the detail changed in intricacy as it wound its way up her forearm and her bicep, the way her bare skin peeked out through the sections, was rather mesmerizing.

Tantalizing.

"Your dress is stunning, Lizzy," he told her. His rather husky tone betrayed him despite his conscious efforts to conceal just how strongly seeing her like this was affecting him.

She bit her lower lip, and he thought she was pleased, if demure.

"I thought it was pretty," she agreed as she plated food for herself.

He couldn't help but notice the sudden, slight stiffness in her shoulders that hadn't been there a moment ago and the cool way in which she half-deflected his compliment.

Red understood now that this wasn't just modesty he was observing in her. This was a defense mechanism to hide her insecurities from him...perhaps even from herself.

While she may be comfortable enough in her own skin again to wear such an alluring, dazzling frock, she was still trying to come to terms with the fact that physical desire on the part of the admirer tended to accompany such sincere compliments.

That was why she switched the focus of his original intent to how she thought the dress was "pretty." The adjective downplayed how lovely she really looked in it, and her wording made it impossible for him to continue to flatter her--unless he wanted to push it and have her withdraw from him.

And he certainly didn't want that.

"Tell me what you did today," he requested gently, moving the conversation to a topic he knew she would be much more comfortable with.

He watched the tension immediately bleed from her posture as she willingly and enthusiastically described her morning session with Baz. She soon had him chuckling and shaking his head between bites of the delicious food as she repeated the things Baz had said, and the sharp, quick retorts she had returned in kind.
It was evident by her amusing accounts that Baz was growing fond of her.

That wasn't to say that the guard had been indifferent toward Lizzy, especially since he'd been watching over her for close to three years.

But now, due to Red's insistence, the bearded man was getting to know her on a more personal level. The guard's genuine regard for her was certainly stronger than it had been before. Red was very pleased that they seemed to be finding a camaraderie...a rapport.

He gazed at Lizzy, silently wondering if she reminded Baz of his youngest sister who had passed away almost a decade ago. Now that he thought of it, Red could certainly see the obvious similarities between the two young women. And if Red could see them, then the guard had to be quite aware of them as well.

Baz was most definitely good for Lizzy, but she was good for him too.

"You're smiling at me."

Her quiet voice brought him back to the here and now. His expression softened as his affectionately amused eyes met hers.

"Can't I smile at you?" he questioned.

He caught a glimpse of something peculiar and complex gleaming there just before she glanced shyly down at the spoon she held in her hand.

Red speared another tender morsel on his fork. He watched as the butter glistened in the candlelight and dripped from the meat onto the dark green vegetables while considering what to say to her...to attempt to understand her sudden, mercurial shift in mood.

"I want to make love."

Lizzy winced at the sharply discordant sound of his heavy silverware clattering loudly against the expensive porcelain.

A blush suffused her features as she felt his eyes focus intently on her. Gathering her courage, she nervously peeked at him.

His expression was one of open astonishment.

That was the very last sentence he had expected to come out of her mouth. But was it an unwelcome one?

Absolutely not.

Visions of kissing her, suckling her breasts, feeling her pulse threading beneath his teeth as his tongue laved her, flashed swiftly through his mind.

The thought of the sheets tangling around them as he rolled Elizabeth to her back before positioning himself between her soft thighs made his member throb and his blood heat.

Red took in a ragged breath as quietly as he could, forcing himself away from those highly sensual fantasies.

Swallowing thickly, he steadily regathered control over his body and mind as he casually looked away from her to pick up his fallen fork from the sauce pooled in the middle of the plate.
With deliberately slow and dignified movements, he wiped the handle and tines clean with his napkin before setting it down with care on the squared lip. Then he folded his napkin twice and laid it gently on the table.

Only once he was positive that he had his emotions under his strict control did he lift his eyes to her. She was watching him warily and her cheeks were very pink indeed. Though in this case, he was uncertain if he observed a blush, or a flush due to embarrassment. It was very obvious that he had not reacted how she had expected him to. And he had yet to respond to her statement.

"Do you?" he asked softly, gaze intently searching hers.

Looking nervously down at her hands folded tightly in her lap, she nodded slowly.

"I'm sorry," she suddenly blurted out.

His brows knit together in confusion. "You're sorry?"

She bobbed her head. "I meant--I meant to wait," she winced openly. "Until after we finished dinner." A hand rose to flick impatiently at their half-eaten platters. "I wanted to be...sultry about it. Seducing you." She hunched her shoulders, acutely embarrassed. "But I...I was looking at you just now. And I..." She hesitated, glancing bravely over at him before confessing in a rush, "I felt this strong desire to be with you. And it just," she sighed heavily, "came out...."

Red was smiling warmly at her, eyes softening.

She probably wouldn't be very pleased to know that he found her stuttered explanation quite endearing, so he kept that thought to himself.

The fact that his sweet girl was beginning to acknowledge the abiding pull of the physical attraction between them was, in his opinion, a very good thing. And the fact that she wanted to not only acknowledge it, but to physically act on it....

"You want to make love...right now?" He needed her to clarify her comment. He had to be sure he knew what she really wanted.

Lizzy nodded miserably.

He leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table so he could be closer to her.

"You certainly don't need to look so glum about this, sweetheart," he rumbled, his tone playful and hopefully easing her nerves.

He was careful not to appear like he was laughing at her, but he couldn't keep his eyes from glinting in affectionate mirth.

Christ, was she charming!

She slanted a tentatively entreatying glance at him. "You don't think I'm...silly?"

"Silly?" He jerked his head once in denial. "Honey, that is the very last word I would even think to use to describe you."

"I had it all planned out," Lizzy pursed her lips, upset with her lack of finesse. "This isn't how I wanted it to happen," she mumbled in annoyance, hands fidgeting in her napkin before she balled it up and tossed it on the table in frustration.
"Maybe not." Red kept his voice even.

The rest of their meal now completely forgotten, his gaze settled unwaveringly on her. The anticipation he'd been keeping in check flared within his heart and then flooded his entire body as he slowly rose to his feet.

"But now I know your thoughts," he smiled. "There isn't any room for doubt in that regard, is there?"

Elizabeth unconsciously puffed out her cheeks slightly, darting a quick look at him. She swiftly shook her head, letting the air out in a diffident sigh.

Red was sure that she believed such a reaction to his equanimous question was undignified and immature. She was most likely hoping he hadn't noticed, since the very last thing she wanted to be considered tonight was inexperienced...ill-prepared.

His expression gentled as he gazed down at the top of her head. She had to know he'd be the last person to judge her so harshly.

Reaching out, he caressed the curve of her cheek with the tips of his fingers. As she turned her face up to his, he observed and acknowledged the apprehension gleaming in her eyes, understanding it for what it was.

Despite what she had confided to him, she was still...uneasy.

To make love tonight would be a huge leap toward accepting her sexuality rather than hiding from it. In addition to the healing progress she'd made before her training had begun, it was obvious that her sessions with Baz had aided in giving her much of her self-confidence back.

She wouldn't even be entertaining the thought of engaging in physically intimate relations tonight otherwise.

However, he remembered how she had evaded his compliment earlier about how beautiful she had looked.

Red's fingers lightly followed her hairline, finding a loose curl. He idly rubbed the lock of hair between his thumb and index finger, lost in private musing.

Was she rushing herself?

As much as he desired to take her into his bed again, if she had discovered just now that she needed more time....

He could, and would, wait.

Tenderly tucking an errant strand of the dark back behind the delicate curve of her ear, his fingers trailed along her jaw line. Tilting the small chin upwards, her eyes hesitantly met his.

"Are you sure you want to do this tonight?" His gaze gravely searched hers. "Because it's okay if you're not ready, Lizzy." He offered her a small but genuine smile. "It's okay."

Red watched as she carefully considered his words. The fact that she had to think on them at all was yet another sign that she harbored a few misgivings. But instead of withdrawing into herself like he had almost half-expected her to, she surprised him by leaning into his touch, confident eyes piercing
his.

"I'm sure that I want to try."

At last.

"With the understanding that I--"

"I know." Red inclined his head in understanding. And he did. Just to be close to her in an intimate way again would be wonderful.

And if they should make it, all the way...it would be fantastic.

If not, they could always try again tomorrow or the day after that....

At her declaration, the air between them seemed to change in temperature...and in feeling. Or perhaps he'd just become even more aware of the thrumming, sexual tension coursing between them.

The lover's passion in his soul that he had firmly quelled since she'd come home from the hospital began to slip from his mercilessly tight, mental grip. He was certain she could see it flashing in his eyes and feel it in his touch, for her nostrils flared as she inhaled his scent, her eyes suddenly glittering with her own, pent-up desire.

"Well," he murmured with a smile, leaning down to blow out the flickering candles. Then he stepped closer, running his large hands down her unresisting forearms. His heart skipped a beat as she curled her fingers willingly about his as he helped her to her feet. "Come with me then, darling girl."

As he led her down the hallway, their hands remained curled lightly around one another, in support and encouragement...and affection.

After ushering her across the threshold to the bedroom, Red closed the door quietly behind them. There really was no need, for they were the only two people there. But he did it anyway to offer her a secure sense of privacy.

Removing his jacket, Red slung it over a nearby chair as he kicked his shoes off. A small smile pulled at his mouth, feeling Lizzy's eyes following his every move. Slowly approaching her, he spread his hands in an open gesture, showing he had nothing to hide.

Dropping to his knee, he tapped her ankle. She startled somewhat at the touch but tentatively raised the small foot, allowing Red to remove her shoe, then the other.

Standing to his full height, Red looked down at her delicate upturned face, his expression desirous, yet gentle.

As their eyes met, Liz's teeth lightly caught her lower lip, pulling at it nervously. Inhaling shakily, she looked down at their feet, and then took another controlling breath.

Red took a breath of his own, reaching out to trace his fingers almost hesitantly down her sides, as if he couldn't quite believe what they were about to do.

"Lizzy." He rested his palms against her hips. "Please look at me?"

She lifted her eyes, clearly showing him the emotions, the turmoil, behind them.

"If you want to stop for any reason," Red assured her, "and I mean any reason," he soothed her trepidation, "I want you to tell me. And I will stop." Red squeezed her hips gently. "I promise."
Relief swept through her. To know that he cared this much and would be so patient.... It was enough to make her throat tighten with emotions she couldn't quite readily name right now.

She nodded wordlessly, closing the small space between them to press her lips to his in loving appreciation.

It began as a slow, languorous kiss, comforting and familiar in its pace and depth. As her lips gently explored his, she discovered that he tasted like the wine they'd sampled during dinner. That, in combination with his scent and the warmth of his hands seeping through the thin material of her dress, was heady.

She knew this...she knew him.

This was Red.

It was something she could get lost in for a long time, this kiss and the feelings of tenderness his large hands moving soothingly up and down her sides stirred in her....

Because she was safe here with him.

She was vaguely aware of hearing a helicopter fly past, the lazy sound of the filtered air circulating the room, the slow ticking of the clock on the dresser...all telling of time passing, but nothing definitive as to how long they shared the simple embrace.

It was funny how time could suspend itself during moments like this. And how she willingly allowed herself to get lost in the time spent.

His palms began to inch higher up her waist while his tongue tentatively slipped just beyond her teeth. She welcomed him in, returning the same sensation of soft pleasure he was giving to her.

She was so focused on the feeling of Red's skillful mouth sliding against hers that she lost track of everything until his thumbs brushed over the firm tips of her breasts.

A sensual thrill jolted through her, tossing her jarringly out of the moment.

She inhaled sharply, eyes flying open.

Red immediately broke away and looked down at her. "What is it, sweetie?" His green eyes were hazy with lust, but his concern for her began to overtake that. "What happened?"

Liz bit the side of her cheek, shaking her head, thoroughly ashamed of herself for overreacting in such a way.

"N-no. Red, I'm sorry," she breathed, visibly upset. "I don't know why--I mean, it felt good," she tried to reassure him. "It...I liked it. In the past, I've liked it. And I even liked it now. I think." She hitched an embarrassed shoulder. "I just...." her voice trailed off, uncertain of how to put her conflicting emotions into words.

"I moved too fast," he hypothesized.

"I'm sorry..." she apologized. "I mean, I know it's you, I just...." she sighed heavily. "I'm sorry."

"No, baby." Red shook his head, tenderly rubbing his hand along her back. "No. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking," he admitted softly. "I should have known better than to...." He paused briefly, clearing his
throat. "Would it be better if I...if I ask before I touch you?"

"I'm not broken," she protested, voice quavering.

"No," he agreed quietly, "you're not." He dipped his head, catching her eyes. "But we can't ignore what you've gone through these past few weeks," he stressed quietly. "There's no shame, none at all, in slowing down, in talking things through as we do them."

Liz looked down at her hand buried in his vest, the tension visible in the pale white fingers. "I feel like there's something wrong with me," she whispered dejectedly.

"There's nothing wrong with you," he countered firmly, pressing his lips reassuringly to her forehead. "You hear me, sweetheart? There's nothing wrong with you," he repeated in a slower, gentler tone before he kissed one of her eyebrows. "Be honest with me, Lizzy...do you want to stop?"

She shook her head emphatically. "But...I'm so nervous, Red," she confided quietly, flushing. "More nervous than I was when we did it the first time. At Terabithia."

"Then let's do what I suggested," he murmured against her cheek. "Okay?"

Her pride made her hesitate.

Elizabeth couldn't deny that a large part of her found comfort in the fact that by doing it his way, she wouldn't have to stress about what to prepare herself for--and when it would happen. How could she find pleasure and joy in this act if she was too harassed by her own worries to lose herself in it--in his attentions--like she wanted?

"All right," she agreed, voice muffled against his shoulder.

One of his hands moved to touch her beneath her chin, bringing her gaze to his.

"May I kiss you?" he asked, eyes serious as they searched hers.

A small smile hesitantly ghosted at the corners of her mouth and she leaned in a little closer, tilting her head to offer up her lips in answer.

Red was just as careful and as gentle in kissing her this time as he had been before. He kept his hands planted firmly around her hips while his lips nipped and slid against hers until her breath began to escape in quick, short bursts, until her heart began to pound loudly in her ears, its thrumming beat echoing throughout her body, until the bones in her legs began to feel like jelly and she had to tightly clench his vest in order to keep herself upright.

His mouth moved to nibble lightly on her earlobe. "May I kiss your neck?" His voice was a husky whisper in her ear.

Nodding wistfully, Liz squeezed her eyes shut as his lips trailed artfully down her slender throat to where it met the curve of her shoulder. A small gasp of pleasure escaped her parted mouth as his teeth and tongue sent a pleasant fire rushing through her.

Releasing his vest, she urgently grasped the back of his neck.

He growled very softly, the sound reverberating deeply in his chest, its erotic vibration making her bare toes curl in on themselves, nails scraping the luxurious carpet as they did so.
Their bodies were pressed quite close together now. She could feel the muscles bunching in his chest, in his arms, in his legs...and she could feel the hard length of his erection pulsating against her stomach.

This certainly wasn't the first time he'd been aroused in her presence since...well, since she had come to stay with him. But this time she couldn't just ignore it...she couldn't just pretend it didn't exist.

The provocative sensation of it pressing against her was an insistent reminder of what they were about to do tonight.

Apprehension and anticipation swirled intensely within her heart and abdomen, making her physically tremble with trepidation...with desire.

"Lizzy...."

Her eyes flickered open to look at him.

He flexed the fingers still tightly wrapped around her hips. "As much as I adore how you look in this bewitching dress...." His gaze wandered appreciatively down her body. "I'd like to take it off," he purred. "If you'll permit me?"

Releasing her shaking fingers from their tight hold on his body, she let them fall naturally to her sides.

Sliding his palms down her forearms, Red caught her clammy palms, threading his fingers between hers. Bringing their clasped hands to his mouth, he kissed her wrists, his eyes intently searching hers.

Could he feel her trembling?

A flicker of concern crossed his features as he felt the slight trembling of her body.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

She nodded mutely.

When his brows drew together, she squeezed his fingers in reassurance. "I'm fine, Red," she murmured, offering him a small smile. "It's okay. You can...you can take it off."

He studied her severely for a moment longer, as if assuring himself that she was telling him the truth...that she wanted this to continue.

Whatever he saw in her face seemed to satisfy him, for he inhaled deeply, an eager heat flaring in his eyes as he let go of her hands to bring his up behind her. One cupped the back of her neck while the other found the zipper. Deftly he pulled it down, following the line of her spine.

Liz shivered as the chilled air brushed against her heated skin. Goosebumps covered her flesh in a wave as more of her back was exposed.

When his hand reached the dip just above her ass, he took a half-step away from her so the dress would begin to naturally slip down her body.

As his eyes took in the rosy flesh shown to him in increments, he became unwilling to wait for gravity to have it's way. Smoothly moving the process along, Red carefully peeled the lace from her shoulders, from her breasts, from her arms before letting it fall to the floor...forgotten.

Standing before him wearing nothing but her skimpy, black lingerie, Liz blushed a bright red.
Observing her desire to instantly cover herself, Red pulled at the buttons on his own shirt in distraction. And it was only fair, after all.

She stared demurely at the grayish-blonde fuzz poking out of the V of his shirt, feeling much too vulnerable to look him in the eyes.

And he knew it.

Stepping close, he wrapped his strong arms around her, one large hand burying itself in her hair at the back of her head, fingers twining through the thick, woven strands.

"Beautiful girl," he told her with a tender smile, squeezing her lightly against him.

He felt her rub her cheek against his shoulder in response.

God, he loved the feel of her slender body melding against his. He dipped his nose to the hollow above her collarbone, inhaling her clean and unadulterated scent. His cock throbbed as these new, enticing sensations layered themselves over the many others he'd experienced with her tonight.

She must have felt it twitch because she tensed ever so slightly in his arms...but she didn't pull away. He was so proud of her, his brave, sweet girl.

"You're probably tired of standing, hmm?" his deep voice caressed her as his lips moved soothingly over her brow.

She hadn't indicated that she wanted to sit down, but he couldn't brush aside the fact that despite the tension in her shoulders, her nervous trembling hadn't subsided.

"How about we move to the bed?" He'd briefly considered moving her to the fainting couch at the foot of the expansive mattress, but then had thought the better of it.

Once they were both sitting, he didn't want move again and break the mood they were both trying to create. And he would not make love to her on such a small and unyielding platform.

Tonight, they needed a bed.

"All right," she whispered.

By the look in Elizabeth's eyes, he knew that she understood the silent motives behind his slow and gentle guidance, and it gave him heart to see that she didn't want to resist him. She may be struggling internally with herself, but that beautifully spirited part of her soul, which had been revealing itself more and more as the weeks had progressed, truly wanted to express itself in the act of lovemaking.

She had to know that about herself, just like he did. But this physical expression of her sensual vivacity could only happen if he guided her through the worst of her lingering feelings of anxiety. Of shame.

And even as he thought that, they once again revealed themselves to him in her body language. Red noticed just how stiffly she perched on the edge of the mattress, arms folding over her breasts. He hoped to soothe much of that tension away, but that wouldn't happen if she stayed balanced precariously in agitated uncertainty.

And her next step to overcoming that? Well...she needed to become comfortable seeing her own body, and his, in a sexually intimate way again.
"Lizzy."

Her eyes lifted to his face.

His expression was understanding and very gentle. "You're beautiful."

A warm blush colored her cheeks, one of her dimples making a brief appearance.

"You are," he repeated with a smile, reaching out to run the backs of his fingers down her silken cheek.

He was pleased to note that as he did so, her arms began to slide from their uneasy posture to dangle at her sides, her hands rubbing along her lap, the slight movement comforting.

There was a soft light in her eyes that hadn't been there before, and, given her relaxed and almost languid body language, he made the decision to take the chance and ask his next question.

"I would like to take all of this off." He plucked gingerly at his clothes, regarding her closely. "Is that okay with you, sweetheart?"

Nodding slowly, she watched in rapt attention as he unbuttoned his vest and shirt. He stooped to snatch her dress up off the floor before he placed it with his crisp, white shirt and vest.

Red turned and held her eyes as he pulled the cotton undershirt slowly up his torso. He lost sight of her for a moment as he tugged it up and over his head. Tossing it to the growing pile, he reconnected with her as his dexterous fingers pulled at his belt, the button of his trousers...and finally the zipper.

Once he stood in front of her wearing only his boxer briefs, a small, pleased smile touched his lips.

She was staring.

Well, that was certainly a better reaction to seeing his obvious state of arousal than the other she could have shown...actually recoiling in disgust. The fact that she didn't shy away from looking at his penis was a good sign. However, it was still covered. The true test would come when he undressed completely, when they were lying down together...when he entered her.

His heartbeat quickened in anticipation at the captivating thought.

_Don't get ahead of yourself_, he chided himself sternly. _One moment at a time._

Red eased down beside her, bracing one long arm behind her while his other hand reached for one of hers. She leaned against him and he brought her knuckles to his lips, bestowing a gentle kiss on them before settling the small palm on his leg.

His own briefly hovered over her toned thigh, in warning of his impending touch, before he trailed his fingers over the soft skin, touching her lingerie.

The way its matte, dark color contrasted sharply with the pale sheen of her skin mesmerized him.

"This is pretty," he smiled, fingerling the thin, scalloped lace band that circled her hips. Then he lightly traced the closest strap of the matching bralette. "As is this." He nuzzled her temple, mouth lowering to kiss her shoulder. "But I think," he murmured, sliding the strap slowly away from her neck, "I'd like to remove it."

As he waited for her assent, he placed kiss after kiss along the bare curve between her shoulder and neck, but slowly...oh so slowly...all the while delighting in the smoothness and slightly salty taste of
her skin. Her chest was rising and falling rather quickly now and he was very pleased to see that.

It meant that what he was doing was turning her on.

"Okay," she breathed.

Twisting the clasp in his fingers, Red felt the catch release. Then he smoothed the straps down her arms until the slip of black lace floated to the carpet.

He gazed hungrily at her, finally allowing himself to openly admire how her pale breasts naturally sloped down to end in pointed, darkened peaks. He itched to take them in his palms and gently squeeze them, or lightly rub her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers until she gasped her pleasure.

But for now, he contented himself with leaning down to find her mouth with his and kiss her deeply.

When he finally felt her begin to reciprocate and kiss him back with the same gentle yet fiery passion he gave to her, he lifted a hand. It hovered near her collarbones, fingertips barely brushing her skin.

"May I?" His voice was barely a breath above a whisper, lips just brushing against hers as he spoke.

Liz inclined her head, a sharp breath releasing from her parted mouth a second later as Red's large palm caressed one breast, then the other.

Cradling one mound in his warm hand, Red caught her mouth in a sensual embrace. His lips worked diligently as his thumb teased the tight little bud. After a moment, he gave the neglected nipple the same attention, drawing both into swollen peaks.

Knowing that this type of sensual touch had completely enthralled her in the past, he continued to squeeze and flick and stroke until she was boneless in his arms. Her head rolled limply back on his shoulder as the little, panting moans escaping her stirred the hair on his chest.

It was perhaps one of the most incredibly arousing sights he had ever seen.

His cock ached terribly. He longed to rid himself of the fucking trappings he wore. The thick erection pushed against the soft fabric of his boxers, threatening to break free of the front slit they contained. Until it finally did.

Dipping his head, Red captured her mouth as he hooked the thumb that had been teasing her into the elastic waistband, pushing them down. His erection sprang free as he worked the light fabric down his thighs and legs before gratefully kicking them away.

His sharp movements had brought her out of a haze of desire. Her lovely eyes slitted open, fell on his nakedness, and then widened considerably before darting up to his.

"Yes, darling girl," he told her, his own eyes glittering in tender amusement, "that's what you do to me."

And just as he had hoped, his playful words made her dimple, her white teeth flashing in a genuine grin as she glanced away. Her blushing expression was reserved, and he had expected that...but it wasn't fearful.

His gaze flicked thoughtfully to the nightstand across from them. He leaned over and opened the top drawer, silently considering the small, plastic black tube sitting there for a moment. Then he resolutely reached out and pumped some of the oily liquid into his palm.
Lizzy looked at the viscous stuff curiously as he shut the drawer. "What--"

"It's lubricant." As he slowly smeared it all over his erect penis, from base to tip, he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

The hurt flooding her expression baffled him, and he immediately turned his full attention on her. Before he could even form the words to ask her what was wrong, she whispered, "I never needed it before."

His eyes were gentle as they met hers.

"You hadn't been through the incident you recently experienced, either," he replied softly. Reaching for his undershirt, he wiped off the excess lubricant from his hand before tossing it back onto the pile of clothes.

"You're nervous, sweetheart, and your body...well, it knows."

She ducked her head, embarrassed.

"Don't do that," he murmured, expression fiercely entreating as he cupped her chin in his hand, gently lifting her face to his. "There's nothing wrong with you," he gravely repeated his words of reassurance from earlier. "Nothing. The lubricant is just a tool to make things easier and more...pleasurable."

Lizzy gazed up at him, wavering uncertainly between feeling ashamed and desperately wanting to believe that she wasn't somehow irreparably damaged.

His darling girl.

He would show her that she wasn't. Lizzy was once again being much too hard on herself by holding herself to an impossible standard—and finding herself lacking. But many victims of trauma had been known to do that as they were recovering. And she was already a perfectionist at heart, so the insecurities that were eating at her were especially ruthless.

She couldn't change any of that about herself in this moment. It wouldn't be fair of her to demand that of herself, and it certainly would be wrong of him to expect her to. He couldn't even fathom putting that kind of intense pressure on her...but she would continue to do it to herself if she wasn't checked.

Red couldn't manipulate her thoughts so that she would understand that she wasn't defective, or broken, and that it was natural for her body to show signs of sexual hesitancy when she was struggling with reconciling her insecurities with her desire.

But he could help her take the beginning steps toward that understanding by encouraging her to be patient with herself.

Lovingly he stroked his thumb against her cheek. "You want to feel good tonight, right?"

Flushing, she lowered her eyes and bobbed her head once.

"Trust me," he requested, voice soft. "This will make you feel good." He dropped a kiss to her brow. "And who knows," he smiled, allowing a mischievous lilt to color his tone, "you may like the sensation so much you'll want to keep using it."
Her mouth shyly dropped open in shock at his forward comment and he chuckled at the reaction, finally curling the arm that had been braced behind her tightly around her slim waist. His jaunty flirting had eased some of the tension in her. It was evident as her body pliantly folded against his.

Taking swift advantage of her current mood, he brushed the tip of his nose against the crown of her head. "Give me your lips," he murmured.

Lizzy turned her face up to his and he took her mouth--gently, at first. But as it had earlier, it didn't take too long for the kiss to blossom into something of a more ardent nature. Once he knew for certain that she was awash with her own passion, he allowed his free hand to caress and tease her breasts until she let loose a whimpering mewl of desire.

At the sound, the powerful urge to make love to her intensified. He could feel his flesh quickening in response, lengthening even more. The very tip of it bumped his abdomen as he carefully shifted his legs, turning more towards her.

"Honey...."

"Yeah?" she breathed.

"Let's lie down."

Her sapphire eyes flicked to his before she looked away to half-crawl, half-slide up the bed. The way her lithe body moved so sinuously against the lush sheets made his breath catch in his throat. And what made the vision even more tantalizing was that it was all unconscious on her part--moving that way. She wasn't doing it to tease him...it was just her.

Red pursued her up the huge bed and eased down on his right side. Following his example, she reclined on her left. Both their heads rested together on one of the many silken, feather pillows lining the antique headboard. Once she was settled comfortably, he laid a warm palm on her waist and edged closer, inch by careful inch, until their bodies were touching...and his hard cock was pressed gently between the two of them.

He watched as she anxiously caught her lower lip between her teeth. "I know you're nervous, sweetheart," he whispered compassionately, tracing her cheek with the tips of his fingers. "We will go slowly. As slow as you want. And if you want to stop, we'll stop."

"I don't want to stop," she replied softly.

Despite her apprehensively racing heart that betrayed her lingering feelings of discomfiture that were constantly drifting in and out of her consciousness, despite the dark memory that insistently kept attempting to rear up from her subconscious and soil this night with Red, she wanted to make love with him.

She wanted to not just physically embrace him as a lover again, but she desired to once more solidify that deeply emotional connection as well. Tonight, she wanted to reestablish their intimate bond, and she also hoped to reinforce it with something new...something that perhaps went even deeper than it had before.

Red had always been a significant presence in her life, his role changing as she'd moved through childhood and those difficult teenage years. And yet, in many ways, the core of who he was to her had remained unswervingly constant. His staunch and unquestionable constancy and loyalty over these last few weeks had proven to her just how much she really needed him in her life. After what he had seen her through, she couldn't imagine him not being there.
What she felt for him now in this moment, as he gazed patiently at her, seemed to go beyond the word love. That word...it was everything, and yet, it just wasn't enough. Saying she loved him was simply not enough. How could those four letters attempt to hold and express the powerful emotions thundering in her heart?

But she could show him.

Elizabeth propped herself up on her elbow and reached down to push the lace thong smoothly off of her shapely hips. Hooking her big toe under the band, she flipped it away and over the edge of the bed. Then she eased back down to the mattress, eyes lifting to his.

His gaze devoured her. "God, you're lovely," he murmured, reaching out to stroke a loose tendril of hair back behind her ear. The husky tone of his voice and his caress sent a wave of goosebumps rushing down her body. "May I hold you?"

Once she answered him by cuddling even closer, his arms slowly came around her. She'd forgotten how perfectly she could fit against his body.

Red stroked her back. "Are you cold?"

He probably felt all those goosebumps. "No," she sighed, rubbing the tip of her nose into the curling hairs on his chest.

Liz thought she felt him smile knowingly against her brow.

As her arms came up to clasp him, she could hear his heartbeat sounding in her ear. It wasn't a calm beat, for she was very much aware of how his length was still hot and hard. But his heart's rhythm was steady and strong.

Just like him.

She closed her eyes against the sudden tears that pricked like burning thorns at the corners. God, he was so good to her. Her breath hitched slightly in her attempt to control the exquisite emotions suffusing her. There wasn't a man alive who was better than Red.

"Lizzy?"

Perceptive as ever, he'd heard the difference in her breathing. "I'm fine," she whispered, nuzzling the base of his throat before placing a gentle kiss there.

As his hands continued to run over her back, she bravely moved her leg forward, rubbing her knee against his rough thigh experimentally. She felt his hands grow still, splaying across her shoulder blades, and she slanted a hesitant glance up at him.

A small, tender smile of encouragement was ghosting at the corners of his mouth as his eyes glinted down into hers with gentle patience.

Seeing such an expression on his face ignited a bit more of the confidence that resided within her, enough to where she found herself easing her smooth leg up and over his hip. Then she suddenly exhaled shakily, abruptly ceasing her movements when she felt his heavy shaft fall into the space she'd created.

One of his hands moved to trace her cheek. "Are you sure you want to keep going?" he asked, voice a husky rumble.
"I'm sure," she whispered.

Red nuzzled her before moving in to taste her lips. "My brave girl," he murmured. "My sweet girl." His left hand caressed lightly down her side. "Will you...will you let me help you?"

She knew what he meant and a pang of nervousness pierced her heart. But...she needed his help. She wanted it. Once her eyes flickered up to his, she slowly nodded.

He offered her a reassuring smile. "Can you move your leg just a little more for me, honey? Mmm...that's it." Once her thigh was settled higher up on his hip, he slid his hand down from her waist to caressingly pass by her abdomen to rest it on the neatly trimmed triangle of her sex.

Her eyes closed of their own volition as he very lightly palmed her there. Slowly her dark brows arched together as she began to accustom herself to the feel of him touching her in such a sensual way. Eventually, as his fingers grew a little bolder, the strange sensations began to metamorphose into those of pleasure.

He must have noticed the change in her breathing, or perhaps her facial expression revealed her enjoyment, for he propped himself up to give her a slow and rather heated kiss on her mouth before he trailed his lips down to her breasts.

Gently he took one nipple lightly between his lips and began to suckle. God, he had missed this. Blood rushed hotly through his veins as he felt the bud harden beneath the tip of his tongue, as he felt Lizzy tentatively, but willingly, open more to his exploring fingers.

It was all so intoxicating. Before he could swallow it back, a moan escaped from the depths of his chest.

"Red," she whimpered.

At the sound of her voice, he released her flesh immediately and looked up. Her eyes were closed. "Are you all right?" he rasped.

"Y-yeah," she breathed. "It feels...." She shivered. "It feels good."

"Good," he sighed, a smile curving his lips. "That's good, honey. Your body is telling me that too, you know. Down here." He stroked his middle finger just inside and a shuddering breath sighed out of her parted lips.

"I...I know." Her hazy eyes opened and lifted slowly to his. "Red...."

"Hmm?"

"I think.... I think I want to try."

Red exhaled slowly, fingers sliding carefully out of her. He had yearned for this moment for a long time and had vividly imagined so many various ways for how it could possibly come about. But even all the sexual fantasies he had secretly harbored hadn't prepared him for the pressure he suddenly felt in knowing that much rested on his shoulders tonight. He was responsible for helping her leap successfully across an insidious hurdle of lingering insecurities and fears. What they did together tonight would have a lasting effect on her psyche.

"I trust you."

The look of complete confidence she bestowed on him took his breath away.
He searched her eyes, finding that once again, in this moment, she was wise beyond her twenty-one years, for the expression in her gaze was knowing. Compassionate. She understood the significant position he was in and had an idea of how he felt about it, for she actually shared many of those same thoughts and emotions that were intimately tied to them.

She reached out and pressed a small, reassuring hand tenderly to his cheek.

He closed his eyes, leaning into her caress. How like Elizabeth to comfort him when she was in the midst of wrestling with her own Goddamned demons!

"I trust you," she reiterated softly.

And what an incredible gift that was.

He opened his eyes to regard her in respectful admiration for a moment before he leaned closer. She withdrew her hand as he pressed a kiss to her brow. "Remember," he murmured, "if you want to stop for any reason--"

"I know," she whispered, curling her hand around his broad shoulder.

His heart began to hammer in his chest as he reached down to hold his swollen member still slick with lubrication. "I won't go all the way in, sweetheart. Just a little." He swiftly rubbed his hand up and down a couple times, readying himself. "I will make it feel good, I promise."

Her tight grip on his arm revealed her apprehension to him, but she didn't recoil as he gently prodded her opening with the head, making sure it touched her in the place where she would feel the most pleasure. When he heard her sharply inhale, her fingers suddenly flexing in the sheets beneath her and over his shoulder, he knew he had found the right spot.

Liz buried her face into the place just below his collarbone, trembling as waves of arousal began to lap over her body. He was right. It did feel good. And as he steadily continued to bump and lightly push her there, those lapping waves of pleasure began to roll, creating a feeling of building pressure centering between her legs and smoothly spreading outward.

Following instinct, she shifted, her leg moving higher as her body pressed closer. The slick tip eased just inside of her and she gasped.

"Slowly, Lizzy," he urged, stroking her back.

Nodding, she swallowed around the lump that had grown in her throat. Was it from the terrible fears that still seethed deep within? Or was it from the staggering feelings of love she had for him?

Was it from both?

He must have sensed the conflict within her. "We will go as slowly as you want, sweetheart," he reassured her softly. "There's no rush."

Her anxious eyes darted to his.

As a man, this must have been hard for him, for she noticed that he was breathing rather heavily. But as she searched his face, she saw nothing but patience.

The rich, low timbre of his voice began to soothe her apprehension away, just as his caressing hand soothed the tension from her quivering body. As her uneasiness washed away with every gentle compliment he murmured in her ear, with every pass his long fingers made over skin, she felt her shivering desire begin mount once more.

He must have sensed the change in her, for his voice faded and he shifted closer, lips drifting from her ear to kiss her at the sensitive place between her neck and shoulder. Then he began to suckle her gently there, and the sensations his teeth and lips brought about in her body were quite stimulating indeed. They contracted and then expanded, seeming to swirl and entwine themselves with the pleasure building between her legs.

Panting, now overcome by her own arousal, she shifted and willingly took his full glans inside of her.

Red released his hold on his cock to wrap both his arms around her. "Hang on to me as tightly as you need to, baby," he rasped as she pushed gently at his shoulder.

Complying to her entreaty, he rolled to his back, steadying her on top of him as she wrapped her hands as tightly as she could around his arms. In the next instant, he felt her take him fully into herself.

His shuddering gasp echoed hers. Red closed his eyes, arms squeezing her against him as they both went completely still for a moment, adjusting to feeling one another in such a sensually intimate way again. Then he began to very gently roll his hips. His eyes flicked open and he raised a hand to stroke her hair, fingers gently catching in the loosened pieces of her braid.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

"Yeah," she breathed. Then, after a few more seconds passed them by, she propped herself up on her forearms, raising her head from his chest to look down at him.

Her sincere wonderment, her aching desire, and her wavering hesitancy were all revealed to him in a single, piercing look. Then she blinked and quickly glanced away, tentatively beginning to thrust her hips in time with his.

Keeping one arm wrapped around her smooth back, he brought his other hand over to cup her chin, gently bringing her face back to his.

Just as he'd thought...there were tears in her eyes. She had tried to hide them. Tenderly he caressed her cheek. She should know by now that she didn't ever need to conceal anything from him.

"It's okay, sweetie," he reassured her in a gravelly murmur, touching the tip of his nose to hers. "It's okay."

Lizzy sniffed, nodding.

He smoothed his hand down her spine to rest it on the small of her back. As his fingers splayed out, he could feel her muscles clenching and releasing enticingly as she moved...in both places. The physical thrills bombarding his senses slyly attempted to completely ensnare him. But he could not lose himself in his own lust at any point tonight.

She was depending on him.

Mentally shoving away the alluring temptations to a corner of his consciousness, he gazed up at her. A tear had escaped her left eye and he reached out to wipe it compassionately away. "Do you want
to stop?" he asked gently.

She shook her head with surety.

"Does it feel good?"

Lizzy hesitated, considering.

She couldn't fool him. Red immediately stilled his hips and the very moment he did so, he observed
the crease between her brows smooth out.

Ah, so that was it.

"I want you to set our pace, Lizzy," he encouraged with a soft smile, making sure that his tone and
expression would convey to her that he truly meant what he said.

Her glistening eyes met his uncertainly.

Before that horrible night nearly four weeks ago, she would have absolutely delighted in taking the
lead, allowing her passionate and sensual nature to overwhelm her as she bounced and arched
confidently on and against his body. He was certain she remembered that about herself as well, for
her lower lip suddenly folded regretfully between her teeth.

Red caressed his fingers down her spine. All she needed was encouragement. And once she keenly
felt pleasure in the act and observed with her own eyes that he did as well, she would regain more of
her confidence.

His lips parted, more words of loving encouragement dancing just on the tip of his tongue. But
before he could utter them, Lizzy began to move.

He closed his mouth, watching intently as her eyes veiled themselves behind her thick lashes, as her
head bent down in concentration, as her long, dark braid slipped with each small thrust she made
around her back until it hung down her right breast, the soft ends tickling his erect nipple. As his
palms slid up her thighs to hold her hips, he became mesmerized by the sight of her breasts bobbing
with her movements, those dark peaks just brushing his chest as she arched tentatively over him.

Christ, it felt wonderful. She felt wonderful.

"That's it, honey," he murmured, flexing his fingers over her flesh. "That feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Her voice was barely a breath.

"Mmm," he hummed, wanting to make certain she knew he was enjoying himself as well. "May I
touch you here?" The index finger of his left hand brushed against her tight, rosy nipples.

She nodded quickly, pushing her breasts towards him in offer.

Red began to slowly roll and tug them between the fingers of both his hands. If she'd been seated a
little higher, he would have taken them into his mouth, one at a time. But she wasn't, and he was not
about to push her beyond what she was comfortable with.

So he continued to pleasure her where he knew she'd enjoy it most, keeping all his movements
languid and gentle as she continued to thrust carefully, guiding his hips in her rhythm.

Elizabeth wasn't sure how long their bodies moved and clung together before she finally began to
feel the building, shivering sensation within her--the one that preceded her climax.
She whined, her eyes slitting open in honest shock.

She hadn't believed she would feel that tonight. She'd hoped for it, but she had almost been convinced that it wouldn't happen.

But now.... It was there. Within reach.

If she wanted to chase it.

She was aware of Red looking curiously up at her. No doubt he had heard the unusual noise escape her throat and was wondering at her.

"I'm okay," she said breathlessly before he could ask, experimentally increasing her pace as her hands tightened around his shoulders. "I'm okay."

He caught on fairly quickly. His green eyes gleamed knowingly up into hers as his white teeth flashed in the dark. "That's it, sweetheart.... That's it." His fingers released her breasts and smoothed down her slender slides to grasp her ass--the only truly bold move he'd made on her tonight.

But in this moment in time, she found that she liked it.

As she hunched over him, face buried in the crook of his neck, she could hear him murmuring words of encouraging assurance and love to her amidst his own groans of pleasure. Her body and heart hurtled forward, soaring closer, ever closer, to that compelling sensation just out of reach. And then suddenly it whirled around while rising up to slam into her--and it happened all at once and so quickly that it took her by surprise.

A soft, startled cry escaped her as the waves of her release crashed over her, through her. Liz clenched his shoulders tightly, trembling and gasping as she allowed herself to be carried away by those staggering, rippling sensations of pleasure that belonged to him, too...for he had helped bring her here.

And he was still moving, thrusting gently against her. Shaking her mind from the languid haze that attempted to consume it, she braced her hands in the silken sheets beneath them and rose up on her arms, hips rocking in time with his.

"Red," she whispered shakily, dipping her mouth to his ear. "Red...."

His hands gripped her body as his own climax gained swiftly on the heels of hers, gently lifting her up and off of his throbbing member before he came a split-second later.

He groaned loudly, fingers spasming around her hips as she slowly slipped to his left side. While he rode out the turbulent waves of his own release, she curled an arm over his robust chest, nuzzling his neck as his harsh breathing slowly began to ease.

A few minutes of comfortable but awed silence passed as they laid there together in the velvet darkness of the room before he turned his head to press his lips tenderly against her brow.

"Well...." he smiled, voice a gravelly murmur, "I cannot wait to do that again. You?"

Liz's lips curved optimistically as she inched up onto her elbow, kissing him in reply.

"Are you silently implying that I can't keep up with you?" he playfully questioned the hopeful glow he had seen in her features.
A quiet giggle burst from her.

Very pleased to hear that silvery laugh, Red flashed a grin at her. "Well?" he teasingly pressed her for an answer.

Dimpling impishly at him, she leaned in to recapture his lips with her own.

Her kiss tasted of many things, but confidence was the aspect that was most prominent to him. And as she herself deepened the kiss, Red anticipated a full evening ahead where the growing confidence of the strong woman beside him would continue to reveal itself to them both.
I think the title of this chapter says it all ❤

Thank you for reading and your support! :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Six days later on Thursday, Elizabeth found herself once again walking the teeming halls and busy courtyards of the University of Washington, her slender arms laden with textbooks and her thoughts brimming with all the assignments she needed to work toward finishing by next week.

Her junior year of college had officially begun on Monday, and it all seemed suddenly much more serious than it had before—"it" meaning her studies...which would ultimately lead her to the unknown life she had stretching before her, a blank canvas of endless possibilities.

Did most third years feel overwhelmed and awed all at once in this way? Or had she just leapt forward in maturity over the last month?

After recovering from Grady Forman's violent attempt on her life in the safety Red's suite and in his company, being back on campus and surrounded by wide open spaces, various buildings, noise, and people was quite...surreal.

For one thing, she had to reacquaint herself with being out in public again, speaking and interacting with strangers, whether they were students like her or professors. At first, she felt like everyone was staring curiously at her, and if she was alone without a familiar, friendly face to buddy up with, she darted from class to class until she could sequester herself up in the library and mentally dive into her work.

Intellectually, Liz knew people weren't really gawking at her. She knew women weren't harshly judging her, and men certainly weren't stalking her. In fact, most people probably didn't even give her a second glance. They all had their own lives to lead, after all.

Consciously, she was quite aware of all of this.

But she was an emotional young woman and the scars Forman's attack left on her heart were still fresh and pink. It would be a while before they faded, so she was still struggling daily to keep her volatile emotions from rearing out of her subconscious to the forefront of her thoughts and running rampant.

During the first couple days on campus, when she would weave her way through the crowds, especially throngs of rowdy young frat guys, it was quite difficult to keep from tossing paranoid looks over her shoulder or from startling easily when someone jostled her as they hurried to their destination. There were times during those first few days when she actually felt panic attacks coming on—brought about, she surmised, from the stresses of the jarring, unpredictable environment she had so suddenly submerged herself in.

Once she felt an attack coming on, when her breathing began to hitch sharply and she felt light-headed and chilled, she abruptly stopped walking and braced herself firmly against the nearest tree or wall, or sat down hard on a nearby bench, hands clasping tightly in her lap, and she breathed deeply like Red had taught her.

In and out.

In...and out.
As she shakily drew in breath after breath, as her heartbeat finally began to calm, her swimming thoughts refocusing, she impatiently tried mastering her irrational fears, reminding herself that she was safe, that Red was just a phone call away, that she had been training with Baz and knew how to defend herself. Not that she was a master of attack and defense like he was, but she was certainly much better off than she had been a month ago.

She wasn't weak.

She was strong.

Wasn't she?

But after the third close call passed on the fourth day of school, Liz stared down doubtfully at the cell phone she was clenching in her clammy hands, hot tears of frustration pricking her eyes.

Was she really so strong if she was having setbacks like this?

Flipping her phone open, her fingers dialed Red's number...but her thumb hesitated over the send button as she wavered indecisively on what she should do.

This wasn't an emergency. She had managed to control her breathing and even calm herself. Despite her longing to hear his reassuring voice, she didn't want him to worry about her.

Pride had kept Liz from telling him about the other three close calls that had happened on the first and then second days of classes. When she hadn't experienced one yesterday, she had been heartened and had fervently hoped that these bouts of anxiety that had been coming unexpectedly upon her had dissipated entirely since she was adjusting more and more to campus life again.

But now that she had experienced a third one in less than a week....

Her pale thumb hit the call button. Whether her finger had slipped or she had subconsciously done it, she couldn't say.

The line immediately rang once.

Shit.

She didn't want him to be concerned!

Swiftly Liz snapped the phone shut and defiantly stuffed it into her jeans pocket.

It wasn't until ten minutes later, when she was in class listening to one of her psychology professors lecture, that she felt it insistently vibrate twice against the top of her thigh. Bracing herself, she quietly slipped the device from her soft denim, flipped it open, and glanced down at Red's message.

-Do you need to talk?-

Liz looked quickly up at her professor, who had paused in speaking and was currently scrawling something illegible on the whiteboard. Frowning, she squinted at the spidery handwriting. She'd have to peer at her partner's notes later to know what in God's name he was writing. Why did all professors have handwriting like doctors? Liz sighed. She was determined to keep her cursive neat and precise throughout college and when she finally made it out into the real world, too!

-Shit.

She didn't want him to be concerned!

Swiftly Liz snapped the phone shut and defiantly stuffed it into her jeans pocket.

-Do you need to talk?-

Liz looked quickly up at her professor, who had paused in speaking and was currently scrawling something illegible on the whiteboard. Frowning, she squinted at the spidery handwriting. She'd have to peer at her partner's notes later to know what in God's name he was writing. Why did all professors have handwriting like doctors? Liz sighed. She was determined to keep her cursive neat and precise throughout college and when she finally made it out into the real world, too!

Shaking herself from her musings to take advantage of the brief lull in the classroom, she sent back, -No. I'm okay.-
In the weighty silence that followed, she could almost see him giving her a searching look.

God, even over text he could read her like a book.

Swallowing thickly, she chewed lightly on her lower lip, nervously waiting for his response.

-if you need me,- he finally replied, -I'm here.-

Breathing a quiet sigh of relief that he hadn't pushed her, she texted back, -I know. Thank you. I'll see you tonight?- 

-of course. I promise I won't be late. George knows to pick you up at the library at seven like he did yesterday.-

-I can always just take a cab.-

-Why on Earth would you do that when we have George?- She could almost hear the exasperated growl in his words and it made her grin.

Red had offered for her to stay with him in his suite while she looked for an apartment closer to campus, and she had taken him up on his offer.

This meant, of course, that Red insisted she take advantage of George's services.

When she had begun to stammer out a flustered refusal, Red had waved her stuttered exclamations away, telling her blithely that George received a handsome salary and that taking her to and from the university was certainly not out of his way.

So she had reluctantly agreed.

Of course, her feelings of shy embarrassment for having a private car and driver at her disposal had faded over the course of the week once she began to fully appreciate the convenience and luxury it afforded her.

George's sleek, black town car was akin to a small limousine. Liz had room to lay out all her texts and notebooks on the leather seats so she could work on her assignments and readings while traveling back into the heart of the city. The car even had a supply of snacks: from expensive wines and champagnes to ice cold beers, bottled spring waters, and sodas. There were even jars of gold-wrapped candies and chocolate-covered almonds, tins of freshly-baked snickerdoodles and chocolate chip cookies, and small bags of various kinds of organic, flavorful chips in a basket next to the small icebox.

More than once she hadn't been able to resist the lure of all the delicious snacks. When Red had finally asked her with thinly veiled concern why she hadn't been finishing her dinners over the last few nights, she had given him a helpless grin and a shrug, finally admitting to her guilty pleasure.

Rather than being annoyed, he had actually looked quite pleased. She had a feeling it was because he was relieved to see her normal appetite returning now that she was in school again.

Well, she was glad too.

Her blue eyes glinted with amusement as she texted back, -I was just kidding.-

She could almost see him scowling in half-seriousness. -It's hard to tell tone through this damn texting, Lizzy.-
“Why do it so often then?” she teased. “It’s more of a younger generation thing, anyway. I’m honestly surprised you do it as often as you do.”

“You certainly know how to wound a man’s pride, sweetheart!”

“I was kidding!” she hurried to reassure him.

“So was I.”

Liz dimpled.

“Shouldn’t you be paying attention in class?” This last came on the heels of his previous text.

Wrinkling her nose at the screen, she quickly typed out, “Yeah, probably! I’ll see you at home.”

“I’ll see you at home.”

Home.

As much as Liz had come to think of the penthouse as her home over the last month, practically speaking, she really needed to live somewhere much closer to the university. And honestly, it wasn’t fair to Bronn to keep him cooped up in a hotel, no matter how spacious the suite’s rooms and veranda were. He was a large dog and needed space to let loose and run, especially now that his paw pads had healed.

But there was more to it than that.

She wouldn’t go back to her old duplex. She couldn’t. Every time she’d walk past the pool, she would see Lauren’s dead body sprawled, naked legs spread, glassy eyes staring, her face frozen in terror. Every time she’d step up her driveway, she’d look at the walkway winding before her and remember the overwhelming fear and helplessness she’d felt as Forman had attempted to rape and then murder her.

So it had been her idea to start looking for somewhere new to live. Even though Red had given no indication of wanting her to move out, she had felt deep down that it was time for her to independently stand on her own two feet again. She had all but foisted her presence upon him when she had desperately needed him and he, sensitive gentleman that he was, had allowed it. But the worst of the crisis within her had passed, and her pride, maybe even her vanity, clamored for her to show him that she wasn’t broken, that she was able to live alone, outside of his constant protection.

On Sunday, when she had quietly announced her intentions to move out over dinner, Red had given her a piercing look over the rim of his glass. It had been a look of surprise, at first. But as he’d held her eyes, his expression had smoothed into one of quiet thoughtfulness.

Then he had asked her if she would like his help in searching for a new apartment.

As she had nodded gratefully, relief had swept through her, chasing her feelings of uncertainty away. Liz hadn’t needed to explain in detail to him why she wanted to move out. It had seemed like he already had an idea of her reasoning, and his willingness to aid her in her desire for independence warmed her and reassured her that she was doing the right thing.

But later that night as they had rested drowsily against one another, the sweat from their lovemaking cooling their flushed skin, she had mustered her courage and had brought up the subject one more time. Even though she had thought she’d known where he stood on the matter, she had needed to be certain of how he really felt.
She had needed to actually hear him say the words that he wasn't angry with her.

"You're not upset, right?" she'd asked, her soft voice quietly breaking the languid silence between them.

Red had stirred and had slowly shifted to peer questioningly down into her upturned face. "Upset?"

She had quickly glanced down to nervously study the curling hairs on his bare chest. "About me wanting to move closer to school."

"No," he had shaken his head, frowning slightly. "Of course not." Then his brow had creased in sudden concern. "Did I give you the impression that I was?"

"No," she had quickly jerked her head in denial. "I just...." She'd darted a swift glance up into his face before continuing, "I just wanted to make sure."

"You thought I'd be upset with you...because you want to move closer to the university?" His eyes had searched hers. "So the commute won't take as long? So you can have a bigger place so Bronn will have room to run?" He'd reached out to touch her chin, bringing her restless eyes back to his. "So you can be even more secure in yourself again?" This last was said more slowly, and with compassion.

She had shrugged a smooth shoulder self-consciously at the quiet understanding in his voice.

"Honey," Red had smiled reassuringly, "if I were a lesser man and insecure in our relationship, then...yes, maybe I would be." He'd caressed her cheek with the back of his finger. "But I know exactly where we stand with one another. I don't take your wanting to move out as a slight." His expression had softened as he'd studied her face. "I do understand, you know," he had told her gently.

She had flushed, feeling relieved as well as a little foolish. "I should've just kept my mouth shut," she'd muttered, embarrassed that she had doubted his sincerity.

"No."

The vehemence in his tone had startled her and their eyes had met again.

"I'm glad you spoke up." There'd been a sense of gravity between them that hadn't existed a moment ago. "I want you to always feel like you can talk to me." His fingers had moved to tuck a lock of tangled hair behind her ear. "About anything."

She had leaned into his caress. "You've said that to me before." And he had, multiple times over the last month...and throughout the years he'd been in her life.

"It bears repeating."

His expression had been soft, but his tone of voice had been unreadable. Did he not think she believed him? Because she did.

"I do trust you, Red," she had whispered fiercely.

His eyes had gleamed with a smile at the fire in her voice as he'd run his hand through the heavy fall of her hair.

Liz had wanted to say "thank you" into the charged silence growing between them, but the words
had lodged themselves in her throat, completely unwilling to roll easily off her tongue.

They just hadn't seemed to be enough.

Inching herself up on an elbow, she had leaned closer to kiss him on his lips.

*There.*

Something tight in her heart had eased as their mouths had met and had eased apart and then had slid together again.

*This* was how she could show him what she was feeling inside. The kiss had genuinely expressed the deep sentiments of gratitude--and love--she'd felt in that moment for him.

He'd known it, too...he must have, for the passion in his response was just as tender and as deep.

"For the record..." his lips had curled as they had finally slipped delicately off of hers to trail up to her ear, "I'm quite proud of you, Lizzy."

She'd closed her eyes as he had nuzzled her temple.

"For all that you've accomplished over these past weeks," he had continued quietly, the stubble on his chin lightly scratching the sensitive place beneath her earlobe, making goosebumps rise in a wave over her entire body. "For all that you want to do...for going back to school tomorrow, for desiring to have your own space...." Leaning back slightly, he met her eyes again, his own serious. "I'm so proud of you."

Liz grasped hold of that memory and held on tightly to it in the back of her mind for the remainder of the afternoon and early evening. It rested there, a reassuring light nestled in the shadows of self-doubt that had been creeping in since she'd felt that crash of anxiety earlier.

When she finally slid into George's car when it rolled into the library's turnabout at seven o'clock sharp, she was delightedly surprised to find Red waiting inside for her on the long, black leather seat.

"Red!" she exclaimed with a happy smile, tossing her book bag on the floor before shutting the door behind her. "I thought you had a meeting tonight."

"It was moved," he replied airily, gathering her close against him for a deep kiss that made her heart pound.

"I'm glad you're here," she murmured rather breathlessly once he released her mouth. Then she glanced self-consciously toward George--and found that a black panel greeted her line of sight rather than the back of the older man's head.

"I thought you'd appreciate a little privacy," Red explained with a twinkle in his eye, expression knowing.

She blushed. "I didn't know the car had that," she gestured toward the panel.

"Convenient, isn't it?" he grinned, leaning back against the cushion as the car began to move forward.

"Very." Relaxing lightly against him, she pulled her knees up to rest them gently on top of his thighs. "Is there a reason you want...privacy?" She fluttered her lashes flirtatiously at him, and his grin widened slightly as he reached out to affectionately cup her cheek in his palm.
"While the thought of making love to you in this car, with its tinted windows and sound-proofed barrier, is a tantalizing one..." he murmured as he ran his fingers slowly down the side of her neck to brush against her waist and then to finally curl around her hip, "I think we need to save that experience for another time."

Liz stiffened slightly, recognizing this particular lighthearted tone. It was the one he used when he was about to speak seriously with her about something of a sensitive nature but didn't want her to immediately clam up on him.

She should have known that he wouldn't allow her accidental--or purposeful?--call to his phone go unspoken of for very long.

God, he knew her so well.

Too well.

"I'm fine," she told him defensively, wincing at how guilty she sounded.

A brow arched. "Are you?" he asked quietly. "You called me today."

She shrugged uncomfortably. "But then I hung up."

"Lizzy."

Biting her lower lip, she lowered her gaze, somewhat ashamed of herself for behaving in such a way to where a gravelly note of exasperation actually colored his voice. It reminded her of how he'd used to admonish her when she'd been a little girl throwing a temper tantrum.

She certainly didn't want him seeing her as immature, especially when she was trying to reestablish herself as a self-assured woman in his eyes.

"I hung up because I got myself under control." The words came out in a husky rush and she hitched an embarrassed shoulder, eyes flickering to his.

Concern creased his brow. "You had a panic attack?"

"No," she shook her head quickly, flushing. Liz refused to call what she had experienced by that name. She didn't dare label it. If she gave it that name, it would hold too much sway over her.

"Nothing so...full-blown." She took in a deep breath and then let it out slowly. "But...it was the third one I've had this week."

Red's nostrils immediately flared.

"I didn't tell you because I kept thinking 'that'll be the last one' whenever they came on me," she rushed to defend her actions before he could demand why she hadn't told him. "I think..." she hesitated, then continued quietly, "I'm pretty sure it's because I'm having a little trouble adjusting to being on campus."

His expression became less heated and more thoughtful. "Is it all the people?"

"I guess," she hedged, cheeks burning hotter with shame. "The people and...my schedule."

He cocked his head in gentle query.

"I mean...like, my day-to-day schedule isn't as predictable anymore." Understanding dawned in his eyes as she continued, "It's...regimented, sure. But the unpredictability of it all...." She cleared her
throat, looking down. "It's been disconcerting, Red."

"I can imagine," he replied, tone softly empathetic. His free hand drifted over hers. "You didn't have to bear it all alone this week, sweetheart."

Her eyes flicked hesitantly to his.

His expression was tender. "Your anxiety. Your doubts."

"I know," she murmured. "I know you're here. And it's not that I don't trust you. But...."

"But....?" He squeezed her fingers in encouragement.

"I'm tired of being weak!" The breathless words burst from her before she could stop them. "I'm tired of feeling like this. Like something's wrong with me. I thought that if I didn't talk about these--these anxiety attacks, or whatever they are--that they'd stop." She ground her teeth against the sudden onslaught of anger and disappointment she felt so deeply in herself--and to keep more humiliating admissions from escaping past her lips.

"You're not weak." Red's voice was firm. "Impatient? Yes. Prideful?" His mouth twitched very slightly. "Yes."

Her eyes narrowed as they searched his.

"Don't misunderstand me," he soothed. "You're allowed your pride, Elizabeth. We all are allowed it." He shook his head in understanding. "Some days it's all that keeps us standing tall." Then he met her eyes again, his own grave. "But don't allow it enough free rein to where it will harm rather than help you."

Liz's eyebrows knit together, wondering what he meant.

"Sometimes talking things out is better than keeping them bottled up to where they seek and finally find a physical outlet," he explained gently.

She frowned down at their clasped hands, understanding that he was suggesting the bouts of anxiety could have possibly been avoided if she had confided in him from the start.

"Did you think that if you shared with me how adjusting to being back at the university was...difficult...I'd think of you as weak?"

"I didn't want you to worry," she whispered.

"Because you thought I'd think you weak."

She hitched a discomfited shoulder.

He let out a quiet breath and lifted his fingers to touch her cheek. "Look at me, Elizabeth. Please."

It was the please that compelled her. Slowly her eyes lifted to his.

"I've said it before and I'm going to say it again: you aren't weak. You've overcome much in the span of a month, Lizzy, but you will not be the woman you were before...before the incident." His tone was very gentle. "It's not fair of you to expect that of yourself."

"But I want to be that woman again." The quiet admission of longing came straight from the very depths of her heart.
"I know you do, honey. I know." Red caressed her cheek in compassion. "But that woman didn't know how strong she really was."

She gazed at him, expression quite fragile indeed. "Are you saying that...that you don't miss her?"

"I'm saying," he replied slowly, "that I have much respect for the strength you've shown me...for the woman you've become." A small, encouraging smile ghosted over his lips. "Perhaps it's time you show yourself what I see."

Elizabeth reflected much on herself that night. And it wasn't easy. Self-reflection never was, especially when she had to closely circle traumatizing memories she wanted to leave buried and never mentally touch again. But after she shoved her pride firmly to the back of her mind, she was able to study herself from a more...detached stance, and she began to understand what Red had been saying about her.

She had overcome so much in such a short amount of time. Even though every week had felt like a lifetime while she'd been living them, four and a half weeks was just a blip of time in the grand scheme of things. By the end of each week, she had tussled with and had succeeded in hurtling over many exceedingly difficult challenges and insecurities amplified by her fear, self-doubt, and shame.

Obviously she was still struggling emotionally, as the anxiety she'd experienced had shown her this week. But she grudgingly admitted to herself that Red was right in that she needed to give herself more credit...that she needed to be much more patient and understanding with herself as she continued to move forward with her life.

To help combat her lingering uncertainties and insecurities, she set and kept to as regular of a schedule as she could on campus and in the city while she stayed with Red. She also made the effort to talk to him about her day...about her classes, about how she felt about them, about her friends or people she met.

Sometimes those conversations lead to deeper, more philosophical ones, something she began to enjoy because it began to dawn on her that he was speaking to her differently...more as an equal. Not that he hadn't respected her before. He had.

But there was something more to their conversations now that hadn't been there before. Often he would ask for her opinion on an issue and they'd lose themselves in the art of witty or soulful conversing and, sometimes, even debate. They didn't always agree, and many times he would give her advice even if it was unasked for. But that had always been his way and it didn't offend her. She could see that he spoke from life experience...that there was merit behind what he was saying.

What these conversations proved to Liz was that Red's view of her was changing yet again. She was maturing, as was his perception of her...and so was their relationship.

As the weeks continued to progress, taking them further into autumn, she threw herself even more whole-heartedly into her studies, keeping her mind open and listening hard within to see in what direction her intuition would guide her, Psychology or Law.

She still saw Katie and that particular group of friends on campus for lunch or coffee. Liz had kept in contact with Katie during the latter half of her recovery, but only through text. So Katie knew exactly what Liz had gone through and informed those who asked. When the semester had started, she had made sure to tell the girls and young men not to pester Liz about it unless she wanted to talk about what had happened to her.
When Liz had actually seen Katie for the first time in a little over a month, she'd observed her friend's eyes widen slightly in shock.

Elizabeth had felt a burst of self-conscious embarrassment as Katie had managed to hide her concern behind an upbeat "I've freaking missed you, girl!" and an enthusiastic hug.

The stark difference in her appearance and behavior had apparently still been quite noticeable then, but Katie was a sweet enough friend not to comment on how thin she'd looked or how reserved she'd been.

Over the next five weeks, Katie made consistent efforts to bring Liz more and more out of her shell. And even though she was still hesitant to take her friend up on her weekend offers to go out shopping, dancing, or drinking in the city, Liz certainly appreciated them.

She liked knowing she wasn't forgotten about.

But her constant declining of Katie's invitations was beginning to cause a bit of a rift.

"I'm starting to think she really doesn't believe me anymore when I tell her I appreciate her offers to hang out," Elizabeth confided in Red one Saturday night in early October.

"Who, Katie?" Red asked, looking up from his book to observe her frowning down at the text she just received.

At her dejected nod, Red tilted his head slightly to the side. "You could go out, you know," he stated slowly, watching her thoughtfully to gauge her reaction. "You don't need my permission. And I certainly wouldn't begrudge you an evening out with your friends."

"I know that." She shook her head quickly. "That's not it, Red. Then she sighed, looking down at her hands as she set her phone down on the arm of her chair. "They're...at a bar."

"You used to frequent them all the time."

"I know," she muttered, picking at her nail. "I guess I just don't want to deal with drunk guys trying to pick me up." She added a huff to her tone...feigning hauteur to cover the sudden anxiety brought on by the very thought of being in that loud and flashy milieu where a woman had to be on her game and on her guard all at once, even if she was with a group of friends...even if she was in a relationship.

Liz used to relish being in that kind of socially challenging environment, especially when meeting new people. She had thrived on its pulsating energy and had manipulated the undercurrents beneath what was being said by all parties there to further develop her own reputation--and to just let loose and have a good time!

But now....

She bit the inside of her cheek, rubbing her sweaty palms against the tops of her thighs.

"What I'm hearing," he said carefully, marking his place before closing the book, "is that you lack confidence in yourself." He met her eyes, his expression patient. "You need to start thinking about what else you can do to find it again."

"I'm training with Baz three times a week," she immediately defended herself.

"Yes." He regarded her gravely, though not unkindly. "But has that activity been enough for you?"
No. But he already knew that. Liz's nostrils flared and she stubbornly glanced away from him.

They'd spoken of this a few times before...her insecurity, her lack of confidence. It was an incredibly painful subject for her, so it was much easier to brush this consistent advice off and willingly choose to ignore it and the part of herself it pertained to than follow it and once again branch out into the world even more.

Red must have observed the conflict skittering across her face, for he prudently turned the conversation safely back to her original comment. "If you want to show Katie you still want to be her friend, what if you ask her to go out during the day next weekend? You could take her to lunch--or do you both tend to go Dutch?"

Her expression smoothed out into something more thoughtful as she nodded. "Yeah. We tend to split the check. Usually."

He shook his head at that, an amused smile flickering over his lips.

Upon seeing that, she wrinkled her nose at him. "What?" she asked defensively. "Dining etiquette is different for my generation, Red!"

"Okay, okay." He held up a hand placatingly. "So you go Dutch. What is something you could do before or after lunch where it would be just the two of you?"

Liz pursed her lips contemplatively, considering places where there wouldn't be too many people surrounding them, stressing her out. "I guess we could always go to a spa somewhere and get massages." Her blue eyes were gleaming wistfully. "Or we could go to a salon and get our hair and nails done."

Red's white teeth flashed in a pleased smile. "Well, there you go! Why not do both?"

"It's expensive to do both."

"If expense is a problem...." He raised a brow teasingly at her as he made a show of slowly reaching for his wallet.

"I have money, you know," she rolled her eyes in playful exasperation. "I can pay for my own, Red. It's Katie who may not be able to afford both, or even one. She doesn't have an inheritance to dip into...."

His grin was sly. "Or a sugar daddy to pay for her fun?"

"Red!"

"I know you hate it when other people call me that," he told her with a smile, "but I think we can laugh about it here, when it's just the two of us, hmm?"

She snorted dismissively, waving his tease away. "Well, in any case, I don't want her to think I'm insensitive to her monetary status."

"Lizzy, why don't you let me pay for the both of you?" Red asked seriously. "Just this once, let me insist. If you're uncomfortable telling her the money is from me, pretend it's from you."

"If we are going down this path of argument, I have enough money to pay for us both."

He shook his head. "That's a sweet thing to say, honey. And you're right. You do." Sitting forward,
he caught and held her eyes. "But let me do this. I want to do this for you, and for her. She's been a good friend to you. An understanding friend who has asked to spend time with you, but hasn't pressured you," he elaborated. "It's a rare thing, you know."

Liz brought her thumbnail to her teeth, nibbling lightly on it as she thought over his rationale.

"Not to mention that you've been working hard on all fronts....and so it follows that you certainly deserve a day of wellness and beauty," he coaxed, voice deepening persuasively. "Please allow me this."

It was the please that swayed her. "All right," she capitulated, giving him a hesitant but grateful smile. "But...just this once, Red."

His answering smile was rather triumphant. "I'll make the reservations for next Saturday for you both at my favorite spa in Seattle, La Porte D'argent. It actually isn't too far from here, come to think of it. Diana, one of the veteran masseuses there, has the hands of a goddess. She'll make you feel like you're floating on air when she's through."

And he was right: Diana did have the hands of her Roman goddess namesake. By the time Liz and Katie left La Porte D'argent the following weekend, it was four-fifteen in the afternoon and they were both feeling like they'd been remade in wisps of air held together by sweet-smelling oils.

"I had no idea spas could be that huge!" Katie exclaimed as they relaxed back against the seat of the cab. "Marble floors! Gilded walls! Forest foliage and meticulously painted ceilings that look like the sky.... Not to mention it had that amazing salon attached to it," she shook her head in awe. "That place puts Massage Envy to complete shame!"

"I forget how long we spent in the bathing area," Liz grinned, remembering the giant Roman tub, the multitudes of cascading waterfalls, and the seven, steaming and sparkling pools that had arched like a vibrant rainbow around the room, each one a different color due to the various natural elements that made for healthy skin.

"A couple hours at least," Katie sighed contentedly, head falling back against the top of the seat. "We were treated like queens!" She turned her face to look at her friend. "Your man is definitely well-connected, Liz."

She shrugged a nonchalant shoulder, but the knowing grin she shared with Katie was a pleased one. "I'm glad we got our hair and nails done before the massage," Liz reflected, moving the conversation away from Red and back to the incredible experience they'd had. "Me too," Katie agreed.

Both young women looked happily down at their finger and toenails.

Liz lifted her hands, studying her impeccable French manicure. She'd chosen a warm ivory color rather than pure white, which she tended to think was too garish. Unable to resist, she'd had the manicurist paint a delicate flower on both of her ring fingers. A tiny silver jewel glinted in each of the centers.

Sighing contentedly, Liz folded her hands in her lap. "I honestly don't think I could have sat upright in the chair for anything. I'm ready for a nap!"

"Sleeping will be the last thing on his mind when he sees you, so I'd wake yourself up!" Katie teased with an impish grin.
"You think he'll like it?" she blushed, fingerling her hair. Some of the length had been cut off, but the burgundy lowlights and layers were back, giving life, volume, and bounce to the dark waves.

Her friend snorted. "You know he will. Just like Mark will like mine!" She ran her hand vainly through her platinum blonde locks, beaming. "I've never gone silver before. He's going to flip his shit. I may not come out of the bedroom all weekend!"

"Katie!" Liz giggled.

"Oh, c'mon, Liz. You know you won't either!" Katie's eyes sparkled mischievously. "If you remember to think at all in the next thirty-six hours, please tell him I said thank you, will you?"

Katie had been right. When Red laid eyes on Elizabeth as she walked through the front door to the suite, thoughts of napping completely fled her consciousness upon seeing the warm affection, the open admiration, and the ardent desire gleaming in his intent gaze.

"You look beautiful," he told her right before scooping her up into his hard arms. "And...." He buried his nose in the curve of her neck and shoulder, inhaling deeply. "Christ, you smell good."

"Thank you," she grinned, giving him a sound kiss on the mouth once he lifted his head. "It's the coconut oil they used. I think Diana rubbed about a gallon of the stuff into my skin," she joked. "Oh, and before I forget--Katie says thank you, too."

"Obviously I don't need to ask you if you had a good time," Red smiled. "You're positively glowing. Radiant. And it's not all due to that gallon of coconut oil." He stepped back to hold her at arm's length. "Let me see everything." His eyes traced over her. "Let me see you."

Liz spread her arms very slightly and twirled around for him in a rather kittenish way before she reached with both hands and pulled her long hair forward to tumble carelessly down her front.

"I got layers," she proclaimed happily, scrunching her fingers through her soft tresses to fluff and shake them out. "And there's even some color again." She lifted one lock and turned it in her fingers, showing him the dark burgundy hue scattered throughout her natural brunette strands, catching the light glittering overhead.

"Beautiful girl." Reaching out, he caught her small hand in his large one and he lifted it, admiring her fingernails. "Pretty." Then an affectionately amused smile curved his lips as he lightly tapped her ring finger that sported the painted flower and jewel. "This is cute, sweetheart," he purred, meeting her eyes.

She blushed, shrugging.

His smile turned into a grin as he brought her hand to rest against his chest, placing his palm over it. Moving closer, his mouth dipped toward her ear. "Do your toes match?" he asked, teeth lightly catching and nibbling on her lobe.

"You'll just have to wait and see," she teased flirtatiously, fingers tightening in his shirt as his lips trailed down her neck to place a kiss at the hollow of her throat.

Her blue eyes gleamed up into his when he pulled back to look at her in mock-sternness. "What if I don't want to wait?"

"Patience is a virtue," Liz chided lightly with a laugh, making to playfully slip away from him.

She didn't get very far. Almost immediately he closed the gap between them, his hands sliding up her
arms to clasp her gently, holding her in place. "You're purposefully baiting me," he rumbled, eyes sharpening in keen interest.

Her heart began to pound faster. "Does it turn you on?" The coquettish words escaped her before she quite knew what she was saying.

Red bared his teeth in a delighted grin. "Oh, I think you know the answer to that," he told her before swiftly taking her mouth with his...gently, at first. Always gently.

But as she all but melted into his embrace, he didn't hesitate to quickly deepen the kiss, increasing their rhythm until she was breathless with blossoming desire.

"Do I?" she murmured once he released her lips to gaze knowingly down at her.

Chuckling at her coy attitude, he cupped her face in his palms. "Make love with me, Elizabeth."

Her heart tripped sharply within at the sincere request, at the low, gravelly tone of voice he'd used to say her full name, at the fervent passion emanating from those expressive, green eyes of his.

His smile was warm as he caressed his thumbs under her chin. "I want to see all that lovely hair of yours spread out over my pillow as you lie down..." he murmured softly, tone as smooth as honey. "Or feel it as it drifts down around my face as you thrust over me."

Liz shivered, goosebumps rising all over as one of his hands moved to stroke down the heavy fall of it, tips of his fingers purposefully brushing against her spine through the dark strands.

Her physical reaction wasn't just because of his touch. It was because of his voice, too, because of the things he had just said....

She swallowed thickly.

Elizabeth had to admit, the vivid scene he painted with just a few, choice words was arousing her already piqued interest...her already stimulated body.

And while she was much more comfortable with the act of making love than she had been a month ago, there were still moments, like now, when she was very willing but felt a brief pang of self-consciousness unexpectedly rise up from deep within and express itself in actions or words.

"I thought you were more interested in my toes," she flushed, her sapphire eyes darting skittishly away from him as the words popped nervously out of her mouth.

She'd hoped they would have come out as a sultry tease, but instead they were colored with her bashful awkwardness.

Before she could even think to mentally berate herself for ruining such a sexy moment, Red gently pulled on her hair until she lifted her eyes to his understanding ones. "Oh," he smiled huskily, "I'm sure I'll see them as I undress you...or as I hover over you as you lay back on my bed in nothing but that silky lingerie of yours." His eyes swept hungrily over her. "Or nothing at all."

Her breath caught in her throat at the mental picture...as his hands slipped around her body, fingers trailing down her smooth arms to lace with hers. Slowly he brought them to his lips and pressed a kiss to each.

At the tender display, her eyes finally flickered to his again.
He quirked a jaunty brow slightly at her as if to say, Well?

Elizabeth found her voice, and with it, a shred of composed assurance. "Katie was right," she told him softly, a small, gratified smile pulling at her mouth.

"Oh?"

"She said you'd want to once you saw me."

"Ah." He returned her smile slowly as his eyes searched hers. "I suppose we men can be rather predictable, hmm?"

"Not always," she teased, well aware of his desirous stare.

"Well, how can I not 'want to' when you're standing in front of me, looking so damned ravishing and literally seducing all my physical senses...." He squeezed her slender hands, expression serious. "You know what I want. But what do you want, sweetheart?"

She dimpled at him, a burst of confidence returning, alighting her sparkling eyes and forcibly pushing back her lingering embarrassment as she took his sincere words to heart. "I want you," she declared before sensually closing the small distance between them.

It was a few hours later, while they were lounging lazily in bed, when Red received a phone call from one of his employees. A fine little apartment, one that fit all of Elizabeth's needs, had finally been found about ten to fifteen minutes away from campus. Photos were immediately texted and Red put his cell on mute as Liz carefully looked them over, her excitement growing the more she saw.

"It's perfect!" she exclaimed enthusiastically.

Smiling, Red took his phone back and gave the order to have the apartment held so she could come see it for herself before any final decisions were made.

"What did you say?" he asked whoever he was speaking with on the other line. "What--oh. When is she coming?" Red repeated back, eyes flicking to her.

Liz propped herself up on her elbows, chin resting over her laced fingers as she smiled sweetly up at him from her indolent position on her stomach.

Unable to resist her enticing ways, he reached out to trail his free palm down the smooth, naked arch of her back to lightly--possessively--cup her ass.

"Tomorrow," Red answered gruffly, eyes gleaming knowingly down at her as she stifled an amused laugh with her slim fingers. "She's busy this evening."

Seeing the apartment with her own two eyes was just a formality, in Liz's opinion. She had known it was the one when she had seen the photos. But Red had advised her long ago to never to put money down on property until she had physically gone to the site in question and had inspected and walked the grounds for herself. She recognized the wisdom in his words, so she followed his directive before she officially leased it and moved in.

"It's an amazing apartment, Baz," she gushed a couple weeks later as they seated themselves on the padded floor to stretch their legs. "I can't believe it wasn't snatched up the second it went on the market! Especially since it's so close to campus...."

The man smiled, bending one knee up and grasping hold of it, pulling it into his chest. "I'm assuming
the price was probably pretty steep?"

She copied him. "Yeah," she replied thoughtfully. "That's probably why." Then she smiled. "But I got lucky. Red managed to get the original price down for me by speaking directly to the owner. He didn't have to go through the realtor."

"He's not paying for it?" Baz asked curiously.

Liz shook her head, releasing her right leg so she could do the same to her left. She wasn't offended by his question. Red had paid for much over the course of her life and Baz probably knew that. So it would be a rational conclusion for him to draw: assuming that Red was paying for her living arrangement.

"I can afford it," she confided. "When my dad passed away, he left me some money." She glanced up at him, deciding to trust him with some more personal information. "It's a lot of money. More than I thought he had tucked away." Her brows knit together. "But...."

"But?" the man prompted when she trailed off uncertainly.

She sighed, giving him a faint smile. "But I'd much rather have him here than have the money."

His expression softened slightly at her quiet remark. "Of course you would, Liz."

"Sometimes I feel guilty about using it."

"The money?"

"Yeah." She stretched both legs out in front of her and reached easily for her toes. "It's like.... I don't know. It's like I'm using him. My dad."

"He left it for you to be used," Baz reassured her.

"I know that," she conceded quietly. "But it's like....what I'm spending it on is only temporary. I know I won't stay in Washington forever. Sometimes I feel like I'm...wasting it, since I'm not buying something that will last."

"You're not disrespecting your dad's memory by spending the money, Liz. Even if it is on something temporary, as you say. You need somewhere to live!"

She snorted softly. "I know. And I know it's stupid--"

"Not stupid," he interrupted sharply.

The sudden heat in his voice made her eyes snap back to his in shock.

"You're not stupid for thinking that you'll hold on to your dad, to his memory, by not spending the money." Baz cleared his throat, reining in his flash of temper. "Don't put yourself down like that. I don't like it."

She bit her lip and glanced self-consciously down at her bare legs.

"What you're saying shows that you have a good heart. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

Liz silently bent her knees, bringing both her heels in to rest between her legs.

"Don't brush off what I'm saying," he warned. "You need to give yourself more credit, Liz."
"You sound a little like Red." She glanced up at him, a hesitant smile touching her lips.

Baz waggled his eyebrows mischievously at her to take away the harsh sting of his previous tone. "Then maybe you should listen to me. Most times I know what I'm talking about."

That elicited a grin from her. "So now that I've shared something personal with you, you get to share something personal with me."

"You're changing the subject."

An impudent brow rose. "So? That's what people do when they're having a conversation."

The man's eyes narrowed in pretend annoyance and her impertinence. "I thought we were here to train, not to talk."

"We're stretching," Liz defended their actions, gesturing to their contorted bodies. "We can multitask by talking and stretching at the same time."

Baz rolled his eyes and shook his head, diverted. "Fine. But," he held up a cautioning finger, "after I share a secret of my life that will undoubtedly bring us closer together, we get down to business."

"To defeat the Huns?"

Surprised laughter burst from him and he rubbed his brow, both exasperated and amused with her all at once.

"I'm surprised you got the reference," Liz grinned impishly.

"What do you want to know, Elizabeth?" Baz growled, cracking his neck to release some of the tension.

"What is it exactly that you do for Red?" she asked as she continued going through the motions of warming up her body. "I mean, I know you work for him. I overheard you both talking, once."

Baz shot her a discreetly wary look. The little minx had good ears. He'd have to warn Red later. But he knew that right now, in this pivotal moment, he had to really watch his step with Elizabeth.

Like his employer, he wouldn't lie to her. But he had to be extremely careful about what kind of information he shared with her.

"I was hired to be a guard."

Her eyes snapped to his face, expression both immensely curious and extremely taken aback. "A guard?" she gaped.

"Yes."

A tense silence began to stretch between them as they studied one another.

After several moments, Liz scowled at him, finally breaking their stalemate with a huffy, "Care to elaborate?"

"Were you waiting for me to?" he asked innocently. "You didn't ask for me to elaborate, you know. I'm not a woman. Your gender tends to elaborate without us even having to ask, but we men--"

Rankled, she snarled at him.
His response to that was to laugh at her display of perturbed temper. "You're so damn easy to rile up!" he chortled.

Baring her teeth at his assertion, she flicked an impatient hand. She wasn't about to let him mentally wander off on a tangent. He wasn't going to be let off the hook so easily! "Well?" she demanded testily.

Baz's smile eased into something more pensive as he considered her for a moment. "You know how wealthy Red is, Liz," he finally told her seriously, stretching out his legs in front of him. "Wealth brings power and influence. When a man has those things, he tends to create enemies. In Red's specific case, he has many of them spanning the globe." There was no sugarcoating this kind of information, and his tone was very calm and matter-of-fact as he laid it all out on the line for her to absorb.

"So you weren't kidding." Her blue eyes were wide. "You really are a bodyguard."

"I prefer the term 'guard,'" Baz corrected gently. "I protect more than just his body."

Liz leaned back on her hands, staring openly at him as she began to reevaluate her previous perception of him. "If you're supposed to be his guard, then why aren't you with him now?"

"He doesn't always need a guard," the stocky man explained. "But if he did need my type of services while I'm here with you, he'd call on someone else."

"Oh." Liz blinked. "There are...there are more of you?"

"There are a few of us around," Baz hedged.

Liz licked her lips, filing that bit of information away for later reflection. "You said Red has enemies...." She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "Would they...would they try to hurt him?"

The man pretended not to notice how her voice had hitched slightly on the word hurt. He crossed his legs and sat up straighter, reaching an arm up and behind his shoulder to stretch his tricep. "As I said," Baz replied slowly as she copied him, "he is very wealthy. Has a highly successful shipping business. Owns high-priced holdings." He shrugged before reaching behind him to stretch his other tricep. "You can't really blame him for being cautious, Liz. Even Bill Gates has guards," he explained, doing his best to soothe her worry. "You get money, you get paranoid because everyone is out to get you in any way they can...to take that good fortune away."

"Through violence."

"Not always. But sometimes, yes."

"Has he ever been in danger?" she asked quietly.

Baz hesitated, wondering just how much further they could go in this conversation before he'd have to call an abrupt halt to it. "There've been couple times when he's gone toe-to-toe with a competitor," he admitted reluctantly. Upon seeing concern flicker across her face and fill her big eyes, he gave her a reassuring smile. "But as you can see, Red came out on top. He always does."

Liz gazed wordlessly at him, wondering just how in the world Sam, a simple man who'd lived a simple life in the Nebraskan countryside, had come to know and befriend such a wealthy, powerful, and influential man like Red...a man who needed to hire not just one guard, but multiple guards, to protect him and his interests.
And why had she never been informed of this?

She had understood for many years that Red preferred to keep his personal and business lives separate. And she had always respected that. But him hiring and using guards while he was here in Seattle....

Liz frowned.

Wasn't this something rather important that a woman he was involved with needed to know?

Before she could become too lost in her private and restless musings, Baz swiftly pushed off the mat and then helped her to a standing position.

"All right," he began in his no-nonsense, instructing voice. "Today we're moving off into how to disable your opponent with using only your hands." The man turned her body, showing her where exactly she should place her feet and how she should hold her posture....redirecting her concentration from their grave conversation to her self-defense lesson in order to engage her complete attention.

And Elizabeth would allow herself to be thoroughly distracted so she wouldn't give Baz the satisfaction of observing her fall hard on her ass due to a lack of concentration.

She would apply herself whole-heartedly--for a time.

But once this session with Baz was over, she knew she'd have to talk to Red.
Thank you to my betas for being so encouraging and amazingly helpful, and to my readers for being so patient in waiting for this chapter❤️ I really hope you enjoy!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"Hi," Elizabeth smiled politely at the hostess standing behind the podium of Altura, one of the finest Italian restaurants in Seattle.

Well, according to Red it was the finest, as she was sure to find out tonight.

When the woman looked up, Liz was very glad she’d spent forty-five minutes curling and teasing her dark hair into a mass of elegant waves...and for deciding on wearing the most costly and striking dress she owned.

If the hostess looked like she was ready to confidently strut out onto a fashion show's runway, what with her immaculate blonde updo, her shapely figure sheathed in an expensive black frock, and real diamonds sparkling in her ears and around her neck, Liz was quite certain that the other employees and most certainly the clientele of this establishment had to be just as gorgeous.

Her suddenly clammy hands clenched nervously around her leather clutch as she steeled herself, lifting her chin slightly. Despite her obvious youth, she wanted to look confident and appear like she belonged here amongst all these extremely sophisticated, wealthy, and self-assured socialites.

Red's people.

"I'm here to meet Red. I mean--" she stammered clumsily, seeing confusion sweep across the hostess's perfectly made-up face. "Sorry," she flushed hotly. So much for feigning--and feeling--like she belonged! "I'm part of the party of--"

"Ah, are you Elizabeth Scott?" boomed a man's friendly voice to the left of her.

Startled, Liz turned her head to look at a slightly portly yet classically handsome gentleman who seemed to be about in his mid-fifties. He wore a black vest and suit, minus the jacket, and carried close to his chest a slender leather-bound book with the restaurant's official crest etched in gold on it, signaling to her that he must work here.

His eyes were kind as he waited for her answer.

"I--um, yes.... I am," Liz haltingly replied, still somewhat bewildered and striving desperately not to be embarrassed about it.

"Your party is waiting for you out on the patio," the man told Liz with an encouraging smile. "It's okay, Darlene," he reassured the blonde hostess. "I'll take her on back."

"Thanks, James!"

The man, James, jovially gestured for Liz to follow him inside, which she did, carefully stepping around the potted plants and occupied tables as gracefully as she could in the strappy high heels she wore.

"And how are you tonight, Miss Scott?" James asked graciously once they made it to the French glass doors on the side of the restaurant.
"I'm fine. Oh--thank you," she added belatedly as he considerately opened the door for her. "And you?"

"Never better," the man beamed once he closed the door behind them with a gentle click.

String music suddenly crescendoed in a romantic flourish, filling her ears and momentarily drowning out all other sounds. Surprised, she glanced to her left at the four musicians who were caressing their bows over their cellos and violins, creating a soft and rather poignant melody.

Hearing two glasses clink together in a toast, Liz's eyes flickered to the expansive, rather beautifully rustic courtyard stretching out in front of them. It instantly reminded her of photos of actual Tuscan homes she had seen on the Internet.

What a glowing and inviting enclosure!

Sparkling, iridescent glass lights that were reminiscent of bubbles were strung across the patio's trellis covering from end to end, warmly lighting a large, perfectly square section of smooth cement in the very center.

*For dancing*... she thought, impressed.

Twelve round tables carved from polished Italian oak fanned out in a perfect arc around the dancing area. They all were nestled on the bordering flagstones far enough apart from one other so that the parties sitting at each one wouldn't be able to easily eavesdrop on others' conversations.

Privacy, she was pleased to see, was all but guaranteed for intimate discussions here in this place.

Liz's eyes then flicked inquisitively beyond the center of the patio. Various species of ivy and blooming vines had been encouraged for years to not only climb but cover the surrounding three walls. Small, golden lights twinkled cheerfully amidst the thick, leafy foliage, reminding her of the fireflies she had used to laughingly chase in wonderment when she'd been a little girl.

The thoughtful layout and fine decor of Altura's stunning courtyard created a dazzling atmosphere that was at once both dreamily homey and exquisitely romantic.

"Mr. Brent Cartwright is waiting for you in the corner just there, next to the fountain," James informed her, bringing her out of her contemplative observations.

*Brent Cartwright?* She didn't know anyone by that name.

"I'm sorry," she said hesitantly, thin brows drawing together in confusion as James confidently lead her into the heart of the courtyard. "I think there's been a misund--"

"Ah, Elizabeth!"

Red rose out out from the patio's shadows into the glow of the lights above as he came to his feet to greet her.

"Oh--" *Mr. Cartwright?* Liz slanted him a puzzled look. Why wasn't he using his real name? "Hi...."

She winced slightly at how awkward she sounded as he took her slender hands in his, chastely lifting them to his lips to give them a gentlemanly kiss.

This wasn't at all how she had imagined their evening out on a fancy date would begin. She was thrown off-balance by his surprising act and she didn't much like it!
"You look beautiful, sweetheart," he told her softly, intimately, either unaware of or choosing to ignore her gracelessness.

Despite her discomfort, her dimples appeared briefly at the sincere compliment before she glanced self-consciously at James.

"I recognized her immediately from your description, Mr. Cartwright," James told Red, smiling. "I've never seen such eyes before. I knew it had to be her."

"Their shape and lovely color are rather unique," Red smiled back before his warm gaze returned to Elizabeth's rather stunned one. "James is the maitre d' of this fine establishment," he smoothly informed her. "I asked him to keep watch for you and guide you back here to me when you arrived."

"Oh." That wasn't the reason for why she felt so perplexed right now. He had to know that.

Liz cleared her throat. Maybe Red was trying to aid her in covering her current social gauche by prompting her to acknowledge James.

God, and now both men were watching her closely. Obviously some kind of longer verbal response rather than a one syllable word was expected of her.

Get it together, Liz, she firmly berated herself, flushing. James will think you're rude!

There would be plenty of time to wrangle out of Red his answer for why he wasn't using his actual name soon enough.

Smothering her bemusement while plastering a politely composed expression on her face, she turned her head from Red to smile winningly at the maitre d'. "Thank you for leading me back here to Mr. Cartwright."

Red must have noticed the slight emphasis she intentionally put on the fake name, for she felt his fingers lightly tighten on hers. Was he warning her to drop her pert attitude? Or was it just an unconscious physical reaction of surprise to her wry tone?

Oblivious to the wide range of emotional undertones flowing around him, James's teeth flashed happily. "You're welcome, Miss Scott." He glanced at Red in hearty approval, man to man, and she wondered what exactly Red had said about her before she had arrived. "I'll be taking care of you both personally tonight. Your appetizers should be out momentarily."

"Thank you, James," Red nodded at the other man, who inclined his head and effortlessly extricated himself from their company and swiftly exited the courtyard, undoubtedly to check on the promised delicacies.

"How are you, Lizzy?" Red asked amiably as he solicitously pulled her chair out for her.

As if nothing were amiss.

"Brent Cartwright?" Ignoring his question completely, she fixed an intently curious stare on him as he took his seat across from her.

Unperturbed, he smiled serenely as he poured wine into her crystal glass. "Has a nice ring to it, doesn't it?"

Mentally kicking away the desire to roll her eyes at his blithe tone of voice, she pressed, "Why are you using a fake name, Red?"
"Brent Cartwright isn't a fake name, Lizzy," he chuckled. "I'm sure someone out there in the wide world is, in fact, named Brent Cartwright."

Liz bit the inside of her cheek as she gave him an exasperated look. "It's not yours. Why aren't you using your real name?"

"You mean, why aren't I using the name you call me?"

"Well, yeah," she frowned, accepting the glass he gently picked up and offered to her.

"Many people in this city know who I am and know what places I like to frequent." After lifting his own glass, his eyes steadily met hers. "Mainly my business associates. And since this is a Thursday night, which is technically a work night, I wanted to be able to enjoy an evening out with you without having to worry about someone interrupting us because of business they felt couldn't wait."

Business. Liz's nostrils flared slightly at the word before she glanced down to watch their glasses meet. A pretty little chime sounded as the rims kissed, confirming that they were indeed drinking from very expensive stemware.

The vintage was excellent. One of the best Altura had to offer. If it were possible to taste colors, Red imagined that this particular burgundy hue would always be dense. Silky. Bold.

Christ, it was definitely worth the money he plunked down for the entire bottle!

Red hummed his pleasure, watching Elizabeth out of the corner of his eye as she sipped on hers, probably turning what he had said carefully over in her mind as she savored the smooth and velvety flavor of the wine before swallowing.

He wondered if she would accept his explanation for why he was using the name Brent Cartwright tonight rather than the one she knew him as.

His reasoning for why he used it was sound. His...associates...did know his favorite Seattle haunts, and he truly didn't want to be disturbed tonight...especially considering the very serious discussion that he knew was looming.

Once Elizabeth had left her self-defense lesson to go home, shower, dress, and then meet him here for the date they'd had planned for over a week now, Baz had immediately called Red to inform him of what had transpired.

"I couldn't very well lie to her, Red," the guard had defended himself into the heavy silence growing between them. "She knew I worked for you--as something else besides her instructor. Eavesdropping little sprite," he had grumbled under his breath.

Red had growled softly at that.

"You know I genuinely like her," the other man had quickly reminded him, to both placate his employer's growing surly mood and continue the line of defense for his actions. "When she looked at me with those fucking huge eyes of hers, I knew I wouldn't lie. And if I had, she would have seen through it."

Then Baz had sighed before continuing quietly, "I'm her instructor. She trusts me. And that's significant. You know how difficult it has been for her to...trust." Especially in regards to men. This had gone unspoken, but Red had understood this was what Baz had meant. "How could she continue to put her trust in me if she caught me lying?"
"She wouldn't." It would have permanently damaged their budding relationship, something that Red wanted to be nurtured...not destroyed.

"Right."

This time Red had sighed, making the mental effort to release his vexation with the air that left his lungs. It really wasn't Baz's fault Elizabeth now knew what she knew. If anyone were to blame, it was him. He knew better than to hint at important matters to Baz in her proximity, even if he thought her distracted. Perhaps especially if he thought her distracted.

Elizabeth had always had sharp ears.

In fact, her excellent hearing is what prompted their first chance encounter when she'd just turned four years old.

Red could see her all those years ago in his mind's eye, sitting there despondently on the backyard swing, clutching the rusting chains as she had wept, her tiny body trembling as she'd pressed her round, pink cheek to one of them.

How miserable she had been. And how desperately alone.

He could remember something he had tried to harden deep within reluctantly bending as he'd approached her. The emerald green grass, wet and slippery from the morning dew, had squeaked beneath the rubber soles of his priceless leather shoes as he'd come closer.

Even through her whimpers and loud sniffling she had heard the unusual noise and, startled, had lifted her face.

Her large eyes, bright and glittering with tears, had snapped fearlessly up to his.

While they'd seen one another many times before and certainly weren't strangers, Red had never been able to get this close to her...and he had been momentarily taken aback by just how blue those lovely eyes of hers were...like fine sapphires, dark and clear and shining.

Katarina's eyes.

"They're fighting again," she'd sobbed woefully as he had carefully closed the distance between them by leaning against the chilled metal of the swing's stand. He hadn't been sure if she'd been explaining why she had been crying, or if the words had burst from her because her young heart had been fiercely keening for someone--anyone--to comfort her.

Feelings of sympathy, of compassion, had insistently tugged at his yielding heart as Red had gazed silently down into her sorrowful eyes. His own had slowly begun to soften as he had regarded her, revealing the emotions he'd been allowing himself, perhaps unwisely, to feel.

The very last thing he had needed was an obstacle of attachment, however small, impeding his ability to carry out his assignment. But she had been just a child...an innocent who'd been caught up in the relentless turmoil of politics completely beyond her realm of understanding. Surely offering a small bit of comfort to a distraught little girl wouldn't threaten or derail his ultimate design?

Unable to stand her heartbreakingly crestfallen expression a moment longer, his fingers had slipped inside his jacket to retrieve a handkerchief. Then he had gingerly extended his hand, offering it to her with a gentleness that bordered on tenderness.

Red had remembered that she had studied his steady fingers and the crisp, white slip of linen for a
moment before snatching it shyly from him to first squash it clumsily beneath her red, runny nose and then scrub it across both of her sticky cheeks.

Masha, with her keen ears and hyper-sensitivity to the moods of those around her, had always known when her parents were fighting...and such hostile strife in her home had often depressed her.

Abruptly tearing himself from that poignant memory before it could further consume him, Red had forced his thoughts back to the present as he'd rubbed his brow, contemplating how best to move forward. "You handled it as best you could, Baz, considering the circumstances. I'll handle it from here."

And handle it he would...if she brought it up.

"Does the maitre d'...James...does he know your real name?" Elizabeth asked after a moment, setting down her glass.

"We go back quite a few years, Lizzy."

A dark, slender brow arched. "And he doesn't think it's...odd...for you to use a different name when you come here?"

"Odd?" Red laughed lightly. "Oh, no. He's used to my eccentricities by now!"

"Being duplicitous is an eccentricity?"

Duplicitous? That was a rather strong word...and he didn't much like it being attached to him.

"No." He smiled, hiding the brief pang of guilt he felt behind an air of unconcerned, good humor as he shook his head amusedly. "Being duplicitous is being duplicitous. Going incognito...which is what this is...well, that's commonplace for a wealthy eccentric like me who prefers his privacy when he's out with someone special on a work night."

Elizabeth's eyes flickered to his and he held them composedly. Had this happened under other circumstances, he would have teasingly asked why this seemed to upset her so much. But, come to think of it, had this been any other night, it wouldn't have upset her. In fact, she probably would have found his using a false name amusing...maybe even charming, since he was doing it so they were guaranteed a romantic evening all to themselves.

But Lizzy was taking his going incognito and lining it up in that sharp mind of hers with what Baz had told her earlier. Her intuition was telling her something was off.

And compared to normal people living normal lives, her intuition about him was right.

Red wasn't a normal man living a normal life. And while she was leading a more normal life than he was, hers wasn't exactly like most other young women's lives either.

Before Elizabeth could fire back a retort, James appeared with their appetizers.

"Stuzzichini!" the maitre d' proclaimed proudly, setting down two plates of the rather beautifully tossed vegetables and other Italian specialities in front of them.

Red leaned over his, inhaling the intoxicating aroma. "Gorgeous, James!" he praised enthusiastically before tilting his head slightly at Elizabeth, wordlessly telling her to bolster the man's ego.

"Yes, it's beautiful!" she quickly agreed, flashing a distracted smile up at James. "Thank you."
"Enjoy!"

Once the man had melted back into the night's shadows, Red picked up his fork and immediately cut into the quail's egg and parsley root cannoli. "Make sure you dip this into whipped foie gras there," he advised, gesturing with his fork to one of the delicacies on their plates.

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Red wished he could say it was an easy and companionable silence, but it wasn't.

Elizabeth was mulling, and she was doing her best to artfully hide the fact she was doing so behind delicately eating forkfuls of the food in front of her.

A part of him wished she would just come out and ask him the questions that were undoubtedly whirling ceaselessly around in her mind, but another part of him certainly wasn't too keen to travel down the slippery slope of how much truth he'd be able to tell her.

You knew this would happen, Red grimly reminded himself. The deeper the romantic entanglement, the closer she edges toward the truth of matters....

"Tell me about your day," he finally requested, his light-hearted tone cajoling as he picked up his wine glass to take a sip, hoping to distract her and shake her from this mood.

"You want to hear about the interesting part of my day?" Elizabeth asked quickly, shooting him a piercingly triumphant look.

He comprehended then that he had given her the opening she had desired. Christ, she'd been waiting for him to pave the way for this conversation!

"Naturally," he replied cheerfully, though quite unable to keep the dryness from slightly coloring his tone. He was both nettled and proud of her ability to manipulate the conversation to following the direction she wanted.

The sly minx.

"I had an...interesting...talk with Baz today," she began, eying him. "During our session."

"Oh?" Red took another sip of wine, schooling his face to courteous attentiveness.

"He told me you hired him to be a guard. For you."  

"He told me you hired him to be a guard. For you."  

"I did."  

She blinked, taken aback by his easy forthrightness. Then she frowned at him, setting down her fork. "He said you're wealthy."

"Need I comment on that?" he queried, eyes glinting with amusement.

"I know you're wealthy," she huffed impatiently. "I didn't know your wealth made you a target!"

"Baz said that?"

"Not in those exact words," she muttered. Then she lifted her chin and met his gaze unwaveringly. "But, basically, yes." Her eyes were hard, like chips of ice. "Why didn't you tell me you have guards watching you? And yeah," she flicked restless fingers, "I know you hired more than just Baz."

Red slowly set down his glass and leaned back in his chair, regarding her steadily. "I didn't inform
you because I didn't want to concern you."

She sucked in an outraged breath.

"And before you start accusing me of being condescending, hear me out, Elizabeth."

Her nostrils flared angrily but she set her mouth into a thin line and watched him warily.

"Yes, I hired men as guards," he told her quietly, tone serious. "But it's just a precaution. I've never had to call on them here in Seattle. But it gives me peace of mind knowing I have someone out there watching my back."

"Are they watching us now?" she asked, darting a surreptitious glance self-consciously behind her.

"No, honey."

Elizabeth's eyes flickered back to his as the endearment slid off his tongue.

"They're not watching us right now. I don't always need a guard," he explained with a reassuring smile. "Again, it's just a precaution."

"You still should have told me," she told him, eyes flashing with irritation.

"And if anything like this ever arises, I will be sure to do so." Not that he planned for a situation like that developing anytime soon. He had all the men he needed on retainer.

The promise seemed to mollify her somewhat, but an air of resentment still emanated from her.

Perhaps she wanted an apology. But he couldn't very well express contrition for something he wasn't sorry about. If he'd had his way, she never would have known Baz's true occupation, or that he, Red, had to be on his guard against dangerous people.

Or perhaps something about the truth that had been revealed tonight was still disconcerting her, despite his attempts to reassure her.

Perhaps she was resentful because of both of these things.

Even though she was trying hard to conceal it, her unsettled demeanor was quite obvious to Red, who knew her physical tells as well as he knew his own: her nostrils flaring as certain, rattling thoughts passed through her mind, her jaw loosening and tightening in emotional reactions to those thoughts, her stubborn unwillingness to actually meet his eyes.... And while she was clearly uncomfortable, he also knew she wasn't ready drop this line of conversation.

Mentally bracing himself, he patiently waited for her to speak.

He didn't have to wait long.

"You said you haven't had to call on your guards here in Seattle."

It wasn't a question, but Red answered her anyway, "Yes...that's right." He watched as she unconsciously poked at what remained of her appetizer with her fork, recognizing that she was gathering her courage to verbally approach whatever was troubling her.

"You've been in danger before." Elizabeth's voice had deepened considerably and was husky with the conflicting emotions roiling within as she slowly lifted her eyes to his. Her simmering vexation was apparent, but genuine concern now shone there as well
He regarded her gravely as a heavy silence began to stretch between them, growing tauter the longer they gazed at one another across the candlelit table.

Finally Elizabeth's eyes narrowed at his unwillingness to speak even as he let out a quietly resigned breath. "I won't insult your intelligence by lying to you, Lizzy," he told her softly.

She looked away from him then, furious with herself as well as with him. What had she wanted, him to tell her an untruth? Baz had already explained to her, albeit reluctantly, that Red had gone "toe-to-toe with competitors" before, implying that, yes, he had been in danger.

But having Red himself confirm what she already knew...the alarming words were now solidified into an irrefutable fact that she couldn't shy away from.

If she had wanted to remain in ignorance, she shouldn't have questioned Baz, and she certainly shouldn't have brought it up to Red. Obviously a large part of her didn't want to stick its head naively in the sand. Why else had she insisted on having this extremely difficult discussion with him tonight during what was supposed to be a romantic date?

However...there was another part of her that wished she had just kept quiet, for this knowledge shattered an illusion of him that she'd built up in her mind for years: that Red was...invincible; that he was immune to danger that could threaten his person...even his very life.

Did that make her shallow? To not want to acknowledge the truth? Did it make her a coward?

The very thought of Red getting hurt--of dying--was heartrendingly inconceivable.

Liz shuddered, her fury bleeding out from her heart as she bravely lifted her eyes back to his. "You're being safe, aren't you?" she demanded fiercely.

A faint smile flickered over his lips at the vehemence in her tone. He reached a hand across the table, wordlessly asking for hers.

She placed her small palm in his large one, gripping it tightly as they gazed at one another searchingly.

"I work to ensure it, Elizabeth."

Seeing the honesty in his steady gaze alleviated some of the swirling anxiety she felt, but not all of it. Liz exhaled sharply, trying to sidestep her agitation...so she said the first thing that popped into her head to turn the tide of the conversation.

"Is there anything else I should be aware of?" she asked, her forcibly light tone sounding discordant after such a weighty conversation, which was why she hadn't been able to cover the slightly sardonic lilt.

He gave her fingers a compassionate squeeze. "Not at this time."

Choosing to ignore the flash of a pained smile that ghosted across Red's face before he swiftly masked it behind one that was more understandingly tender, she looked down.

It was a lot to take in...and it was a lot to accept. Red comprehended that. Her glancing restively away from him was her way of retreating. She desired to put distance between them as she sorted through all the information that had been laid before her and the undoubtedly conflicting emotions it conjured up within her. And if they had been at his place, or even hers, she probably would have physically removed herself from his presence, at least for a little while...to process what he'd said and
come to terms with it. That tended to be her way.

But Lizzy couldn't do that now. They were in the middle of dinner, in public. There were social protocols to be followed, and the obligation to propriety trapped her.

So she hid those lovely eyes from him instead.

If Red were to be quite frank with himself, he didn't want her to be reticent. In this particular case, he didn't think it would be good for either of them to be alone just now. In order to keep her from withdrawing into herself, he needed to distract her with something diverting. If he threw more words at her while this particular mood was riding her, they certainly wouldn't have the desired effect. So he immediately tossed out the idea of regaling her with amusing stories.

Hearing movement further up the courtyard, he glanced away from Elizabeth. A few more musicians were just finishing setting up beside the violinists and cellists.

Ah...perfect.

As the music began in an enthusiastic flourish, a slow smile spread across his lips and he lifted her hand in his, rising gracefully to his feet.

Her eyes darted immediately to his face in confusion. "What--"

"Come with me," he purred.

Looking a bit baffled, she obeyed. But when he began to lead her to the smoothly paved area of the courtyard, she balked.

"Oh no, Red," she whispered, bashfully resisting his gently insistent pull.

"Oh yes, Lizzy," he smiled confidently. "Come on."

"But...I don't know how to dance," she demurred as they stepped into the entrancing glow of golden light.

He arched a brow in teasing disbelief at her shy claim as he wrapped one muscled arm around her back while the other lifted hers in place. "Says the woman who knows hip-hop."

"And," he swiftly added before she could protest, "I seem to recall one rainy night not too long ago when you actually showed me firsthand, in a club full of people, that you do possess an excellent sense of rhythm," he murmured, lips just brushing the shell of her ear as he began to sway.

"I mean," she blushed, fingers clenching nervously in his jacket as she hesitantly moved with him, "dance like this."

His white teeth flashed in an affectionate grin. "There's nothing to it. Just follow my lead, sweetheart."

And so, as the evening wore on, Red was able to keep her from withdrawing inward and away from him by teaching her the simple box step and then the foxtrot in between eating their fine dinner and delectable dessert. She took to ballroom dancing like she took to anything that was both new to her and diverting, with sparkling eyes and breathless laughter.

Toward the end of the night, when all the other couples had joined them on the dance floor and he
knew for a fact that no one else happened to be idly watching, he allowed his hands the freedom to
tenderly wander and suggestively press against her a little more. To his delight, he felt her respond to
his subtle overtures with affectionate caresses of her own. And at one point, when she leaned back to
gaze up at him, he momentarily forgot that they weren't completely alone and was quite unable to
keep the tips of his fingers from briefly tracing the sweet curve of her smooth cheek.

"Would you like to come back with me to my place tonight?" he asked softly.

The expression in her dazzling eyes sharpened thoughtfully for a brief second before they darkened
with an intimacy that thrilled him. "Yes."

And as they came together beneath the silken sheets of his bed, as he caressed and teased her lissome
body, kissing and stroking and pleasing her even while he strongly and steadily thrust into her,
groaning and taking his own pleasure as she mewled and gasped beneath him, the cerebral part of
him was aware that she seemed to be coming to some kind of decision about him...about herself.

There was something different in her movements tonight as they neared their climaxes, in the
confident way she grasped him, bringing him even closer against her, breathlessly urging him to
move faster, accepting that he'd have to go harder as well....

And when she finally crested, taking him with her....

Elizabeth wrapped her arms tightly around him, lifting her head up and off the pillows to rub her
cheek against the broad curve between his neck and shoulder before seizing his lips ardently with
hers.

It was a passionate kiss. A fierce kiss. A kiss, Red thought, of acceptance.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience, for reading, and for your support ❤
"You were distracted today," Baz remarked without preamble as he and Elizabeth walked out of the studio together into the dusky twilight.

While they had been training, she hadn't been able to focus as intently. Because her mind had been elsewhere, her form hadn't been as tight as usual and he'd been able to break through her defenses more often than he would have liked, especially considering how far she'd come in her abilities.

The stocky guard watched shrewdly as she came out of whatever reverie she'd been lost in, her spine immediately straightening as her jaw tightened in irritation at the observation she was obviously taking as a rebuke.

He wasn't concerned exactly, but his comment was his way of expressing that he definitely had noticed the difference in her attitude and desired to know what had brought it about.

Elizabeth was a twenty-one year old college girl, and any number of things could perplex or agitate a young woman her age. Baz wanted a verbal response from her, an excuse, an explanation--anything to at least get her speaking--but the chilling silence she purposefully gave him instead spoke volumes.

Ah.

So now she was in one of those types of moods, was she?

Baz knew Liz well enough to know that she was a perfectionist, and when her imperfections were pointed out directly or indirectly...well, she could get ornery, even waspish if she was provoked in a particular way.

She had to be aware of his contemplative scrutiny, for he saw the muscles of her jaw flex and contract even more as she continued to stubbornly hold her tongue.

"You're going to grind down your molars, clenching your teeth like that," he told her dryly, wondering just how many times he had warned her about that over the last couple months.

Her eyes flashed in defiance but she didn't verbally hit him with a retort like he half-expected her to.

Well.

Baz swiftly hid an amused smile by rubbing his hand over his mouth.

Since it seemed like she wouldn't offer up her thoughts on her own, there were two ways he could go about getting the reason out of her for why she'd been in such a distracted state.

He could either ask her directly, which would probably make her defensively sullen and grumpy, or he could shake the reason out of her by ruffling her pride. The second way would most likely take longer, but...what the Hell--they had time.

And besides, he knew very well how her tempestuous moods could shift so quickly and how truth tended to come tumbling out of her during those transitions when she was riled up.

Baz was becoming more and more well-versed in her ways every week. Whenever he teased her or
provoked her temper, he would learn something new...not only about what pushed her buttons (which the mischievous part of his personality enjoyed immensely), but he would learn more about her.

Elizabeth was becoming more than just the young woman he needed to protect and train because he was being paid to do so. No, she was nothing so...impersonal. Not any longer.

Over the last couple months, he'd peeled back layer after layer of her compelling personality and had discovered that when her emotions ran high, unexpectedly thoughtful and downright perceptive comments would slip from her and give him pause, forcing him to reevaluate her character yet again. Often, during these particular moments, he would learn about her philosophical views of the world, especially her surprisingly keen insights to the various behaviors of people.

The more he got to know her in this way, the more he understood Red's fascination with her.

Not only was she a physically attractive young woman, but her personality was an intriguing mixture of dualities. She was clever yet naive, guileless yet mischievous, impulsive yet thoughtful, impetuous yet considerate, fiery-tempered and most definitely stubborn...and yet, at the same time, she was empathetically sensitive.

Despite her youth, Elizabeth was a volatile, passionate force to be reckoned with...and chances were that she would only become more so as she matured.

Baz eyed her as she folded her arms recalcitrantly over her chest.

But in the meantime, she was still coming into her own and was under his tutelage. Since she'd been unable to concentrate effectively tonight, he needed to know the reason why so this wouldn't happen again.

And he'd get the reason out of her the best way he knew how.

This time he didn't bother hiding the smile that lazily curved his lips. "Mooning over a certain someone, were we?" the guard drawled, purposefully widening his grin when her affronted gaze shot fearlessly to his.

Getting Liz's dander up was such fun.

"No!" Elizabeth made a show of rolling her eyes at his tone before throwing an indignant glare at him. "I don't moon!" Then she self-consciously bit her lip before glancing stubbornly away.

Well, yes...if she were to be somewhat honest with him--and herself. She could moon. And had mooned before. Just...not tonight. She'd been distracted during their session, true, and Red's absence had been part of the reason for her absent-mindedness.

He was currently away on another business trip. He'd left earlier this week and said he'd be gone for four weeks, perhaps even five.

Liz had tried valiantly to hide the sudden flash of fear behind her disappointment once he'd broken the news to her over the weekend, but she hadn't succeeded in that very well.

She could still remember how she had tensed in the circle of his arms, her heart twisting uneasily in her chest.

"Lizzy?" Red had questioned softly, fingers trailing into her dark hair.
An embarrassed flush had warmed her cheeks.

God. He knew.

He always knew.

"I heard you," she had murmured in a low voice, furious with herself for allowing fear to creep into her heart.

It had been stupid. Irrational. Forman had been dead for weeks. She'd been the strongest she had been since the attack, both physically and mentally. And this certainly hadn't been the first time Red had traveled for business. He'd gone away a few times within the last couple months, but...never for more than a week at a time.

This would be the first time since the incident that he'd be away from her for an extended period.

An apprehensive breath had escaped her before she could swallow it back.

Hearing it, Red had shifted beneath her, hands tracing up her spine to her narrow shoulders, the calculated movement warning her of what was to come. Liz'd had a feeling that he'd wanted to capture her face in his palms and lift it to his so he could read the raw emotions flickering in her eyes.

So he could affirm without a doubt that she had been unnerved at the thought of him being gone for so long.

Before he could take control of the situation, she had escaped his tender hold, sliding off of his chest to sit up. The sheet had slipped down her naked body and she'd quickly caught the edge of it, bringing it back up to press it tightly to her breasts.

Liz had been aware of his intent gaze as he'd propped himself up on his hands, scooting backward so he could lean comfortably against the headboard.

So he could observe her better.

She had kept her head bowed as she'd fiddled with wrapping the sheet around the front of herself, attempting to cover her emotional vulnerability by smoothing the linen around her nakedness.

But even once her slender form had been swathed, she had still felt completely exposed to him...and had felt so utterly ashamed of herself that she had failed at obscuring her fear...that she had even allowed such an emotion to enter into her mind...her heart.

Why are you even bothering to try to hide it? she had viciously demanded of herself, fingers clenching around the silken material. He already knows how you feel!

Frustrated, Liz had embraced her smarting pride, allowing it to strengthen her. Then she had silently wrestled with her shuddering anxiety, trying to shove it away from the forefront of her thoughts down deep within so that when she finally looked up at Red, he wouldn't be able to glimpse any trace of it.

When their eyes had met at last, she had given him what she'd hoped passed for a polite smile.

"What country are you headed to this time?" she had asked lightly, feigning interest so she would take his focus off of her and put it back onto himself. But the brightness in her tone hadn't come naturally, and so her words had sounded rather shrill.
At least to her ears.

"England." His brows had drawn together slightly in concern as his eyes had held hers searchingly.

Great. Wonderful. Her tone had obviously sounded unnatural to him as well.

Discomposed, she had torn her gaze away from his and had studied her folded legs, the way the sheets pulled around them, outlining her thighs. She had smoothed a palm nervously down one of them--and had been surprised when his large hand came into her line of sight and gently covered hers, taking hold of it. Red had then carefully laced their fingers together and she'd watched as his thumb had slowly stroked her pale skin back and forth...back and forth.

"Talk to me," he had requested gently, warm voice a gravelly murmur in the dark. "Tell me why you're upset."

Elizabeth hadn't insulted his intelligence by trying to lie. Feeling cornered, she had glared fiercely at him instead. "You already know why," she had snapped.

Unfazed by her defensive attitude, a faint smile had touched his mouth at her cross tone. "Do I?"

She had expected him to drop her hand, but he'd kept it firmly within his strong grasp, continuing to smooth his callused thumb across her knuckles.

"You always say you know me so well," she'd grumbled, eyes darting restlessly away from his.

"I do." Red had squeezed all her fingers then to get her attention and she'd glanced reluctantly back up at him. "But that doesn't mean I will take away your agency to speak. And since something about what I told you is bothering you, you should speak."

Her nostrils had flared, eyes sparking defiantly.

"It's part of what makes for a healthy relationship, Elizabeth."

He'd been right. And she had known that. But it certainly didn't make speaking about her stupid, irrational fears any easier.

Baring her teeth in a silent snarl of resentment, she'd looked back down at their hands. "I don't like the idea of you being gone for so long."

"I don't like it much either," he had replied, and even though his tone had been dry, the expression in his eyes had been serious. "But I am required to go in order to--"

"I know," she'd interrupted impatiently. "You have to manage your business."

"I do," he had murmured, his thumb stilling its caressing movements as her eyes had flickered to his face. "It cannot be helped," he had added in an even quieter undertone.

She had wondered at the slow deliberation of that statement and the slight...disgust?...tinging his words.

Then he had blinked, green eyes refocusing back on her face. "I know the separation will be difficult. We both knew it would be when we went into...this." He had put a slight emphasis on the last word, and she had known he'd meant their relationship.

Liz had looked down.
"But that isn't the main reason for why you don't like the idea." Ducking his head, he had tried to
catch her eye. "Is it?" he'd questioned gently.

"No," she had agreed quietly.

The defensive anger she'd been willingly stoking just moments before had swiftly bled out of her,
making her feel drained as she had gazed at him.

"I know that I...that I've come a long way," she'd begun haltingly. "From what I was back in August
and September. But I'm not..." she paused, self-consciously folding her lower lip briefly between her
teeth. "I'm not...completely myself yet."

Red's expression had been patient, so she had tried to explain.

"Even though I know Forman's dead," she had slanted a piercing look at him as she'd said the words,
but he'd met her stare with a steady composure, "...even though I've been training with Baz," she
had continued after a significantly pregnant breath, "...even though I'm going to school and living in
my own place...." her voice had trailed off and he had squeezed her hand in encouragement.

At the touch, she had steeled herself, bravely meeting his eyes again.

"I just...feel safer knowing you're around." She had hitched a shoulder uncomfortably. "Or that
you're not countries away from me. That if I were...in trouble...it wouldn't take long for you to get to
me."

Then she'd shrugged both her shoulders, acutely embarrassed for her lack of self-assurance. "I know
it's stupid," she had whispered, cheeks burning with her shame.

Because, honestly, what were the odds of another man like Forman jumping out of the bushes at her,
attempting to ravage her body and then murder her?

Slim to none, that's what they were!

"No," he'd disagreed sharply. "It's not stupid. I wish you wouldn't categorize your feelings as such,"
he had rumbled gruffly.

The vehemence of this reveal had startled her, and her eyes had snapped immediately back to his
grave face.

"What you went through was horrific. Traumatic." He had knowingly searched her gaze. "You
shouldn't be internalizing any shame due to the fact that you want to feel secure."

"But I feel like I shouldn't need you nearby so that I do feel secure," she'd confided softly. "I feel like
I should be over that by now."

"Who the Hell are you comparing yourself to?" he had demanded in a soft growl.

She had immediately hunched defensively in on herself, eyes flashing with hurt and a bit of heat in
reaction to his impatient tone of voice.

Upon seeing her upset expression, Red had taken in a deep breath and then had slowly released it. "I
apologize, sweetheart. I'm not angry with you. That's not why I...." He had allowed his thought to
trail away as he'd paused for a moment, coming to some sort of decision about what to say before
shaking his head in certainty.
"There is nothing wrong with you," he'd finally told her firmly. "Nothing," he had stressed, sternly punctuating the word by briefly tightening his hand over hers. "You're doing everything within your power to help build your confidence up, aren't you?"

It hadn't really been a question since they both had known that she was, but Liz had nodded anyway.

"That's all you can keep doing." Red had then softened his tone. "Continuing to strengthen your mind and body...perhaps it won't relieve your anxiety entirely, but it will help."

Her blue eyes had flicked away from his as she had buried her disappointment. What had she expected? A magical remedy to cure lingering insecurities brought about from a terrifying and harrowing experience? Her mental tone had been caustic as she had sarcastically berated herself for even wishing for such a thing when she had already known it didn't exist.

"I know it's not what you wanted to hear," he'd murmured, compassion coloring his voice. God, he knew her so well.

"There just isn't an easy solution, is there?" she'd asked with a soft sigh before turning a small, resigned smile on him.

The question had been rhetorical, as well he had known, but Red had shaken his head in answer anyway. "No, baby," he'd replied gently. "But you're making all the right decisions. If you keep doing what you're doing, this uneasiness you feel...it won't last forever."

Elizabeth had allowed the fingers of her other hand to slip down from the edge of the sheet to trail lightly over his rough knuckles in a tender caress that had expressed her gratitude for his patient empathy and kind understanding.

Red had released her palm, but only to gather both of of hers together in his own, giving her slim fingers a warm squeeze.

"Come here."

Shifting closer, she had joined him against the headboard and had leaned against his side, resting her head on his shoulder. As she had closed her eyes, she'd felt him press a kiss affectionately to the top of her head.

"When do you leave?" she had asked after a moment of comfortable stillness.

"Early Monday morning."

It had been Friday night.

"That's soon," she'd whispered, disappointment piercing her and adding a low huskiness to her voice that hadn't been there before.

"I know." Red had wrapped an arm apologetically around her shoulders, fingertips brushing down her smooth skin. "Like I said earlier, I don't expect to be gone longer than five weeks at the most." He had picked absently at the edge of the white linen tucked around her, his touch just brushing against the swell of her breast. "Baz will stay in Seattle to continue your lessons."

"But...." she had turned her face to look questioningly up at him. "You hired him to be something else. Don't you need him with you when you travel?"
"Not always," Red had replied, glancing down at her. "There are others I've hired who share his profession, as you know. And besides," he'd added in a gentler voice, "I want you to continue with your lessons without a long period of interruption. I know how important they are to you."

Especially now that she had admitted what she had to him.

"You have Baz's cell number." He had gazed at her while he'd stroked her hair away from her neck so he could trace a tender caress down her bared skin. "You could always call him if you need anything."

Elizabeth had known what he'd meant by that. Despite the slight pang of embarrassment she had felt, knowing that the guard would be around, doing whatever he'd be doing in the city, had made her feel a little better...a little more secure.

But Baz certainly wasn't a substitute for Red.

"You and I... We'll talk while you're away, right?" she'd asked softly, rubbing her cheek pensively against his broad shoulder.

"Of course we will. Just keep in mind that there is a time--"

"A time difference," Liz had finished quietly. "Yes, I know."

Sensing the melancholy descending upon her, Red had tucked her more snugly against his side. "It only feels long," he had murmured, a smile coloring his voice as the familiar words he'd repeated a hundred times before had washed over her. "It's not so long, sweetheart."

She had snorted softly at that, lightly flicking her fingers against the top of his thigh in gentle rebuke. "You're teasing me," she had accused, a slight growl of indignance slipping into her tone as glimpses of youthful memories had flashed before her mind's eye.

How like him to bring up embarrassing childhood moments during a serious conversation...like the times when she had either thrown tantrums or had cried messy, ugly tears when he'd been leaving Nebraska!

"Perhaps a little," he had grinned, chuckling warmly as he had swiftly caught her hand when she had made another threatening motion against his leg.

Wrinkling her nose at that, Elizabeth had raised her head, intently watching as he'd playfully trapped her small palm tightly against his bare chest. She had slowly curled her fingers as much as his grip would allow into the wiry hairs there as he'd turned towards her, pulling her unresisting body even closer against his.

A hint of his cologne faintly tinged with the musk from the love they'd made earlier had teased her senses. The steady rise and fall of his chest had drawn her attention to the beating of his heart, a strong and sure thrumming against her hand.

Red's hold on her fingers had loosened as the pique he had purposefully stirred in her so she'd shake her dispiritedness had begun to visibly dissipate. As his lax grip had fallen away from her, Liz's expression had metamorphosed into something much more quietly thoughtful as she had stroked him just there, thumb slowly caressing right over his pulse.

Finally her gaze had lifted to his.

*I'll miss you.*
His green eyes had gleamed as he'd closed the short distance between them. "And I you," he'd purred just before taking her mouth with his in a deeply thorough kiss.

And that's when she had realized that she'd actually uttered the heartfelt words aloud....

"Ahem," Baz loudly cleared his throat, sea-blue eyes glinting with barely suppressed mirth as Liz started violently out of her reminiscing.

Much to her chagrin, apparently observing her wide, dismayed eyes and flushed cheeks was the complete undoing of his already-tenuous self-control.

"'No,' my ass!" he chortled lustily. "If what you were doing just now isn't called 'mooning,' I don't know wh--"

"Shut up!" she cut him off with an exasperated hiss, feeling beyond both aggravated and flustered that he'd caught her thinking about Red.

But instead of sobering up like she'd hoped he would at her censure, he actually guffawed louder!

With a growly huff, she flounced away from him to perch primly on the edge of one of the many cement planters lining the street to wait for George to pick her up.

Then she fixed a fiercely resentful glare on him.

Unruffled by her vexation, Baz grinned and settled down beside her.

"I wasn't mooning over anyone--during our session today," Liz clarified in a defensive grumble, eyes flicking down to her clasped hands.

"Well, I definitely knocked you on your ass more times than I would've liked," the guard retorted. "Your mind," he tapped his own temple for emphasis, "wasn't on your defense." Even as he spoke the last words, his amused tone eased into something a little more serious as he tried to gauge her current mood.

If she was going to open up to him and be truthful then he didn't want to appear as if he were laughing at her.

That would just make her clam up on him again.

"I didn't completely suck...."

"True," Baz conceded to her rather feeble defense. And by her wince, he knew she was well-aware of how flimsy it was. "But considering what I expected of you, you didn't do your best."

Elizabeth crossed one slender leg uneasily over the other.

"Right?" he prodded.

Her nostrils flared, revealing to him just how much she was struggling internally with her pride...but she didn't deny his point.

A smile twitched at the corners of his mouth. Good for you, Liz.

"Sorry," she mumbled, quickly slanting him a genuinely contrite look before glancing away to study her hands again. "I'm a little...off-kilter."
And had been all week, but Baz kept his mouth wisely shut on that observation.

"I want a weapon."

The man's eyes widened in utter shock at her blunt words.

That was the very last thing in the whole damn world that he had expected her to say!

What took him even further aback was the gravely severe look in her piercingly blue eyes when they unwaveringly met and held his.

"A weapon?" he repeated slowly.

At her deliberate nod, he forced a teasing smile to his lips while his thoughts continued to tumble over themselves, scrambling for a proper response to give her.

_Goddamn it, Red, you would be gone now of all fucking times, wouldn't you?_

"Don't you feel confident in the abilities I'm teaching you?" he half-joked, waiting to read the annoyance that would undoubtedly be revealed in her face as he tried to deflect her attention from her chosen topic of conversation.

But an understanding smile slightly curved her lips instead, a reaction he certainly hadn't expected from her. Did she understand the reason behind why he was attempting to light-heartedly distract her?

Clever girl.

"You didn't expect that from me."

In a very subtle way, Liz seemed rather pleased by the fact that she had thrown him off balance. Perhaps it was slightly taunting lilt in her tone, or the triumphant glint in her eyes.

"Did you?" she prodded.

"Don't you have confidence in yourself, Elizabeth?" Baz quickly parried back, swiftly switching tactics. He decided then and there that he didn't have to commit to helping her get any kind of weapon tonight—and he wouldn't, not without Red's approval.

That went without saying.

But he could incite her to open up to him about why she really wanted one.

"Yeah," she replied seriously, mood changing yet again...and this time, from coy to assertive. "And...it's growing," she confided. "Every week, it's growing."

"But...?" the guard prompted when she hesitated.

"But--what if I'm bested physically?" she asked quietly, eyes flickering to his face. "What if I have sprained or broken bones and can't defend myself with my body anymore? What then, Baz?"

"Is that what's been on your mind tonight?"

At her reluctant nod, he regarded her closely.

So. What all this boiled down to was that Elizabeth was afraid of being defenseless.
After the horror she had gone through, that fear writhing inside of her was more than understandable. Baz wondered if Red's month-long absence also had something to do with it. Perhaps his being gone for a long stint across the damn Atlantic was the catalytic event that had brought about this fierce desire to be as prepared as she could be if she was forced to come face to face with evil again.

"What kind of weapon are you thinking of?" the guard finally inquired.

"Well... Something a Hell of a lot better than freaking pepper spray," Liz grumbled in disgust.

A silvery brow rose in surprise. "Who told you to carry pepper spray?"

"Katie," Liz sighed, rolling her eyes in fond amusement.

"You told her you wanted a weapon?"

"Uh huh. And that wasn't quite what I had in mind." She made a face, shaking her head. "I told Red about what she said. And he thought it was a *grand* idea." She wrinkled her nose as she lifted her fingers in an air quotes gesture. "Before I knew it, he had attached one to my keychain." Reaching into her bag, she pulled out her keys and dangled them pointedly in front of the man's nose.

And there it was, clipped into a rather bulky leather encasement, stiffly swinging back and forth with the jingling hardware.

"It's not a bad idea to have that," he told her, nodding toward the item she exasperatedly shoved back into her purse. "I'm actually surprised Red didn't think of it himself."

Liz snorted. "That's exactly what he said! He actually seemed pretty upset with himself." Then she shrugged. "That's probably why he got me one so quickly."

"Probably," Baz agreed dryly. "But in all honesty, Liz, pepper spray could come in handy. Definitely keep it on your person."

"Yeah... I know."

She had the aggrieved tone of a woman who'd been lectured one too many times by various people on the benefits of carrying pepper spray, so Baz nodded his understanding and let the matter drop.

"Before Red left, did you tell him you want a weapon?"

She slowly shook her head.

The temptation to ask why was strong, but the sudden shuttered expression in her blue eyes forced him to hold his tongue.

Well, at least now he knew he wouldn't be contradicting anything Red might have told her. Not that he thought she'd pit them against each other for her own benefit....

He slanted her a wary look.

On the other hand....

She could be a resourceful and sly little thing when she wanted to be. It would probably be wise of him to follow his gut, watch his step, and keep double-checking on that now that she was obviously comfortable enough with him to confide something personal that she had *n't* shared with Red.

"Have you given any thought to what kind of weapon you want?" he asked again.
"Something that can do damage. A knife, maybe." Her eyes suddenly gleamed predatorily. "Or a gun."

Baz shot her a sharp look. He recognized the feral glitter in her eyes. Oh yes. He knew it well. It existed in all people...some individuals were just more honest about acknowledging it and actually showing it if the situation warranted such a reveal. After what she'd been through, it was only natural that that particular aspect of her personality would reside so incredibly close to the surface. And it would undoubtedly remain there for a long while, at times bleeding into her thoughts, her expressions, her actions.

Like it had tonight.

"Have you ever fired one?" he asked carefully.

"Oh, yeah," she nodded, that peculiar, fierce light fading from her big eyes as she grew more reminiscently thoughtful. "It's been years, but...yeah. I lived in the country. Everyone in my town grew up learning how to shoot."

Baz opened his mouth to speak, but she swiftly cut him off.

"I know," she murmured, waving an impatient hand. "I know this would be different than shooting my dad's old hunting rifle in an open field at bales of hay."

How had she known that was exactly what he'd been about to imply?

"But I've done some research on handguns, Baz. I guess I now just need help in...in figuring out what the best choice is for me." Her eyes flickered beseeingly to his as she gave him her best unsure-but-game smile.

Now that he had dragged all of this out of her, she wanted his help. But he wasn't sure if he was the right person to aid her.

In fact, he knew he wasn't. Not with this. Not when it concerned her so intimately.

"Let me think about your options," the guard said, expression grave so she would comprehend without a doubt that he wasn't just brushing her off. "Okay?"

Elizabeth searched his face for brief moment before nodding her understanding. "Okay."

Much later that night, when Baz phoned Red to check in, he relayed his enlightening conversation with Elizabeth, laying all the facts out in the open for his employer to sift through.

"A taser could work for her," the guard suggested into the silence that stretched between them.

"Mmhmm."

"Maybe even a blackjack."

"Hmm."

From the sound of it, Red didn't seem too keen on either idea.

Baz tapped his index finger quietly on the table and wisely held his tongue, knowing the older man well enough to understand that he now needed silence as he weighed all the various choices in his mind and considered the pros and cons of each.
"I'll get her a gun," finally came the gravelly murmur.

The other man immediately balked. "It's such a huge responsibility, Red!"

"She can handle it," came the calm, almost amused response.

The guard ground his teeth. "Have you even read the fucking gun laws for Washington? All the hoops she'll have to jump through to get her license? Not to mention she'll be put on government lists, Red. Unwanted attention could be drawn to her--"

A bark of rough laughter escaped his employer, abruptly halting the hasty spill of words. "We're not going that route."

Meaning, the legal route.

The guard's eyes narrowed thoughtfully as he lifted his gaze to the window that looked down into Elizabeth's new apartment. He watched as she grabbed a slice of pepperoni pizza out of the box in the oven and bite into it before heading back into her den, forgoing the use of a plate.

If she got grease on that priceless suede couch of hers....

"I was already planning on going to see Mitchell before flying back to Seattle in a few weeks," Red was saying, bringing Baz's attention back to the conversation. "So this actually works out quite well!" There was a note of jovial enthusiasm in his voice that hadn't been there a moment ago.

The man did love his shopping, whether it was for fedoras or firearms!

"You think he'll have something for Liz?"

"That man has something for everyone," Red snorted. "I'm sure he'll have exactly what I'm looking for."

_How will you explain the gun's origins to her?_ Baz wondered, but it wasn't up to him to figure all that out.

Thank God.

"If you're sure...."

"I'm sure." There was a decisiveness in his employer's tone that the younger man recognized and knew not to challenge. "As is she."

Red was right about that. Elizabeth had appeared ready and more than willing to take on the challenging responsibility that would aid in building her self-confidence.

"You and I...we will teach her how to use it until she is as comfortable with it as she is with putting her shoes on," his employer concluded. "She's a quick study. It won't take her long."
This chapter was going to be longer (and an Interlude!) but I decided to split up the events. I realized tonight that it would all flow better that way.

As always, thank you for reading, your patience, and your support ❤

(By the way, how amazing was the 5x08 fall finale? :D Lizzington lives and it's
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
Elizabeth kept herself extremely busy the month Red was away in England.

When she wasn't completely wrapped up in studying or methodically working on her assignments upstairs in the university's library, she was either doing yoga at home to center within, jogging with Bronn around her neighborhood to keep her stamina up and to keep him in shape, grabbing a meal with Katie and the girls to socialize, training with Baz to keep honing the skills she was learning, or she was venturing into the city to attend her dance class.

During the last few months she'd spent recovering mentally, physically, and emotionally from the assault, she had truly forgotten just how much she loved hip-hop. But once she'd heard a song she had danced to last spring blare loudly over the speakers at the student union, and had actually caught herself discreetly tapping her feet under the table in the quick movements she had memorized all those months ago, she'd resignedly admitted to herself that she missed it more than she had realized.

When she'd finally confided her longing--and hesitancy--about returning to dance over the phone to Red that night, he had immediately encouraged her to attend at least to one session. If she felt desperately uncomfortable, he'd advised she could always wait and try again another week.

But in the next breath he had reminded her that she probably would know most everyone in the class...and that it wasn't as if she'd be performing onstage before hundreds of avidly-watching strangers. Everyone in the studio would be focusing on their own dancing...not on her.

Liz had flushed hotly with embarrassment at that. "I must sound really egocentric, huh?" she'd asked under her breath, uneasily rubbing the back of her neck.

"No." Red had been adamant. "Not egocentric. That's the wrong word." Then he had gentled his tone. "Perhaps...nervous is a better word."

"Can you blame me?" she'd snapped, the defensive words tumbling roughly out of her mouth before she could even think to hold them back.

Shit.

Closing her eyes, she had tightly folded her lips together as her cheeks had heated yet again with shame.

"No." His voice had been calmly even.

Her eyes had flickered open at that. God, the fact that he'd sounded completely unfazed pointed to that he was used to these agitated and angry outbursts from her.

And that had made her feel even worse.

"Dancing is a confident expression of your vivacity, your beauty...your sexuality," he'd explained patiently, tone quite matter-of-fact. "Everything you've been concealing from others."

He had paused significantly to let his words sink in, and she'd quickly taken advantage of his silence to defend herself.
"Not everyone," she had retorted quietly.

"Your close college friends, Baz, and myself don't count, Lizzy."

Pursing her lips, Liz had looked down at the fuzzy blanket tangled around her legs.

He'd been right.

"Of course you're going to be nervous if you engage," he had continued softly.

By his tone of voice, she'd immediately known that they weren't speaking only of dancing any longer, but rather what the sensually dynamic activity represented for her: forgiveness and acceptance.

If she engaged, as Red had so delicately put it, she'd be stepping towards truly forgiving herself for everything she'd gone through while further accepting herself as a sexually mature young woman outside Red's bedroom...and being unafraid to unveil that fact to everyone she'd come into contact with in the future. If she engaged, she would begin to find joy rather than apprehension in that aspect of who she was in order to more fully embrace life again.

"Of course you're going to be uncertain," Red had continued. "Hesitant. Even anxious." A pregnant pause had passed them by before he'd said, "But since you actually told me tonight that you really miss dancing and are seriously considering returning to it...."

Her fingers had tightened over her phone in reaction to the almost savagely triumphant smile that had crept into his low tone of voice.

"I think you're standing on the ledge between the debilitating fear you've been holding inside of yourself...and the courage I know you possess to jump away from that fear."

Her breath had caught sharply in her throat at the alluringly vivid mental image his descriptive words had painted, heart aching with trepidation...and longing.

"But...what if I fall?" she had whispered uncertainly.

"Oh, my darling girl...." he had murmured, his silken baritone full of empathetic compassion. "But what if you fly?"

That was the night when Elizabeth had made the decision to gather her courage, albeit rather tentatively, and metaphorically spread her wings to take that leap into confidence with all the fiery spirit Red saw in her.

And the more she resolutely persuaded herself to attend her class, the more she became like her old self: easy-going, enlivened, composed, and intently eager. Within her orderly and structured life, dancing once again became the way she could creatively express herself in an enthusiastic, independent way. Because that was exactly what dancing was: an energetic form of art where every movement and sequence of movements had aesthetic and symbolic value. And it was up to her to learn the intricate routine correctly and work tirelessly at it until she got it all right.

She reveled in the pounding beat of the music, in the sweat running down her spine and sliding down her temples, in the sharp precision of her movements. Sometimes the thought that dancing was a lot like her sessions with Baz tickled the back of her mind, making her grin amusedly as she sensually whipped her body to the pulsing vibrations of the bass line. Both types of lessons were rigorous and required her to meticulously focus her attention on her stimulated muscles, on the way they shifted and pivoted as her thoughts furiously flew ahead to what she had to accomplish in order
to accurately execute the next formation.

The fact that she had whole-heartedly committed herself to both types of training was extremely beneficial to her, for one complemented the other and heightened her skill levels and her self-assurance with them.

As Elizabeth's confidence bloomed even more, so did her social life off and on campus.

In her classes, she no longer bolted to the very back of the room to remain relatively tucked away and unseen by most. Bravely she began to inch her way closer to the front of the classroom day by day, willingly partaking in social conversations with her peers as well as actively participating in and, at times, even leading discussions on the current subject matter they were all studying.

Her observant professors, especially those teaching psychology, began to take attentive notice of her, recognizing her aptitude for understanding the behaviors of people. One professor advanced that shrewd interest a step further and actually took Liz aside one afternoon and encouraged her to partake in a class that was typically reserved for fourth year declared Psychology majors ready to graduate.

Liz was admittedly shocked, then flattered.

"Won't I be behind if I'm coming in almost halfway through the semester?" she asked, tone a little shyly hesitant.

"With where you're at in your studies, I think not," Dr. Evans smiled. "And if you decide to commit to the class, I'll make sure you receive full units for it as if you had been attending it this entire time."

Liz's mouth dropped open slightly at that. "Is that even okay?" The words popped out of her mouth before she could consider them and she flushed, embarrassed.

But her professor only grinned kindly. "I think once I show the department board your marks and the content of your latest essay, the university will make an exception in this case, Elizabeth. They have before."

"But--I'm only a third year." And hadn't officially declared a major!

"I wouldn't have approached you to take this reserved class if I didn't think you'd excel." Dr. Evans's expression grew more seriously thoughtful. "You have an inherent skill many psychologists would have given their eye teeth for if they'd possessed it at your age."

Liz frowned.

"I know you don't believe me, but that's because you've always had it and don't know how to comprehend people otherwise." Dr. Evans searched her face. "I really do think there will be many employment opportunities readily available to you once you graduate...and they will become apparent if you commit to attending this class I'm offering to you."

The younger woman's cheeks brightened at the compliment. "I need to be honest, Dr. Evans...I'm still undecided between Psychology and Law."

"I know," the professor replied with an almost pained look in her eyes, disliking the thought of losing such a promising student to another walk of life. "That's why I'm encouraging you to take this class."

Elizabeth tucked her hair behind her ears, considering.
"Attend it once, no commitment required until you and I speak again afterward," Dr. Evans smiled persuasively. "I think it'll help you decide your future."

After another moment's reflection and coming to the decision that she would have nothing to lose and everything to gain, Liz agreed.

The class was a seminar, not a lecture, so the size was much smaller and the feel much more intimate than what she was used to.

A flash of anxiety suffused her mind and heart when all eyes snapped curiously to her as she walked in on her first day of attending it. Mentally squashing down the ridiculous desire to whirl around and flee out of the room, she plastered a polite expression on her face and forced herself to sit in the third row from the front.

By the end of that first day, the word was out around the class that Liz Scott was an undeclared third year--and yet, despite the fact that she hadn't had experience yet in counseling or profiling real patients like they had, her peers recognized her intelligence and began to respect her for it.

"The class sounds fascinating and I'm excited to go...but I'm pretty nervous, too, Red," she told him over the phone much later that night.

"That's a natural emotion to feel when attempting something new," he replied with a patiently fond smile. "Did you commit?"

"Dr. Evans said I can participate in one session at the clinic and then let her know if I want to continue with it."

"So you'll be applying what you've learned these past couple years to actually counsel a real patient of this clinic? And it's close to campus, yes?"

"Yes," Liz nodded to both questions, staring thoughtfully up at the ceiling of her bedroom. "Dr. Evans will be sitting behind a two-way glass window and will observe my interaction with the patient." She crossed one leg over the other, right foot bobbing restlessly in the air. "Apparently the whole session will be taped. The person I'll be counseling will know that, obviously. It'd be weird if they didn't. I guess they have to sign a waiver or something."

"Makes sense," he murmured. "And you're being recorded because..."

"Oh, everyone in my class has to be taped counseling people, not just me," she clarified quickly. "It's because I have to review it with the entire class later," she winced apprehensively.

"You have doubts?" he asked softly, instantly picking up on her anxiety.

"Some," she hedgingly admitted. "I just don't want to make a fool of myself."

"Mmm."

"I mean, it wouldn't be so bad if Dr. Evans would be the only one to see my tape. If she and I reviewed it privately. She's my teacher and she knows what she's talking about," Liz tried to explain. "But knowing that everyone in my class will be criticizing me if I make a mistake...."

"I think you're confusing criticizing with critiquing," he observed gently.

She fell silent at that.
"Your peers have been doing these counseling sessions longer than you," he went on. "Perhaps they'll have something useful to impart to you. Advice, Lizzy. To improve yourself."

"You're talking as if I'll make mistakes," she muttered, cheeks heating slightly in irritation.

"I think that it would be unfair of you to expect perfection from yourself, especially since it'll be your first time counseling," he replied carefully, quite aware of her shift in tone. "Reading and then debating the aspects of psychology are different from actually applying those aspects firsthand in a real counseling session."

She sucked in a defensive breath, but before she could stammer out an objection, he swiftly continued, "You're a perfectionist, honey. I know you want to do well. And I believe you will do well. But you can still do well and err. And it's okay, Lizzy. It's okay."

Liz's eyes narrowed. He had a point, of course. Well, points. About all of it: the fine distinction between criticizing and critiquing, how she shouldn't expect to breeze through her first session without making a single mistake, how a person could succeed at whatever they were doing even while making a mistake or two.... She scowled defiantly up at her toes.

"Elizabeth," Red ventured knowingly into the brooding silence growing between them.

"Mm?"

"You're making a face, aren't you?"

"No," she fibbed resentfully.

He chuckled quietly at that and she bristled indignantly.

"Don't you think what I said has merit?" he inquired, his tone a mixture of amusement and gravity.

She sighed, the rebellious glare that had twisted her features fading away to something much more acquiescent. Why fight the truth? "Yeah." Then she crossly pursed her lips. "It must be nice to be right all the time."

That shook a genuine, booming laugh out of him.

Liz hadn't been expecting it and she found herself dimpling grudgingly in response. God, that particular laugh.... She hadn't heard it in a long while. Not since he had gone away.

"Not all the time," Red grinned. She could just imagine his white teeth flashing in the darkness of his bedroom all those thousands of miles away in England. "But perhaps most of the time," he jested.

She snorted, her right foot bouncing in the air again, but this time it was in reaction to the warm affection in his voice.

"You'll do well, Lizzy," he reassured her seriously, bringing her attention back to the main topic of their conversation. "You always do. And remember to keep an open mind while your peers critique you."

And she did.

Of course, it wasn't easy to sit there and have some of what she had done and said to the patient be torn apart by virtual strangers. But she remembered the advice Red had given her and kept a receptive expression on her face while she diligently took down her notes on what to impart to a
patient next time she attended another session.

And there would most certainly be a next time.

Even though she'd blundered through a few things, Elizabeth had genuinely enjoyed her first counseling session. She was still uncertain if she liked having a stranger open up to her about their life and troubles, but the challenge of understanding them well enough to pinpoint the triggers that caused certain behaviors had been thrilling.

As she continued to attend and participate in those sessions at the clinic over the next two weeks, it became clearer to her that she was definitely drawn more to psychology than to studying the law.

And so, with pride and earnest confidence, Liz officially declared Psychology as her major.

It was utterly fascinating, the science of psychology. She had come to realize that it was like a guidebook...a guidebook to how all individuals thought and behaved. As she learned how to combine her intuitive understanding with her book smarts and apply them to the patients she spoke with, and even to random individuals when she was out and about in the city, people suddenly no longer seemed so...unpredictable.

Ever since Forman's attack, the inconsistency of people had been a constant concern drifting in the back of her mind. But this newfound discovery that there was a formula to human behaviors went a long way to easing much of the apprehension that she'd been tensely carrying around in her heart for so long.

People were consistent. Their behavior had a pattern...and she could discern that pattern if she had an understanding of their personality traits...their character.

After her critique one afternoon, Liz shared her thoughts on the subject with Dr. Evans. Her professor listened attentively, a small smile suddenly curving her lips as an intriguing idea began to blossom in the back of her mind.

After Elizabeth completed the last counseling session for the week, she was unexpectedly pulled into the room on the other side of the two-way glass window.

It was an unusual occurrence to be asked to join her professor in that room, so she immediately thought she had done something horribly wrong in her session. Her mind anxiously scrambled back over the events of the last hour as she turned the knob on the door to let herself inside.

What had she done to warrant any kind of reprimand or censure?

Her concern increased when she realized her professor wasn't alone in the room. God, she must have really screwed up if another doctor was listening in on her session!

Both her professor and the stranger looked up from the papers they were holding and turned toward her as the door quietly clicked shut.

Dread swept slowly through her, making her feel cold. Brittle. She could actually feel the blood draining from her face as she mustered her nerve and moved further into the room.

"For God's sake, don't look so concerned, Liz!" Dr. Evans chuckled upon seeing her student's pallid and nervous expression. "Everything's fine."

Embarrassed relief flooded Elizabeth, leaving two spots of high color staining her cheeks. "It's not often I'm called in here!" she replied with a shaky laugh, blue eyes flicking from her professor to land
curiously on the tall man dressed in a tailored, dark navy blue suit.

"Elizabeth Scott, this is Agent Fox of the FBI." Dr. Evans smiled, gesturing to the man who seemed to be in his early thirties.

_The FBI?_ Trying to mask her shock and failing miserably, Liz took the agent's outstretched hand. "Oh--uh.... Hello,"

Inwardly, she winced at how freaking immature she sounded. _Damn it, pull it together, Liz!_ Grasping her poise, she bared her teeth in a friendly, if curious, smile.

Hopefully the man wouldn't hold her initial awkwardness against her.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Scott," Agent Fox smiled back, politely masking his amusement at Elizabeth's bewildered reaction. "Dr. Evans has told me quite a bit about you."

"Me?" she queried, nonplussed.

The agent nodded seriously. "And after observing your session just now, I'm inclined to agree with her assessment of your abilities."

Liz shot a quick, questioning glance at Dr. Evans, who was looking very pleased.

"Like her," Agent Fox nodded to her professor, "I also think that with the right practice of application over the last year and a half of your schooling...you could be an asset to the FBI. Perhaps even a profiler."

The young woman's eyes darted back to the man incredulously. "A profiler? For the FBI?" She knew she did very well in her courses, but...he couldn't be serious. She was almost tempted to ask to see the agent's badge just to assure herself that this wasn't some sort of elaborate joke being played on her.

"Yes, Liz," Dr. Evans confirmed, smile widening. "I told you she'd take a little convincing," she added as an aside to the agent.

"I'm--I'm sorry," Liz stammered, still feeling rather dumbfounded. "I'm, um, I'm honestly astonished. I mean, I'm flattered, too," she tried to cover her feelings of doubt with the truth, "I'm just...." She allowed herself to bestow a sort of helpless smile on the two of them. "I'm just surprised.

Surprised. Yeah. That was definitely an understatement!

"We tour colleges around the country looking for likely candidates to join our ranks. You show promise," Agent Fox told her seriously. "I'd like to give you some literature, if you're inclined to consider...." his voice trailed off questioningly as he made to hand her a folder.

"Oh! Uh, yes--yes, of course," she replied eagerly, if a little awed, as she accepted the packet from him. "Thank you very much, Agent Fox."

"You're welcome, Miss Scott. And if you have any questions, my email is on the card inside. Or you could always talk to Dr. Evans here," he inclined his head at the woman. "She and I speak often."

Liz bobbed her head and smiled winningly at the agent to make up for her earlier discomfiture. "I'll remember that. Thank you."

That evening she did a lot of reading and even stayed up late into the night, drinking coffee to keep
herself alert as she researched the varying potential careers she could choose from if she decided to go into law enforcement...into the FBI.

The FBI. Her.

The thought was almost too surreal to consider seriously...and yet she found herself contemplatively projecting into the future, vividly imagining herself wearing one of those famous FBI bomber jackets, the navy blue material slipping smoothly against her skin as she bolted down the sidewalk toward someone who was urgently yelling, "Agent Scott!" It certainly had a ring to it.... She could just see herself whipping her gun from its holster at her side, lifting it and aiming it warningly at whoever she was chasing down....

Snorting in embarrassment, she shook her head reproachfully at her own silliness and naïveté.

If she were to be some kind of profiler, she probably wouldn't be out in the field very much--if at all! She'd be given a weapon, certainly, but she wouldn't be using it nearly as often as TV shows loved to portray.

Which reminded her....

A frown creased her brow.

Baz still hadn't told her what her options were for carrying a weapon for self-defense. She had planned on stubbornly waiting him out, if only to prove to him that she could be composed and patient when she tried.

But...she was honestly getting antsy.

Her nostrils flared, eyes flashing rather testily as she thought the situation over.

The guard most likely had been deep into conversations with Red about her this entire length of time, undoubtedly filling him in on what she desired...and quite possibly getting his opinion on the matter.

It was a wonder the man sneezed without Red's permission!

Wincing, she sighed out her irritation and swiftly shook her head chidingly at herself again.

No. That wasn't fair to Baz. He was loyally respectful of his employer and had to be considerate and extremely careful, even wary, where she was concerned. She understood that more than he realized. Truly, she did.

Red would probably take her unawares, as he was wont to do, and pointedly ask her why she hadn't told him about her intent desire for a weapon. She'd have to have a pretty damn good answer ready for him when he did broach the subject.

Elizabeth blinked wearily, forcibly bringing herself back to the present. Her eyes flickered up from the keyboard to her laptop's screen, the crest of the FBI shining brightly at her in all its fluorescent glory.

Were her fledgling skills really that noteworthy for Dr. Evans to recommend her? For that agent to actually observe her?

_Idiot_, she thought derisively. _They wouldn't have gone through all this trouble if you didn't show.... How did he put it? Ah, yeah. Promise. If you didn't show promise._
Her expression turned gravely thoughtful as she silently regarded the three words written across the waving banner: *fidelity, bravery, integrity.*

She could really do this. While applying her skill sets as best as she was able, she could learn to strive even higher for those three ideal characteristics agents were supposed to emulate...and in so doing, maybe she could make a difference in this incredibly harsh world they all lived in.

Perhaps she could even have a hand in ridding the world of the evil she heard about in the news every single day, of the men and women who stole, raped, enslaved, and murdered. If she was able to connect the near-invisible dots and unravel a murderer's pattern of behavior and thus create an accurate profile on him that would aid field agents in his capture or possible death, shouldn't she do it?

If she really did have the budding promise of the ability to accurately profile felons like Forman, wouldn't it be, for lack of a better word...wasteful...if she *didn't* endeavor to use it?

Wouldn't she be wasting herself? Wasting her life?

The small smile that curved Elizabeth's lips was self-deprecating. God, she sounded as if she were having a freaking midlife crisis or something!

She then recalled what Red had patiently said to her over the summer when she'd been wavering indecisively between choosing either Psychology or Law as her major: her future was not set in stone. If she belatedly realized later on down the line that a profiling career wasn't right for her, she could always attempt another venture.

Oh, God.... Red.

What would he think of her seriously contemplating such a gravely dark career?

She rubbed her fingers over her mouth, imagining the look of incredulous disbelief that would undoubtedly cross his face once she told him.

Profiling criminals? It certainly wasn't the most lightsome of paths she could choose for herself.

But right now, in this moment, it was a far more attractive option than becoming a psychologist or counselor, jobs that would require her to interact on a deeper emotional level with her patients.

Red had once described her as empathetic. And in that, she supposed he was correct. Her emotions, volatile or not, ran strong and sure within her and it was far too easy to give rein to them and get tangled up in another's troubles...to take them upon herself, as if they were her own. She was sensitive, and that was both a strength and a weakness.

Liz let out a resigned breath.

Of this she knew all too well!

From what she could gather by participating in these clinic sessions, being a counselor took *too much* from her. Too much of her energy, her sympathy, her very self. What did it say about her that she didn't want to do it for the rest of her life? Did that make her lazy? Did it make her a coward?

She'd probably be a good psychologist.

But...she would also probably burn herself out by helping others find their way to successfully wade through the difficult currents of life.
However, if she were to dive into a career at the FBI, she would still be able to utilize her strengths and aid people without having to sacrifice her own peace of mind...and, dare she say, her own happiness.

Elizabeth slowly lifted her gaze back to the FBI's crest blazing forth from her laptop's screen.

Naturally she didn't have to make any lasting decision about any of this tonight. But...she could put herself on a graduation track that could very well lead to a career with the FBI if she decided to apply. There certainly wasn't any harm in doing that. In fact, it behooved her to do it, for then all avenues would be wide open to her.

And so, early the next morning, Elizabeth met with Dr. Evans, who just so happened to also be her graduation advisor. Together they spent quite a bit of time going over what she would have to accomplish on and off campus in order to be a serious contender for a position at the FBI.

The two year schedule they drew up together was rigorous: in addition to filling her days with all the appropriate classes and making sure she excelled in all of them, she'd also become a TA for her language class, which happened to be Russian.

For some inexplicable reason, she'd been drawn to the language over all the others she could have chosen to study. For the last three years, she had been picking it up very well indeed. She definitely wasn't completely fluent, but she was proud of the progress she'd made so far. Since her grades were quite good, she was almost one hundred percent certain her language professor would recommend her for a TA position.

If all went according to plan, once the university let out for summer, Elizabeth would begin working as an interpreter at the SeaTac airport. She would have to hold a position there for precisely two full years in order for the FBI to even accept her application.

There was also her health to consider. She would have to strictly keep herself in shape because there were physical tests the FBI would conduct that she had to pass. Luckily she was already participating in many kinds of athletic activities, so she wasn't too concerned about her fitness. Despite her confidence in this area, she still needed to look into adding weight training to her workout regimen. Perhaps Baz would help her with that. Or Red.

As Liz gazed down at the notebook paper she had filled with her handwritten notes, she was consciously aware that she had reached a significant turning point in her life. Gone now were the carefree nights of bar hopping, shopping, and clubbing with her friends. Not that she'd been doing any of that this semester, but if she had chosen a different route to take, she certainly could have picked up those particular social habits again.

A small, almost regretful smile ghosted at the corners of her mouth.

She wouldn't be doing any of that now. There just wasn't time.

But did she really need all of that superfluous activity to have a sense of purpose, of self-worth? Perhaps she had, once. But now....

The expression in her blue eyes sharpened, a decisive light gleaming there in their depths.

Now she had an ambitious goal that could lead straight to a successful future shining vividly on her horizon. And she was going to pursue it.
Thank you always for reading, your support, and your patience❤️ I appreciate every kindness expressed!

As some of you know already, I'm working with a few artists I've met over social media to bring some of Sine Qua Non's chapters to life visually :) I'm very excited about this and I believe you all will enjoy the artwork as well. When a piece is completed, it will be posted at the end of its corresponding chapter. The first piece has been posted in Chapter 15: A Disquiet In His Soul, if you're interested❤️
Should she do it?

Elizabeth stared gravely down at the letter she held in her hands.

Tempered pride permeated her, intermingling with nervous consternation as she reread the same line over and over again: "I would like you to be a guest speaker at the Conference on Campus Sexual Assault and Violence."

For the past two months, she had been attending counseling sessions for assault victims on the university grounds. These meetings were conveniently held every weekday in the early evening when most students were finished with their classes. The group of students present during her favored Tuesday evening time slot was relatively small...perhaps fifteen to twenty young men and women were there at one time. Most Tuesday nights Liz would see the same core group of faces sitting around the circle, but sometimes she would observe new ones drift shyly in to take their places amongst the regulars.

These hour-long sessions were lead by a credentialed counselor who firmly refused to take a cent from the university for the insightful advice she imparted. Brenda was a soft-spoken, rather petite woman who appeared to be in her early thirties. She possessed one of those sweetly open and trustworthy faces where a person immediately felt comfortable enough in her presence to pour out their heart to her. And with the gentlest expression of compassion on her face, she would listen with her full attention fixed unwaveringly on them.

Brenda was a sexual assault victim herself, and Liz held her in respectful esteem--not only for the way she adeptly counseled the group, but also for the way she assuredly carried herself.

The woman had confided in all of them that years ago, when she had been struggling with depression and anxiety because of what had been done to her, she rose from her bed every morning with difficulty and had stared fiercely at herself in the mirror, vowing out loud that she would not allow the fact that she was a victim define who she really was, that she was more than that and she would prove it to herself and the world.

Brenda had affirmed that truth to herself every day for weeks on end. And every time she had said the words aloud, they had become easier to say. Then after a while longer...they had become real.

The amount of empathetic strength that poured from this individual was extraordinary. Inspiring. And it was part of what brought Elizabeth back every week.

She didn't speak up much herself, nor did she grow too chummy with anyone during these sessions. But she always listened with a keenly sympathetic ear to those who did share their stories...their musings and feelings.

Her attendance at these meetings was probably the most profoundly personal thing she held secretly close to her heart. In an age where young people broadcasted everything they did, even down to what they ate for breakfast, she didn't breathe a digital or verbal word about this to anyone.

Not even Red knew that she went to these meetings.
That wasn't to say she didn't consider telling him. There wasn't a day that went by when she wasn't sorely tempted to reveal her secret.

But she never did.

Liz couldn't really rationalize why she didn't confide in him. It wasn't that she feared he wouldn't understand. In fact, he most likely would wholeheartedly commend her for going. All she knew for certain was that, at least for now, this was something that she wanted to keep intimately private.

Sighing softly, she slowly sat down on the sofa next to Bronn, who immediately shifted closer to put his large head in her lap. His golden eyes stared wistfully up at her and she smiled, reaching out to affectionately fondle his ears.

"What should I do, Bronn?" she asked him softly.

The Sarplaninac gave an evasive-sounding grunt before shoving his muzzle reproachfully into her other hand.

"Yeah, I know it's my decision," she murmured, obediently smoothing her palm over his head and down to his thick ruff as she leaned back against the suede cushions.

And it was. She could decline. There wouldn't be any shame in that. Certainly these counselors would be the very last people to harshly judge her for not wanting to speak publicly, even if she would just be reading the short essay she had written, not giving a long speech.

Two weeks ago, all members of the different groups were asked to consider participating in writing a brief but personal discourse on what steps they were actively taking to heal from any kind of trauma they were currently experiencing. It had been thoroughly explained that these papers would be published anonymously in a bound book. Copies of it would then be passed out to everyone attending the counseling sessions. This book was to be exclusively for members, written only by members...to impart advice and encouragement through the written word.

It was something tangibly real that everyone could easily refer back to when their need for counsel was great.

Elizabeth had considered Brenda's proposition for a few days before making the decision to participate. Perhaps, since she was hesitant to speak up often in the circle, this was the way she could help her peers.

Over the next few nights after she had willingly committed herself to the assignment, she had meditatively composed her thoughtful and rather introspective sentences down in the leather-bound journal she'd bought after Sam had passed away. Most of the pages were filled with her memories of him, from short blurbs to longer, more drawn out reflections...one to three word descriptions of how he had looked or sounded...even stories she had recalled him relaying to her. But now the journal also contained the first, second, and third drafts of this practical, pensive, even philosophical counsel.

Elizabeth hadn't been the only member who had decided to participate. Many essays had been turned in anonymously along with hers, and she could tell the vehement response heartened the entire room.

Last week, a few prototypes of the book had been passed around for everyone to glance through. On a handful of the submissions there had been a small mark on the bottom right-hand corner. Brenda had asked that the writers of those particular essays consider revealing their identities to her later that night or over email. She had assured them that they didn't have to come forward, of course, but if they could, their choice to drop their cover of anonymity would be greatly appreciated.
After she'd arrived home that evening, Liz had debated with herself for a long while on whether or not to send Brenda an email informing her that her submission had been one of those singled out. She'd been cautiously wary as she had contemplated her two choices. What could the reason possibly be for her paper to be marked? What would the counselors want her to do...or commit to?

She almost hadn't revealed herself.

But then the considerate thought had crossed her mind: Brenda never asked for much. After all that she had done for everyone, surely Liz identifying herself was the least she could do to attempt to repay her?

Besides, how horrible could the reason for Brenda wanting to know who wrote certain papers really be?

A grimace of unease crossed her face.

Well, now she knew!

Brenda's tone in her letter to Elizabeth was genuinely grateful and sweetly understanding. Her thoughtfully polite and precise words tried to absolve the younger woman of any guilt she might begin to harbor if she declined the request to speak.

Liz would be lying outright if she said that the very thought of speaking at this event didn't make her mouth go dry with intense nervousness.

Because it wasn't like she'd be reading her essay in front of a couple dozen people.

More like a couple hundred people.

The conference would be big. Not national-size, but certainly large enough that the very idea of standing up on a stage and reading her own words aloud over a microphone made her palms sweat with apprehension.

But as Brenda had said in her letter, Liz would be able to reach and perhaps even aid more people out there who were suffering from a similar trauma if she spoke at the conference.

"You have a way with words, Liz. Please consider it," was how the counselor had ended her note.

It had always been difficult for Liz to refuse someone when they asked for a favor--especially when it was someone she liked and respected. And as much as she fretted about the very idea of public speaking....

A determined light began to gleam resolutely in her eyes.

Her emotional discomfort would be nothing compared to the psychological afflictions that people with stories like hers were currently agonizing over every day.

Nothing.

And as that truth wove steadily throughout her thoughts, Elizabeth knew that she needed to speak.

She had to.

In one shining moment of courage, she would both accommodate Brenda's wish and she would help anyone out there who might need to hear what she had gone through and how she had decided to take control of her life again...so that they could take ahold of theirs.
The temptation to divulge such a hugely important decision to Red was strong. And when she actually spoke with him on the phone that night, she almost blurted out everything: how she'd been attending Brenda's counseling sessions, how much they'd helped her put things into perspective, how she'd written an essay and it had been captivating enough to where counselors wanted her to read it at a conference....

But Elizabeth found herself perversely holding her tongue. If she revealed everything to him now in one fell swoop, then she'd have to explain why she hadn't told him before. And she didn't want to do that. She didn't even think she could because...well, because she barely understood the reasons for her own secrecy herself.

Red, perceptive as ever, knew there was something on her mind that she wasn't too keen on sharing with him. At first he attempted to tease and cajole it out of her, but every time he masterfully tried to trap her into giving him answers without actually inquiring directly, she slyly sidestepped his thoughtfully-laid, verbal snares and then adroitly pushed him into a new topic of discussion.

Eventually he gave up the dogged chase for hidden detail, and Liz was finally able to mentally relax, quietly breathing out a sigh of relief.

"I'll be coming back to Seattle soon," he told her with a warm smile, changing the subject.

"Really?" she asked, excited pleasure coloring her voice, making it brightly vivid.

"Mmm. Next weekend."

"Friday?" That was the day she'd be speaking at the conference.

"Either Friday or Saturday. Unfortunately I won't know until I'm actually traveling.... You know how it is with my schedule," came his cheerfully blithe response.

Liz wrinkled her nose at that. "Will you at least text me when you know?" Her tone both teased and berated him for his habitual inability to commit to a firm timetable.

"I'll text you the moment I land in Seattle," he promised gravely...but she thought she could detect a slight hint of amusement in his voice.

Her eyes narrowed in irritated exasperation. That wasn't what she'd asked him to do--and he knew it! "You're teasing me," she tartly accused him.

"You sound miffed," Red clucked his tongue at her in playful admonishment. "Don't you appreciate our banter, Lizzy?"

"You know I like it," she huffed in resigned defiance, deciding to be honest despite feeling rather indignant.

That brought an affectionate chuckle out of him, the low rumble of it making her toes curl in on themselves with longing. God, she couldn't wait for him to come back so that she'd be able to actually feel that particular soft laugh reverberate in his chest, the vibration of it making a wave of goosebumps rise lightly over her body as she'd curl herself closer around him....

A quiet breath escaped her.

She had missed him so much this last month. Still did, even now as they were on the phone with one another. Phone calls were all they had and she'd had to find contentment with them while he was away. But speaking to him over her cell and actually being in his physical presence were two, very
A sudden and fierce yearning pierced her, more intense than any of the other times she'd felt a similar pang over these long, interminable weeks. It was a profound desire to feel his arms around her, supporting her with their hard strength, his deep, gravelly voice murmuring words of encouragement in her ear right before she'd step onstage to read her essay in front of an auditorium of strangers.

"Red?"

"Hmm?"

"Can you...umm.... Can you do something for me?"

She could almost see his brow arching in surprise. It was rare for her to approach him in this way. "What is it, honey?" he questioned curiously, gently.

"Can you wish me luck?" she asked, her rather vulnerable tone breathlessly soft.

"Wish you luck?"

Liz winced at his utter bemusement. She couldn't blame him. It was her own doing that he had no idea what she was thinking about--what she meant.

"There's this thing I have to do next week," she hedged reluctantly. "And I'm...pretty nervous."

In her mind's eye, she could just see his gaze brightening sharply as understanding dawned on him. "This 'thing' you mention...is this what you were avoiding telling me about earlier?"

"Yeah," she grimaced, flushing.

"Is it for a class, or....?"

"Yes!" she swiftly jumped on that plausible explanation. It wasn't quite a lie.... "I still don't really want to talk about it, but...."

"But...?"

Shrugging a self-conscious shoulder, she confided quietly, "I think I'd just feel better knowing that you know that I have something going on. And that you're going to think well of me."

"Then I wish you luck," Red told her seriously with a smile. "Though you should know by now that you don't need to ask favors from me. Especially when it's something like that."

She blushed at the slight growl of reproach in his voice. "Thank you," she whispered. For always being supportive. For not pushing me to tell you why.

And so, seven days later, Elizabeth carried his words and the memory of his voice with her into the conference's large auditorium. They remained there just at the back of her mind, helping to steadily imbue her with the conviction that she could stand before a couple hundred people and speak words that had come straight from her very soul.

You can do this, she affirmed to herself as Brenda motioned her forward to take her place in front of the podium.

After breathing in a long and controlling stream of air and then letting it flow quietly out of her lungs, Liz purposefully stepped out into the dazzling warmth of the stage's golden lights. Her heart
thundered in her ears as she walked all the way to the center. Brenda reassuringly bestowed a kind smile on her before backing away, allowing the younger woman room to position herself comfortably.

As Liz situated herself, she refused to gaze too long at the hoards of people sitting out there in the vast darkness, watching her. She tugged nervously at the collar of her sweatshirt.

All student guest speakers had been told to wear whatever they would be most comfortable speaking in, so she had chosen a nice pair of dark, designer jeans, a plain white tee--and that rather shapeless black hoodie she just hadn't possessed the courage to part from yet. But now she wished that she had found the inner strength to don an outfit that was a little more chicly becoming. She felt completely underdressed!

God, there were so many individuals out there, staring at her with intent eyes.

Her palms began to sweat and she hastily wiped them on her thighs before setting them down on the smooth, polished wood on either side of her essay.

"Then I wish you luck." Red's smiling voice resonantly drifted through her thoughts. Her nostrils flared slightly. *You can do this,* she reminded herself sternly as she bravely lifted her chin. *So do it.*

And she began to speak.

As Liz wove her incredibly personal story, her voice became stronger, and as her sentences and pregnant pauses won her genuine emotional reactions from the audience, she became more self-assured. There were a few times when she had to lower her voice, fearing that the fiercely emotional memories her words were bringing to the forefront of her thoughts would betray that she was on the verge of tears.

But with an enduring strength she hadn't known she'd possessed, she managed to hold herself together with a poised, steady composure.

The auditorium broke into resounding waves of clapping once she finally finished speaking from her paper. Swallowing thickly, she bit her lip against an apprehensive smile once the din faded, for she had one more thing to say...and it had come upon her while she'd been talking.

"You know...I was really nervous about speaking here today," Liz confided, glancing shyly up from the podium to actually *look* at all the people she'd been addressing for the last ten minutes.

A murmur of sympathetic laughter rippled throughout the room.

"But," she went on, voice now fervent as self-possession warmly suffused her mind and heart, "I'm glad I decided to come here and tell you that I'm not going to let what *he* did to me control me. My life."

Her pale fingers plucked at high neck of the dark, oversized sweatshirt she wore.

"I wore this hoodie for weeks after it happened. It was all I *wanted* to wear." Then she paused, shaking her head emphatically. "No," she corrected herself quietly. "It was all I *could* wear."

Liz was still able to recall the complicated and intensified feelings of terror and shame that had consumed her, insidiously weaving themselves throughout her mind and heart. A slight shudder ran through her as the glimpses of painful memories flashed swiftly before her mind's eye before she mentally grasped them and forcefully threw them back down deep within.
"I didn't have the confidence to show my body." Her tone was softer now, husky with remembered psychological anguish. "I didn't want anyone looking at me....especially when I was around people I didn't know very well." A gently wry smile flickered across her lips as she shrugged a self-conscious shoulder. "Kind of like tonight."

Quite a few understandingly empathetic chuckles broke out around the room.

Heartened by that, her young eyes briefly scanned the attentive crowd in front of her.

"But after all the hard things I've done over the last few months to take hold of my life.... And, after coming here tonight...." She took in a deep breath and then let it out slowly, a proud smile suddenly curving her lips. "I just don't think I need this is anymore."

Liz stepped back from the podium and resolutely lifted the black, heavy sweatshirt, weighted down by old fears and past insecurities, up and over her head. Clenching it tightly to her chest, she marched over to the trash can partially hidden by the enormous velvet drapes at the side of the stage.

Time slowed and her awareness narrowed down to the nearly threadbare garment she held in her slender hands until it was all she was conscious of. This sweatshirt was comprised of everything she desperately desired to abandon to the past: her lingering terror of Forman, the heightened discomfiture she now felt around strangers...especially men, her sometimes blinding fear of the unpredictable unknown, her intensified feelings of disgrace and humiliation....all of it was woven into the very fibers of this article of clothing.

And she was ready to take an assured leap forward away from everything negative that was contained here.

She was ready to move on.

Silently baring her teeth in a defiant snarl, Elizabeth shoved the sweatshirt and all it represented to her into the trash can in one abrupt and decisive movement.

Thundering applause erupted throughout the auditorium as every person surged to their feet to express their congratulations. Piercing whistles and excited cheers echoed all around, drowning out all other sounds. The very building itself positively trembled with satisfaction and joy radiating from every single person, especially from the young woman standing confidently on the stage.

Toward the very back of the grand room, right beside the large double doors, stood a man dressed in a fine, three-piece suit. Unlike the rest of the undulating audience, he remained still and silent, his tall posture dignified. Although he didn't loudly clap and call out like everyone else to show his regard for her, a knowing smile of quiet pride curved his mouth and his green eyes shone with loving admiration beneath the rim of the black fedora he wore.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you always for reading, for your support, and for your patience 💖
Chapter Notes

It has been brought to my attention that *Sine Qua Non* has been nominated for a few categories for the 2017 Tumblr TBL Fanfiction Awards.

Thank you so very much for this. I'm truly honored ❤️

I honestly wouldn't be here writing today on AO3 if it weren't for you guys, my faithful and supportive readers and reviewers. So my heartfelt thanks goes out to each and every one of you ❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Red pushed his finger lightly up the bridge of his nose to scratch an itch as he waited for the woman sitting behind the glass to give him his change and receipt. He then glanced impatiently to the left at the closed double doors. Dance music blared loudly behind them, and he could even hear a few enthusiastic whoops and whistles shrilling over the steady beat. He was almost tempted to hastily tell her to keep it all--he didn't want to miss Lizzy's performance, which, according to the pamphlet he'd just tucked inside his jacket pocket, was scheduled to be the last one of the evening.

Just like her, he had barely made it in time.

Once a suitable amount of minutes had passed after Elizabeth had finished speaking at the conference, he had tried phoning her to invite her out to dinner. But her cell had still been off so his call had gone straight to her voicemail. In fact, it had seemed as if she had forgotten all about turning it back on--an unusual occurrence for a young person.

People of Lizzy's generation always had their phones on and about their person.

Obviously she'd been in a delightedly distracted state of mind, for once she'd been able to properly take her leave with acceptable social grace, she had happily dashed out of the conference in quite a hurry indeed.

"Where do you suppose she's going?" Baz had muttered curiously as the woman had quickly jumped into a waiting cab.

"No idea," came Red's bemused answer as he'd opened one the passenger doors to his sleek, jet-black town car. "But I'll follow her. You and Aaron can have the night off."

Baz had slanted his employer a slyly knowing look but had held back any impudently suggestive remarks--this once.

As George had swiftly driven after Lizzy's cab, speeding Red along down various side streets into the shining heart of Seattle, he had tried calling her one more time--but, just like earlier, to no avail.

Red had known something unusual was happening today the first time he had tried to get ahold of her. Like he had promised her he would over the phone last week, Red had sent her a text right when he'd landed in Seattle--but she hadn't responded...which had been odd. That was when he had touched base with Aaron and Baz, and they'd told him that she was at a conference.
While both men had known what the conference was for, they hadn't known she was to be a guest speaker.

"Would've liked to have seen her up there," Baz had rumbled in keen disappointment when Red had filled him on what Elizabeth had done.

His employer had just smiled.

The pride and loving admiration that had suffused him as he had watched her bare her sensitive soul in front of an entire room full of people who actually wanted to hear her story had been exquisitely powerful. And those feelings had then intensified tenfold when she had stalked purposefully across the stage to resolutely throw that damned hoodie away.

At last!

Even now he could feel his throat constricting with true, unadulterated joy for her.

Elizabeth deserved the ringing applause that had resounded throughout that huge room. She deserved to feel the fierce pride, the blissful satisfaction, and the complete and utter happiness that all were undoubtedly permeating her very soul right now, just like she absolutely deserved to express it all.

That was probably why she had decided literally at the very last minute to join the other members of her hip-hop class to dance onstage tonight at one of the many, privately owned performing arts centers scattered around the city.

Last time she had spoken to Red about dancing, she had been adamantly against performing in front of strangers. But after that compelling speech she’d made which had caused her to willingly turn a highly significant emotional point in her recovery, dancing onstage most likely wasn't nearly as terrifying a concept as it once had been.

Red was thrilled that her old flare of self-confidence seemed to have come blazing fervently back to the fore.

"So...." The cashier's voice brought him back to the present, and he blinked, meeting her curious eyes. "You do know the show's almost over, right? I probably should have told you that before you paid," she flushed, embarrassed. "I can refund you right now...."

The man shook his head. "No, thank you. The performance I'm here to see is actually last on the program." He flashed his teeth winningly at her. "I'm lucky I'm in time!"

"Oh, okay," the cashier replied, obviously relieved. "Are you here tonight to see your, ah...." She peered closer at him. "....Daughter perform?"

Red laughed gaily. "My daughter? Hardly," he smiled to take the sting from his words as he collected his ticket, change and receipt. "Have a good night." After politely tipping his fedora to her, he walked into the dark, thrumming theatre and immediately slipped into an empty seat close to the aisle way and along the back wall.

Considering the significant age gap between Elizabeth and himself, he supposed, like her, he'd also have to become accustomed to some people assuming he was related to her in a familial way, especially if she wasn't directly beside him.

When they were physically together, there was absolutely no questioning that they were involved romantically.
The cashier's comment didn't bother him too much tonight, though. Chuckling quietly to himself, he amusedly shook his head at the shallow conclusions others were capable of thoughtlessly drawing as his eyes flicked to the stage.

The group dancing up there now just struck their last dynamic pose as their song came to a startlingly abrupt halt, which apparently was commonplace for hip-hop music.

This particular musical genre certainly wasn't to Red's preferred taste, but in surmising just how important this performance probably was to Elizabeth, he wanted to watch it...watch her. Ultimately the choice of music didn't matter--it was what she would release, or finally allow herself to show, while she danced that would illustrate just how far she'd come in her psychological healing.

He was very glad he'd followed his gut and had tailed her here. He would probably have to admit to her later that he'd done so, which would naturally lead to his open confession of observing her speak...but he wouldn't think of that now....

....for her group had just walked onstage.

His green eyes diligently scanned all the young women until...ah, there she was--and practically in the very middle!

It surprised him that Elizabeth would choose to dance in a place where most people in the audience would naturally be looking. But then, perhaps her talent was such that she had been set there on purpose by her teacher and peers.

A knowing smile slowly curved his mouth.

Her placement onstage spoke volumes about how self-assured she really was feeling. If she hadn't desired to be in the middle, she certainly wouldn't have been. His darling girl had a will of iron.

Elizabeth wanted to be the focal point.

Then, before he could consciously register any more physical details about her, the music began in a tireless flurry of rushing, synthesized notes.

"I love you so
Wanna throw you from the roof
The pressure builds
Wanna put my hands through you
I'll squeeze you tight until you take your last breath
Loving you to death, loving you to death"

Red avidly watched her as she spun swiftly around before strutting closer up to the front of the stage. The dazzling lights lined there shone upon her, illuminating her in a lambent flame as she danced.

Of course, the other fifteen or so young, undulating women were exhibiting the same moves, but he only had eyes for Elizabeth.

As she gyrated agilely to the side, the myriad of gold and black sequins on the tiny leopard-print shorts she wore for her costume sparkled brightly in the vibrant, multi-colored lights flashing down from the ceiling, drawing his intent gaze to the way her hips sashayed back and forth suggestively.

He could feel his body and soul responding to her carefree beauty, her provocative movements. Blood began to roar through his veins as that trembling, dark wildness deep within him rose eagerly up on its haunches, straining towards the same something that obviously existed in her. Of course, he
had known it did. He'd been intimately acquainted with it before. It had just been shyly hiding for a while.

But no longer.

No longer.

"The pressure's rising I won't make it through tonight
This love immortal is an assassin's delight
Just blow me up or run me down or cut my throat
And when it's time for you to die"

"Detonate me
Shoot me like a cannon ball
Granulate me
Kill me like an animal
Decapitate me
Hit me like a baseball
Emancipate me
Free the animal, free the animal"

The lyrics of the song were carnally sumptuous. Seductively raw. Just like the way she was erotically pivoting that lithe body of hers as she surrendered to them.

As Elizabeth stepped sharply across the stage in time with the vibrating bass line, he could catch glimpses of her skin tone beneath the stretch of the black tights gripping her firm legs. Then she suddenly threw back her head with dramatic flare, her long, dark hair whipping around as she boldly exploded forward in an impressive leap, hands reaching demandingly for the sky.

Red's mouth went dry with desire, nostrils flaring as his esteeming gaze ardently devoured her.

The way she imperiously flung her face up, as if keenly scenting the air, the way she then smoothly dropped to floor, long legs splaying out before she whirled back to her feet to vault sassily down the glittering stretch, was almost primal in its uninhibited, gritty sensuality.

"I love you so I'm putting you in quicksand
You take your chances when you kiss the hitman
The animal's inside of this infinite jest
Loving you to death, loving you to death"

Her slender torso flowed like water as she unabashedly shimmied and arched forward, one loose sleeve of the black top she wore slipping down her thin arm, baring a smooth shoulder and revealing a tantalizing view of her pale décolletage to his reverently desirous attention.

"The pressure's rising I won't make it through tonight
This love immortal is an assassin's delight
Just blow me up or run me down or cut my throat
And when it's time for you to die"

"Detonate me
Shoot me like a cannon ball
Granulate me
Kill me like an animal
Decapitate me
Hit me like a baseball
Emancipate me
Free the animal, free the animal"

With every fervently nimble burst of radiant movement she made to the pulsating beat, it seemed as if Elizabeth became more and more a shimmering creature of the song. She was still his Lizzy, and yet...she was something else now, too. Something more.

He could almost hear her very soul howling wildly with utter abandon as she fluidly ricocheted, fervidly twisting and writhing to the soaring, nuanced vocals wantonly piercing the air.

As she danced utterly and completely unconstrained, she was dauntlessly letting everything go with each and every powerful lyric reverberating off the walls.

All her lingering terrors of the unpredictable unknown, all her fearful anxieties, all the treacherous insecurities that had slyly inhibited her for so long....

All of it was being released and she was being absolved.

"Murder me, ruin me, look what you do to me
Beautiful pain baby, pour acid rain on me
Kill me with your loving
Kill me with your loving
I'll slice you and dice you, like sugar and spice
I'll do all that you want me to on the beast in you
I'll kill you with my with my loving
I'll kill you with my loving"

"Murder me, ruin me, look what you do to me
Beautiful pain baby, pour acid rain on me
Kill me with your loving
Kill me with your loving
I'll slice you and dice you, like sugar and spice
I'll do all that you want me to on the beast in you
I'll kill you with my with my loving
I'll kill you with my loving"

"Detonate me
Shoot me like a cannon ball
Granulate me
Kill me like an animal
Decapitate me
Hit me like a baseball
Emancipate me
Free the animal, free the animal"

Then she was passionately flying across the floor in a heaving surge of untainted, feminine sexuality. Even from the yawning distance between them, Red could see her sapphire eyes blazing with a pure, fiery heat, signaling that she was fiercely celebrating the burning vivacity embodied in her wild and free spirit.

"Granulate me
Shoot me like a cannon ball
Evaporate me
"Kill me like an animal
Decapitate me
Hit me like a baseball
Emancipate me
Free the animal, free the animal"

As the throbbing pulse of the song crescendoed, swelling to an intoxicating release, Elizabeth whirled earnestly, her white teeth flashing in a rapturous smile as she hurled herself, body and soul, forward, gracefully lifting her arms in liberation.

"Free the animal"

For the third time that day, enthusiastic applause erupted before her eyes.

And once again, profound feelings of heartfelt admiration and acute pride for her pervaded Red, filling him through and through.

Christ, she had come so very far.

The man slowly released a harshly panting breath he hadn't quite known he'd been holding, eyes slightly closing as he purposefully willed his body to relax while steadily reining in his physical yearning for her.

Soon, Red promised himself, raising his hands to vigorously clap with the rest of the audience. Soon.

As he attentively refocused his affectionate gaze back onto her, he saw her take in a deep, shuddering breath before she squared her narrow shoulders to stand straight and tall, confidently joining the other women at the very front of the stage. Linking arms in tight camaraderie with each another, they bowed as one.

Then absolute darkness settled over the theatre as the thrilled women exited the stage, broken only by a sliver of glimmering light as Red slipped away to wait for Elizabeth outside.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you always for reading and for your support :) Every word of kindness is so appreciated.

The song Liz dances to is "Free the Animal" by Sia.

Since this was such a big moment for Liz, I pondered for a long time over what song she should dance to, wavering between various hip-hop songs that were popular in 2006...but none of them clicked.

Then I took a step back and really thought about the dance-y songs I personally enjoy and (admittedly) sing along to in the car (even if they weren't composed or released in 2006).

And it hit me: Sia.

Sia is an amazingly talented artist, and her music has the particular vibe I was searching for...gritty, sensual, empowering. And after searching through many of her songs on
Spotify, I settled on "Free the Animal."

The lyrics are open to interpretation, as are any song's...and in the way I read them, I felt these suited Elizabeth...what she's going through, what she's feeling...perhaps they are even foreshadowing....

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed this chapter :)}
Red's idle eyes snapped up from the ground in attention as the cacophony caused by about fifteen, tittering young women suddenly filled the air, adding to the already boisterous noise of the city. They had all just burst out of the double doors on the side of the performing arts building, laughing and chattering away as women were wont to do when they were riding high on exhilaration and endorphins.

From his stance near the sidewalk's low cement wall, he thought he caught a glimpse of Elizabeth's face in the falling darkness of night among that blissfully happy gaggle of girls. He could certainly hear her. As that silvery laugh he knew so well pealed out, an answering smile tugged unconsciously at his mouth. Lifting an elbow from the wall's ledge, he stood up straighter from his half-reclined position against it and intently scanned every face until he found her.

"Emily says we're all getting drinks at The Tavern," one of the young women called loudly over the hooting and hollering.

"Yep, that's what I said!" Emily declared, flashing a grin around her lively group of friends.

"In our costumes?" he heard Elizabeth exclaim in dismay.

His eyes gleamed in amusement at that. She may have turned a huge corner in her emotional healing tonight, but that didn't mean she wanted a hundred more strangers ogling her!

And in that sparkingly revealing getup, there was much to ogle.

"Why not?" came the blithely enthusiastic answer. "We'll all be together! We can help each other fend off any pervs."

"Like we'll need to!" someone else brightly piped up with a giggle. "It's Friday! Guy is working the bar tonight. He'll watch out for us."

"God, he's so hot," another young woman moaned wistfully.

A resounding chorus of wholehearted agreements followed that declaration.

Red shook his head in diverted exasperation at the lot of them.

"Someone's gotta be our designated driver."

Well, thank God someone in that group possessed the foresight to have thought of that.

"Why don't we just hire a cab?" came the intelligent suggestion.

"Cab's too small for all of us!"

"Do we all need to go together...?"

"It'll be fun if we do!"

"I vote for getting a limo or something," spoke up yet another new voice who must have decided to
try to throw her weight around in the main conversation. "I bet it can be here in, like, fifteen
minutes!"

"Hey, what about that guy? His car is pretty big."

Suddenly Red found himself and his own town car he lounged near the primary focus of fifteen pairs
of curious, feminine eyes.

*Shit.* They thought he was a chauffeur!

So much for attempting to be inconspicuous.

"Red?" Elizabeth's incredulous voice broke through the silence that had fallen.

And suddenly everything else--George patiently waiting in the car, all those inquisitive women, even
his very surroundings--melted away and all that he was aware of was his beautiful girl running
toward him.

Before he knew it his arms were around her and he was earnestly lifting her up and off the ground.
Her lean thighs instantly wrapped around his middle for balance as she clasped the sides of his neck
in her small palms, silken lips moving over his in passionate joy.

The dance team immediately let out a rowdy chorus of teasing whistling and gleeful chortling.

"Liz is dating a cab driver?" one girl queried in bewilderment over the din.

"That's not a *cab*, dork!"

"Guess we'll have to call for a limo after all," someone else snickered dryly.

"If we're really going to do that, then we should go bar hopping!"

"Hey, Liz!" Emily yelled over the good-natured whooping. "Are you coming with us or not?"

With great reluctance, Elizabeth tore her mouth away from Red's. "Not!" she breathlessly threw over
her shoulder before leaning down to touch the tip of her nose to his.

"Get 'im, girl!" another woman trilled, causing knowing catcalls to once again erupt from the rest of
the group.

"All right, all right, you guys! You heard her," Emily called over the girlish commotion, wrangling
the team together with her decisive tone. "C'mon, we have a limo to call!"

Lizzy buried her brightly flushing face into the side of Red's thick neck, shaking with silent, happily
embarrassed mirth as her friends rounded the building's corner, disappearing from sight.

Keeping a firm hold on her back with one arm while supporting the round cheeks of her pert ass on
the other, Red slowly turned them around until he could place her with gentle care on the ledge of
the low wall.

Once he had settled her, he allowed his hands to slide caressingly around to hold her sides in their
sure grasp.

In response to his amorous touch she tightened her legs around him and then lifted her face from the
curve of his neck and shoulder to gaze avidly down at him.
"Hi!" she dimpled softly, eyes shining elatedly in the dark.

"Hi, yourself," he grinned affectionately up at her before catching her mouth in another hard, deep kiss that revealed just how much he had truly missed her over the last month.

"How on Earth did you know I was here?" she asked huskily once he released her lips, expression rather dazed despite herself.

Lifting a hand, he tucked a wayward lock of hair that was rather stiff with hairspray tenderly behind her ear. "Do you want the long answer or the short one?"

"Do you ever have a short answer for anything?" Elizabeth teased impishly, lacing her fingers together at the base of his head.

"Impertinent girl," he rumbled in mock-irritation.

"But I'm right," she boasted lightly in a sing-song voice.

With a soft growl, he grasped her pointed chin in his palm and brought her mouth down to his again. "Just for that, I may not tell you after all," he murmured against her lips as his own lingered over hers, caressingly dipping down over and over until he felt her grip on him constrict--so that she could keep herself upright.

He chuckled knowingly, thoroughly enjoying the effect he was having on her.

"You're not going to get off that easy," she breathed once he let up. Then she swiftly leaned forward, admittedly catching him off guard by such a sudden movement, to haughtily nip him on his lower lip in playful warning that she was serious.

Red bared his teeth in a savagely fervent smile. "That's where you're mistaken, darling girl." His eyes gleamed suggestively up into hers as she pulled back to look at him. "With you, I can get off that easy."

As she stared wordlessly at him, he reached out and lightly tapped an index finger twice beneath her hanging chin.

Cheeks very pink with a pleased blush, she slowly closed her mouth...and then swallowed. "But... Seriously, Red," she said as he lifted her easily off of the wall to set her gently down on the ground. "How did you know I was here?"

"Let's get in the car and I'll tell you on the way home." He paused for a split-second in speaking as he opened the passenger door for her. "That is...."

With her hands braced on the top of the car, she turned a questioning glance on him when he didn't finish.

He smiled at her. "If you'd like to come to my place tonight."

"As if I'd go anywhere else!" she huffed saucily before sliding smoothly onto the long leather seat, but the intimate warmth he had seen in her eyes before they had flickered away from his sent a pang of delight through his heart.

"Hi, George," Elizabeth smiled winningly at the chauffeur as she scooted along the glossy cushion to make room for Red.
"Good evening, Miss Eliza," George replied in his heavy English accent, eyes crinkling affectionately as they met hers in the rearview mirror's reflection.

Once Red was settled comfortably beside her, he directed, "George, my place, please."

"Very well, sir."

"And..." he added while draping an arm around Elizabeth, "you won't mind if we put up the partition for a little while?"

Not that George really had a say in the matter, but Red was feeling magnanimous just now.

"Of course not, sir."

Once the barrier was sealed tightly, the man shifted, pulling her closer against him. "For privacy," he murmured in her ear before pressing a kiss to her forehead.

Relieved, she gave him a grateful smile. "He already got an eyeful enough earlier!"

"As did your friends!"

Though by the smug light suddenly glinting in her eyes, Red thought that perhaps she wasn't as bothered by her dance team observing their passion as she might have been before tonight.

He allowed a delighted chuckle to escape him, tucking her lightly against his side as he caressed his other hand up her leg. Feeling the warmth of her skin seeping through the various materials...the ribbed silkiness of the black tights and the rough texture of the sequined shorts...was titillating.

Red spanned a large palm over the top of her thigh, thumb just grazing the sensitive flesh on the inside. His eyes gleamed in an almost primal satisfaction as he watched a tremor quiver there. Then he tightened his grip, slowly squeezing until he heard her breathing hitch audibly at the unquestioningly possessive touch.

As he pressed his lips against her hair, he was quite aware of her sensual response to him. Her breath was warm against his skin as those pouty lips of hers trailed lightly over his cheek to purposefully linger near the tender place right below his ear.

Their tempered passion suddenly flared, ardently hot. He knew that if he vigorously pulled her into his lap now, she would most certainly indulge his erotic fantasy of having a swift bout of sweaty and gritty sex inside a moving vehicle.

And he was tempted.

His fingers flexed over her taut skin.

Sorely tempted.

However....

A faint smile curved his mouth as he reluctantly forced himself to release her leg.

As much as he wanted to get physical with her right now, it would be prudent if they waited until they were secluded and locked away up in his suite. Satiation by the way of quick and dirty sex inside of a car was all well and good, but...not tonight.

Tonight wasn't about what he wanted.
Relaxing fluidly back into the seat, Red nuzzled her temple and stroked his thumb back and forth soothingly over her hip, both to show affection and to subliminally let her know that they would wait.

Sensing that, Elizabeth rubbed her cheek knowingly against his shoulder and sighed her contentment, slowly crossing one toned leg over the other.

Even under the dim glow of the lights lining the top sides of the car, the sequins on her shorts glittered with every movement she made, drawing and holding his attention. Fascinated, he reached out and gingerly took the hem in his fingertips, observing how those tiny pieces of reflective plastic had been meticulously sewn into the material to overlap like a fish's scales.

Lizzy watched him examine her shorts in an easy silence for a moment before admitting quietly, "I can't wait to take them off." Then she made an impatient face, wriggling her ass. "Even with tights on, they're itchy!"

"I can imagine," Red drawled, eyeing her. "They are quite...enticing, though." Especially when they were bunching higher up her thighs like that, honestly leaving very little to his imagination.

Not that he needed to imagine what she looked like. He now knew her body as well as he knew his own.

A dark brow rose in surprise. "You think so?"

"Mmm."

She glanced down at herself, pursing her lips in disbelief. "I would've thought you'd think they were.... I don't know." She wrinkled her nose thoughtfully. "Garish?"

"They're a costume." Which automatically excused the fact that they were rather ostentatious. "And this leopard pattern...." he traced a few of the black, brown, and gold whorls flowing up her hip, "fits the theme of your song well, I think."

His tender smile was knowing as her shocked gaze flew his.

"You saw me?"

"I did," he admitted.

Was she pleased by the fact? Red steadily searched her face. She seemed to be. Though that wasn't all she was. Perhaps she was a bit flustered, too. And a little bashful. But the most prominent emotion overlaying all else was a sort of...fierce gratification.

She was a compelling one, was his Lizzy. How could she appear to be both tentatively hesitant and unabashedly self-assured at the same time?

He lightly squeezed her hip, eyes gently smoldering as they caught and held hers. "And you had me quite...enthralled, Elizabeth."

Blushing with pleasure, both her dimples appeared as she gazed back at him.

"I'm proud of you," he told her, tone intently serious. "For all that you've overcome...especially today."

Her expression immediately sharpened in an unasked query.
"Yes, I saw you," he admitted again in an even softer voice, for he knew exactly what she was wordlessly asking. Memories of how she had looked onstage, speaking in front of all those people, flashed through his mind. His feelings of pride intensified as his hand slipped over her lap to find and take one of her own. "I really am so proud of you, sweetheart."

"How did you know I was speaking today?" she whispered, cheeks brightening even more.

"When I touched down this afternoon, you didn't text or call me back, so I was...concerned."

An amused smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth as her brows predictably drew together, her lips forming a huge O of dismay.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Red!" Elizabeth gasped. "I forgot to turn on my phone! It's been off all day!"

As she made to fling herself forward to snatch her purse from off the floor, he loosed a low growl, tightening his hold warningly on her hand. "Well, don't go turning it on now!"

A breathless giggle burst from her as she allowed him to imperiously pull her back against the seat.

"You won't need that at all tonight," Red stressed firmly, mouth dipping to hers to play with it for a moment.

...A few moments.

"I plan to keep you well and thoroughly occupied," he purred, nipping her lower lip to assure her of his serious intentions before pulling away to look at her.

A shiver ran up her spine as his sensual tone and the meaning of his promise washed over her. "That...uh...." She cleared her throat, her sapphire eyes dusky with her own desire as she blinked up at him, valiantly attempting to find her voice. "That doesn't explain how you knew where I was," she finally managed to point out.

"I phoned Baz and had him find you."

Her eyes widened. "You were that worried about me?" After all this, she certainly wouldn't turn her phone off ever again!

The man shrugged a shoulder. "Considering everything that has happened over these last few months, I'm taking all the precautions I can, Lizzy."

"I thought Baz was just a guard." Though now that the hasty words had popped thoughtlessly out of her mouth, she supposed guards could have more skills than just physical ones. In fact, they were probably required to possess much more than the ability to attack and defend.

She winced somewhat self-consciously as Red confirmed this belated thought by nodding slowly. "He is, but he has many skill sets. He's a great tracker, among other things. The man could really take a job anywhere if he ever wanted to change careers."

"Will he?"

"I doubt it," Red laughed cheerfully. "I pay him too well."

Liz smiled, admittedly relieved to hear that. She enjoyed her lessons with Baz, just like she liked being in his company, and would be genuinely disheartened if he were to leave.

"So Baz told you I was at the conference....?"
He nodded. "And when I arrived, you had just walked onstage, looking....apprehensive." His expression was tender, taking any kind of sting from his observations. "Beautiful. Determined." His eyes traced over her face. "You were captivating. Your words engaged us all. And the way you looked when you decisively threw away that sweatshirt...." He gazed in frank admiration at her, seemingly at a loss for words for a moment. Then he took in a breath, finishing his proud thought in that particularly rich tone of voice he only used when he was touched deeply by emotion. "It was profound, Elizabeth."

"Thank you," she whispered emphatically as she squeezed his hand, truly affected by his heartfelt words. His utterly sincere tone of voice. The loving and steady look in his eyes.

Perhaps she should have told him last week, for he had found out anyway.

And suddenly, an awful feeling of dread rose up unbidden from within her. Beneath all his unwavering support, was he even the tiniest bit disappointed in her?

God, she couldn't bear the thought.

"I wanted to tell you," she blurted out, eyes now troubled as her uncertainties and regrets began to spiral through her. "I just...." She hesitated, forcing herself to bravely hold his gaze with her own as she desperately tried to find the words to explain something she didn't fully understand. "I just.... I needed to do this myself. For myself."

His expression was piercingly understanding, so much so that her breath caught sharply in her chest, abruptly halting the rush of defensive words hovering just on the tip of her tongue.

"It's all right, Elizabeth," he told her gently. He lifted a hand to brush the backs of his fingers over her cheek. "You don't need to explain yourself."

"Why?" she demanded, the pressurized swirl of anxious feelings finding an immediate outlet in pushing him for a heated verbal response she felt she may very well deserve. "Why don't I need to explain myself?" She shook her head, perplexed. "I feel guilty, Red. After all you've done for me, I feel guilty for keeping this from you."

"Then let me put you at ease: I am not hurt that you didn't want to tell me." He regarded her with an earnest gravity. "I'm not entitled to know all your heart, baby. No one is. Really, I should be the one asking for your forgiveness."

She stared at him, wonderingly confounded.

"As enraptured as I was in seeing you leap across the emotional hurdles that have obstructed you for so long, I was intruding on extremely personal moments that were for you alone," he explained solemnly. "And I'm sorry for it, Elizabeth. Truly."

"No." Liz fiercely shook her head. "No, Red. You deserved to be in both audiences today. I'm--I'm glad things worked out as they did." Her eyes implored him. "I'm glad you were there."

"Are you?" he asked softly.

At his question, vivid memories swiftly flooded her: of how she would wake in the nights directly following the harrowing incident, heaving sobs racking her body as she'd wept disconsolately, and how Red would take her into his arms, holding her, rocking her, murmuring soothing nothings as he imparted through touch and voice that she was safe; of the wounds he had suffered from that she had caused, like the deep scratches on back and his arms from when she'd been caught in the throes of waking night terrors, not knowing where she was or who he was....there was one, long silvering line
on his left inner forearm that would most definitely stay a scar.

Her eyes regretfully flicked down to the spot, which was covered completely by his jacket.

But his hands weren't.

Those strong and steady hands had assuredly clasped her own, had sweetly held her face, had tenderly stroked and caressed her through all the days of her recovery. They were pristinely clean now, but the remembrance of when they'd been swollen, horribly bruised and bleeding, drifted through her mind's eye. As he'd held them under the rushing water of the sink, he had perhaps been trying to hide from her that he bore a deeper, darker emotional soul-wound she had unintentionally inflicted upon him....

Liz lifted her gaze fearlessly to his as that particular, intensely profound memory passed through her mind...and trailing in its wake were countless others of him cooking for her, eating with her, walking around the lobby and outside on the city streets with her, making love to her in the attentive and considerate way she needed, encouraging her confidence to reemerge with his worldly yet soulful advice, speaking philosophically at length with her into the long hours of the night....

At all times Red had been fiercely protective and yet so gentle, so patient, so composed...the calm before her raging storm. He had stood unflappably empathetic before her volatile moods, willingly absorbing everything she'd hurled at him until she'd had nothing left, emotionally surrendering into his loving care.

Her eyes were now alight with the fire of affirmation as they held his. "Yes," she nodded in absolute certainty. "I am."

As his pensive gaze searched hers, his expression slowly began to warm as he found nothing but the truth shining brightly there. Then he moved closer, shifting to wrap both his hard arms tightly around her.

Elizabeth clung to him, burying her nose into the curve of his neck and deeply breathing in his scent, which was a unique mixture of his favorite cologne and the enticing musk of his masculinity. Comforted, she closed her eyes, resting her cheek against his broad shoulder.

"I'm glad you're home," she whispered in his ear.

She felt him smile as his lips passed over her brow. "I am too, sweetheart."
As always, thank you for reading, for your comments and kudos, and for your support!

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
"People are staring at me," Elizabeth muttered uneasily under her breath as she and Red walked through the resort's grand lobby. The echo of the elegant, sprawling fountains almost completely drowned out her words, but when his green eyes flickered to her, she knew he had heard her.

Since she had become attuned to strangers' reactions to her throughout the months of her recovery, she found it increasingly difficult not to ignore the openly inquisitive looks slanting in their direction, however much she endeavored to do so.

Liz bravely resisted the powerful urge to cross her arms defensively over her chest. That was how she'd used to cope with the stress and anxiety, thinking that such a protective gesture would make her appear smaller and obscure her from any and all attentions she didn't want.

No longer! she snarled resolutely to herself.

To give herself some credit, Liz certainly wasn't as perturbed by the unwelcome scrutiny as she once was, but she couldn't help the self-conscious feelings that arose within her caused by the critical vibe she was getting from all these overly curious, affluent people.

Those avidly darting glances were undoubtedly being shot their way because of her dance costume.

Catching a glimpse of herself in a passing window, she was very much reminded of the glittering, leopard-print shorts she wore. They were obscenely short, just barely covering her ass. The tights barely helped in terms of modesty. If anything, they brought even more attention to her petite, barely concealed backside.

Liz smoothed her palms nervously across the front hems, trying to pull the flimsy material down a tad more...but they wouldn't budge.

They might as well be skivvies!

The black blouse she wore was loose on top. Its draping, scooped neckline exposed most of her narrow shoulders and the pale skin of her chest. Though it fell to her hips, it became tighter and tighter, hugging her like second skin, clearly emphasizing her slender curves.

And her hair! God, her long hair was a huge, tangled mess of teased strands whipped into a tumble of twisted ropes with enough hairspray clinging to them all that they were almost certainly guaranteed to retain their twirled shape until the Second Coming.

Since she wasn't leaping and frisking around onstage, Liz had a feeling she looked less like a hip-hop dancer and more like a hooker.

"Own it," Red murmured back, curling a possessive hand reassuringly around her waist. "You look utterly ravishing."

"I look like a freaking prostitute," she grumbled, making a face...but she stopped trying to tug her shorts down and instead gathered her poise and lifted her chin determinedly, proud that her man thought she was beautiful even in this flashy gaudiness.
She felt his long fingers flex against her as he dipped his head closer to hers. "You say that as if it's a bad thing." His light tone teased her. "Some of the most beautiful women I've ever seen have been escorts."

Bristling jealously, Liz turned a fiery scowl on him. "I don't want to discuss all the freaking women you've been with, Red!" she hissed fiercely in resentful affront.

"I said I've seen them, not been with them. There's a distinct difference between these two words, darling," he drawled, quirking a chiding brow at her.

"It was implied that you had been with them when you said you had seen them," she mumbled stubbornly, tossing her stiff hair willfully over her slim shoulders. She grimaced as the crisp and snarled mess poked uncomfortably against her bare skin.

Her sudden, peevish tempestuousness was only a knee-jerk reaction to mask the vulnerability of a nerve he'd unintentionally hit. She knew he'd just been trying to put her at ease with that comment and, at the same time, give her a confidence boost as they tried to make a fairly quick beeline toward the elevators through the milling throng of upscale, nosy hotel patrons.

She had been the one to take unnecessary issue with what he'd said.

As soon as the testy words left her lips, Elizabeth immediately let out a regretful sigh. With that swiftly released puff of air, her briefly-felt irritation, brought on by his reminder of an old, almost forgotten insecurity...vanished.

Leaning closer, she rubbed her cheek along Red's shoulder in a silent apology.

When his lips brushed the top of her head, she knew he'd forgiven her cross retort.

Luckily they didn't have to wait long for the elevator doors to open. Red kept his arm loosely around her as they walked inside. But once those polished, golden doors closed, isolating them completely, his hold tightened considerably and he instantly pulled her up against his body, mouth descending on hers with unconstrained fervor.

Her response to him was just as ardent as her smooth arms eagerly encircled him, clasping him even closer.

As his tongue skillfully danced with hers, Red haphazardly dug his key out of his back pocket with one hand, blindly feeling along the elevator wall with it until the tip caught on the edge of the slot. Chafing to have the use of both his hands, he shoved it unceremoniously into the lock above the floor numbers, turning it with a hasty jerk of the fingers.

Christ, the way she was pushing her narrow hips into his, melding and rubbing against him in all the right ways.... The sensations that were permeating him were exquisitely tantalizing. And absolutely distracting.

His hand went lax over the key as he moaned unabashedly against her mouth, feeling his body quickening with every sensual dip of her lips, with every panting breath she took that thrust her breasts up along his chest, that drove her hips even harder against his.

All he wanted to do was grasp her in his hands and....

Now too impatient to even slide the key out and put it safely back in his pocket, he just left it there in the slot, carelessly sticking straight out.
It doesn't matter, Red thought blearily through the fog of pleasure as the tip of her tongue fervidly traced his. It was the last thing on this Earth that mattered! They were alone in here anyway.

And they had a bit of time to kill while the elevator climbed to the very top of the high rise before he would be forced to take his key and exit.

Time that he certainly wouldn't waste.

Indulging his longing for her, Red wrapped her in his arms, large palms greedily stroking down her sides to clutch her pert little ass. Caressingly squeezing it, he molded her tighter against him, vehemently wishing that they were in his fucking suite already without a stitch of clothing between them.

A soft sort of mewling whimper escaped from the depths of her chest as she tried to hook a leg around his...to attempt to be even closer to him.

God, she had the same idea he did.

Cupping her ass with splayed hands, Red broke their kiss just long enough to command in a voice roughened by need, "Climb."

Flushing with desire, Lizzy grasped his broad shoulders and jumped lightly, spreading her thighs to shimmy up his body. He helped her progress by easily supporting that perfectly round bottom, lifting her up.

She was as light as air, was his darling girl.

As she writhed sensuously against him, he instantly and mentally bemoaned the fact that he had now lost the use of his hands by encouraging her to cling to his body like this....but as she purposefully shoved herself against his hardening member, he suddenly didn't feel quite so deprived.

Damn, what a sensation!

The folds of her thin shorts had given way to his stiffening flesh. Intrigued, he nudged his hips experimentally into her, perceiving that it didn't take much movement at all to part the soft lips of her nether region.

Christ, even with the layers of clothing between them, he could feel her heat.

Yearning roared through him like a wildfire, setting his entire body, his thoughts, his emotions-everything-ablaze.

A lustful growl rose swiftly from the burning depths within and he released it slowly, hotly, against her mouth.

Elizabeth's physical reaction was immediate. Her warm breath caught raggedly in her throat, thighs clenching tightly around his hips as a shivering tremor rippled powerfully through her body.

The inflamed part of his soul threw back its jaws and howled triumphantly as she shuddered desirously against him. It aroused him even more to know that just his voice alone had such an effect on her.

"You like hearing that, honey?" he purred silkily against her lips before sliding down to gently suckle the side of her pale neck.
She panted and jerked her head to the side in what could have been a nod, palms clamping down even harder on his shoulders as she felt his teeth gently scrape her sensitive skin.

"I can't hear you...." Red rumbled gruffly in her ear. "Tell me, baby girl."

The deeply primal tone coloring his raspy voice made another wave of goosebumps rise all over her body as yet another shiver whipped through her. "Y-yes," she breathed.

A feral grin flashed in his handsome face as he lifted his head to look intently at her.

Just then the elevator dinged, cheerfully warning them that they had reached the very top floor.

His floor.

But he wasn't about to let her down and lose the delicious sensation of feeling her incredible heat cradling his hard cock. Oh, no.

"Grab the key please," he murmured, brushing his nose tenderly against hers, "and once we're inside, put it in my back pocket, would you? My hands are full."

Lizzy snorted knowingly, hazy blue eyes glinting with amusement as she carefully slipped the key from the slot.

Red buried his mouth into the long tresses that clung to her neck, inhaling deeply as he kept his eyes forward, easily walking her to the front door.

Her scent was fascinating tonight. On top of her own, natural essence, there was an enthralling mixture of heady sexual arousal, the salty tang of dried sweat, and.... "Open it," he directed as he turned to the side, watching as she obediently turned the key in the lock. He breathed in again, further extending his throat to more accurately define the elusive, fruity whiff.

Ah. Peaches, perhaps?

Red breathed in again, confirming his suspicion. Yes. Peaches. Now that he had identified it, he realized that her long, dark mane was positively saturated with the fragrance. It was probably from all of that hairspray.

It was unusual for Lizzy to be wearing any kind of scent but her own, so this unique, exhilarating swirl of aromas surrounding and pervading her tonight was especially captivating.

Once they were inside and the heavy, wooden door had shut behind them with resounding slam, Elizabeth shakily slid the key back into his pocket.

To his surprise, she rested her small hand hesitantly over his firm cheek for a moment longer--then she buried her face against his neck and gave his ass a quick squeeze.

Delighted, an affectionately warm smile spread across his lips as he walked her further into the suite.

She had never done that before.

Of course, in the past she had wantonly clasped him there as he'd pumped his body over her, her slim fingers tightening around his clenching muscles as he had edged her closer and closer to her physical release, but this was the first time she had ever squeezed it in sensual playfulness.

And suddenly he very much desired to feel that palm of hers grip his naked skin instead.
"Bedroom?" he asked softly, nosing her perfumed hair out of the way to nibble on what he could reach of her neck as he made to turn towards the darkened hallway.

"No."

The impassioned defiance in her voice was unexpected and it stopped him cold. Lifting his head, he gazed questioningly into her fierce eyes.

"Here."

His expression sharpened from shock to intent curiosity. Normally the woman preferred making love in the isolated solitude of his bedroom, with the door shut and the lights either dimmed or off entirely. For her to want to engage in such an intimate act out here in this wide open space, with the city’s lights reflecting into the room...well, to be frank, it was a rather exciting thought.

Elizabeth shifted pointedly in his arms and he reluctantly released her with a tender gentleness.

Perhaps she wanted to prove something to herself. Certainly she had to know that wherever they made love didn't matter to him. All that mattered to him was that she was comfortable enough to focus completely on their mutual pleasure.

Anything he would have asked or said to reassure her of that died on his lips as she took both his hands confidently in hers. Then she carefully walked backwards, pulling him imperiously after her to the large, four-piece suede sofa situated directly in front of the fireplace, with only a coffee table separating them from the glowing warmth.

Amusement flickered briefly in his eyes upon seeing the fire. His men, more specifically Baz, knew them too well.

Only once he and Lizzy stood squarely in front of the plush cushions did she step in closer, sultry mouth finding his as her fingers deftly undid the silver buckle on his leather belt.

His own fingers lightly danced up and down her sides, his heart thrilling at her bold confidence. As their lips parted briefly, she shot him a piercing look from beneath her long lashes as she pulled the metal zipper down, fingertips just brushing against his stiff length. Her eyes flashed knowingly before she amorously closed the small space between them once more, earnestly taking his mouth with hers.

Considering the liberating day she'd had, he knew he shouldn't be so surprised at her brazen displays of assertive affection, but it had been so long since he'd observed this particular sort of fire lighting her eyes, making them burn.

It was glorious to see.

As his dress pants fell in a silken heap around his ankles, he quickly stepped out of them. Then he swiftly kicked off his rich leather shoes and socks, lips seeking and finding hers again as her hands unbuttoned his vest and peeled it away from his body. Soon, not only his vest but his dress shirt and undershirt joined the discarded pile of clothing until he stood before her clad only in his dark boxer briefs, his heavy erection straining against them.

God, how he ached to press against her again....

"My turn," he purred, hands eagerly reaching for the tight hem of her blouse.

"Just don't rip it," she warned, white teeth flashing in a playful grin. "I borrowed it from my dance
teacher." Then she quickly flicked her fingers down at herself. "All of it, actually."

Well, that made sense. She *had* turned up to the performance unexpectedly...and at the last minute. Of course she'd had to borrow an extra costume from somebody.

"Such a shame," he murmured with genuine regret as his fingertips traced the low neckline, unable to keep himself from eyeing the shadow between her ample cleavage.

"Guess you'll have to keep the memory of me in this outfit up here," Elizabeth teased, lifting a hand to tap her finger lightly against his temple.

"Mmm." Slipping his palms beneath the soft hem, Red drew his hands up her body, gently peeling the blouse away as they went. Her lovely skin was revealed to his hungry eyes inch by careful inch as he slowly rucked it up. When he finally reached her breasts, Lizzy gracefully lifted her arms and then the material was free and floating, forgotten, to the floor.

His mouth watered, thick cock pulsing twice at the sight of all that iridescent skin waiting to be touched, licked, nipped, stroked.... Clearing his throat quietly, he reached around and in one smooth movement unhooked her strapless bra.

Almost immediately her freed, dark nipples puckered as the circulating air, chilled from the suite's long disuse yet edged with searing warmth from the glowing fire, washed over them.

Enamored, Red slowly sank down to the sofa, eyes drinking her in.

Christ, she was a fucking vision.

The girl could be a model, and that wasn't just his unwaveringly loyal bias speaking.

Elizabeth was always beautiful, but she was especially bewitching as she stood there, naked from the waist up. Her lissome body glowed sensually in the low light of the fire behind her. The flickering tongues of flame cast dancing shadows over her ivory skin, mesmerizing him. Her long, inky hair fell in twisted waves down her back. A couple wayward locks had drifted down her left breast and the teasing hint of a rosy nipple poking out defiantly through the strands titillated him.

His fingers itched to brush her hair away from that pert nub so he could rub his thumb over it while he took the other in his mouth....

"Come here," he bade quietly, lifting an arm invitingly.

"Don't you want me to--" Lizzy's voice faded away as she plucked at those glittering shorts before gesturing questioningly down at the tights still gripping her legs.

"Would you...." he hesitated briefly before giving voice to his desire, "keep them on for a while?" His tone lowered sensuously. "If you can bear it?"

His green eyes glanced up at her, knowing they were a little more than uncomfortable.

She studied him for a brief moment. "You like me like this."

Was she questioning that fact?

"I do," he readily admitted. "It's sexy." He rarely used the word, but it was the blunt truth. His admiring eyes then swept tenderly over her again. "You're a very sexy, beautiful woman, Elizabeth."

As she dimpled shyly at him, a pleased blush suffused her cheeks at his compliment.
"Come here," he bade again, the warm, intimate look in his eyes coaxing her closer.

Taking her in his arms, Red eased back into the expansive sofa, bringing her with him. Once she was settled comfortably on top of him, he caught her mouth in a languidly probing kiss as her lower half became cradled between his parted thighs, her hips pressing lightly against his.

Ardent heat once more blossomed between them as they idly relished in the sweet affection that kissing like this afforded them.

As much as Red desired to make love to her, he had tempered that powerful longing until it was smoldering just beneath the surface, all the while sternly reminding himself that they had the entire night to have sex. And multiple times, at that. Surely he could indulge them both and just languish about, enjoying a longer bout of foreplay?

Besides, it would draw out their yearning, making the moment all the more potent when they did finally succumb to their more...carnal passions.

By the way her lips lingered over his...then broke slowly away...only to come back and caress over his again....it seemed as though she was of the same mind, so he was doubly glad he had ventured to move them forward in this way.

For a while, the world fell away and all Red was aware of was the way she looked in the flickering firelight as it danced over her ivory skin, how warm and smooth she felt under his hands, the way her silken lips moved over his, the way her soft curves melded into his stocky frame, the way her clothing rubbed erotically over his bare legs, the way she tasted of passionate enthusiasm...and the wintergreen mints she'd purposefully chewed on in the car, undoubtedly preparing for this moment.

Then the moment came when Elizabeth shifted, her mouth finally leaving his to leisurely trail down his chest. He let out an indolent sigh as her pink tongue flicked over one of his nipples, drawing it into a tight bud. As she moved over to give the same attentions to the other, he closed his eyes in pleasure and lifted a hand to thread his fingers through her stiff tresses. They made a peculiar, crunching sound as he began to massage the base of her neck.

A grin ghosted at the corners of his lips at that. No doubt both his hands would be smelling like peaches by the end of the night.

Not that he minded in the slightest.

The poor girl would have a devil of a time getting all that gunk out of her hair when she decided to shower. Perhaps he'd offer to help her with that....

"I missed you," Elizabeth murmured, bringing his wandering attention back to her.

His eyes slitted open to lazily watch as she continued to drift down his body. One of her full breasts hooked briefly on the material of his boxers that was drawn taut by his heavy erection. Her white flesh bounced, the rosy nipple rubbed to attention by the friction.

God, the sight was so alluring.

"I missed you as well," Red replied, tone rather gruff from lust and the depth of emotion this honest exchange produced.

He caught a brief look of a fleeting smile before she lowered her face to his body again.

A quiet pant escaped him as she brushed that cute nose of hers into the wiry, curling hairs just below
his belly button, her small bottom lifting into the air as she arched her back to put more weight on her knees so she'd be much more comfortable in her exploration.

His appreciative gaze followed the smooth line of her spine to where it tantalizingly disappeared into the sequined band of those tiny shorts. Before he was even consciously aware of it, one of his hands began to instinctively follow that gorgeous curve. And as she shifted yet again, smoothly pressing herself into his touch like a purring kitten, the flimsy material slid down her ass just a little more, captivating him, revealing the translucent waistband of her tights and a glimpse of the vibrant red lace thong she wore beneath it all.

Red.

Another grin twitched at his mouth as his thumb traced that wisp of scarlet.

How wonderful.

Then he felt Lizzy tentatively lick the place right below his navel before pressing a tender kiss there, and his grin turned into something more amorously wistful. And when her warm breath erotically washed over that highly sensitive area, that amorously wistful expression metamorphosed into something much more fervently covetous as his fingers skirted the mound of her full breast.

All the titillating sensations bombarding his heightening faculties massaged a quiet groan from him. It reverberated deeply throughout, immediately catching her attention.

As Elizabeth slid backward to look up at him curiously, the swells of her breasts caught on the material stretching over both sides of his erection and a soft gasp of startled pleasure escaped her.

Her eyes instantly lidded themselves as she shifted yet again, long lashes fluttering as she purposefully drew her breasts down...then back up. And then she did it again. And again.

The sight of her body gracefully undulating as she sensually teased herself was almost too much.

Before Red could extend his other hand to touch her...to bring her closer against him, she suddenly pushed herself upright and out of his wanting reach.

Following her movements, he found the almost steely glint in her lovely blue eyes was reminiscent of the expressions that had sometimes crossed her face when they had first become physically involved. It was a vulnerable, reflective look that revealed to him that she felt she had something to prove...to herself. To him.

To them both.

But what could she possibly have to prove tonight?

That particular train of thought came to a jarring halt as she imperiously reached out, her fingers slipping beneath the waistband of his boxer briefs. Then she gave an insistent tug.

Well, whatever volatile mood was currently riding her, it certainly wouldn't inhibit her in this pastime!

Red obediently lifted his hips, breathing out a sigh of relief as his cock sprang free from the confinement.

He watched as her fingers released his boxers, dropping them carelessly to the floor. Lifting his gaze, he found her attention wandering appreciatively over his nude form before steadily fixating on the
bulge between his legs.

Her eyes were gleaming brightly with her admiration of him.

Red didn't make it a habit to think on the amount of years separating their ages too much, especially when he was in her company. But to intimately know that a youthful and beautifully vivacious spirit like Elizabeth thought him physically attractive at forty-six years old bolstered his masculine ego quite a bit.

And with this knowledge suffusing him, he felt himself pulse again under her wanton regard.

Then Lizzy edged closer, taking care not to bump him anyplace with her knees, her fingers deliberately extending out.

*Touch me,* he wanted to implore.

But he didn't have to voice his longing, for a soft fingertip was suddenly tracing a slow line on the underside of his length from its base to the mushroomed tip.

He couldn't help the soft moan that escaped him. And when she wrapped the rest of her slim fingers lightly around him....

"...Lizzy...." he sighed.

Her eyes flickered to his at the sound of her nickname, two spots of glowing color standing out on her high cheekbones. He wondered if she was blushing or flushing.

Perhaps she was doing a bit of both.

Elizabeth had touched him like this before, of course, but tonight....well, it was unusual. Something about the way she was looking at him, holding him, was significantly different from all the other times.

Then she rubbed her hand down and up his member once, testing her grip, testing him. And then she did it again...and again...slowly stroking the rigid shaft as she bravely trained her eyes on his face, trying to gauge his honest reaction.

"Does that feel good?" she asked him softly.

Did it ever!

Red relaxed languorously into the plush suede beneath them, humming his pleasure in answer.

As a man in his prime years, he was well-acquainted with this sort of sexual stimulation. He'd touched himself and had brought himself to orgasm countless times. Women had done it to him as well...and in the more recent years, they had either been professionals in their field or they had been casual encounters. Either way, both groups of women had offered him the same thing: release...an escape.

Well, an escape for a short time, anyway.

Even though most, if not all, of those times had ended in pleasurable gratification for him, he understood then as he did now, that was all those women had given him: physical release.

There hadn't been anything more behind the services they performed, or behind his varying responses to them.
All parties had just been going through the motions, as the saying went, to distract his overwrought mind with carnal pleasures of the flesh just long enough to give him satiation and relief.

But with Elizabeth....

He groaned again, closing his eyes as her smooth palm gently pumped the slick flesh, as her thumb clumsily--endearingly--caught just beneath the sensitive ridge of the crown before tenderly sliding over it, up to the very tip to smear the wetness beading there...and then moving with care back down to repeat the erotic movements over again.

Christ, it was _more_ with her. And that feeling thrilled him.

Liz's gaze was thoughtful as she watched him respond positively to her ministrations, which were growing less hesitant and more confident the longer she carried on.

He was enjoying himself, that much was abundantly clear. Seeing as how this was the first time she was really playing with his body unhurriedly...really exploring him thoroughly...this knowledge inflated her growing confidence in the way she'd desperately been hoping for.

Tonight, she wanted to prove to herself, and to him, that the insecurities she'd hurdled through and then had soared triumphantly over would no longer inhibit her in the bedroom.

Over the last couple months, she'd been an enthusiastic lover...for the most part. Red had been so patient with her by being content to rediscover their sexual passion at her pace. In the weeks after she had taken Red back into her bed, she had encouraged his amorous attentions, and certainly hadn't hesitated to act upon her own for him.

However, despite this, a part of her had still remained somewhat hesitant between the sheets, dwelling on the lingering feelings of inadequacy that the assault had provoked in her.

Red had known. She was certain of it, for sometimes when they'd made love it had seemed as if he were holding something in himself back from her. Something they had been building toward and that she'd actually glimpsed burning within him...before the attack.

Elizabeth wanted to stoke that something to ignite again. In order to do that, she needed to reassuringly express to him that he didn't need to restrain himself any longer.

Her eyes traced tenderly over his robust form as she stroked him, taking notice of his completely relaxed state: of his smooth brow, all cares and worries momentarily erased; of his closed eyes, graying eyebrows only slightly drawn over them due to the intensity of pleasure he was experiencing; of his slack mouth slightly parted as excited pants tumbled from it, the sound of them even stirring _her_ blood....

Following her instinct, her desire, she lowered herself down and hesitantly ran her tongue over the bulging head of his cock.

"Oh.... _God...._ " he rasped at the unexpected--but completely welcomed--sensation.

Red's eyes snapped open and he found himself staring at all her long hair falling forward over his lower half, her face just barely visible amidst the wavy mass.

Lizzy must have sensed his fierce pleasure in what she was attempting to do, for she took a little more of him in her mouth, slightly increasing the pressure of her tongue against his taut flesh.

"Yes, honey...." he encouraged in a low tone, avidly watching her lapping lightly at the tip of his
cock. The sight was so fucking, beautifully erotic that it literally stole his breath. And when her lips tentatively encircled him more firmly....

"Goddamn...."

Hearing the harsh unsteadiness in his breathless voice, she peeked at him uncertainly through the dark tresses of her hair.

It was the first time she'd ever done this to him.

In the eight months they'd been together sexually, she had never expressed any desire to do this to him, for him...until now. Red had never asked for it and had certainly never pushed for it, instinctively knowing she'd had her reasons for not wanting to engage in this particular kind of sexual activity.

And as incredible as it felt now...as much as he wanted her to continue running her lips and tongue over his stiff erection....she didn't need to keep doing it for his sake.

"You can stop, sweetheart," he managed to say, fiercely wishing his voice could be less gruff and much more gentle. "You don't need to...." But with the way she was still lightly swirling her wet tongue idly over the very tip, it was honestly difficult to think at all, let alone have steady control over his tone.

Red barely suppressed an escaping gasp of disappointment as she lifted her warm, moist mouth from his penis. Tossing her long hair back over her bared shoulder, Liz pursed her lips and wrinkled her nose in annoyance as the heavy locks cascaded back down, tickling his nether region.

His eyes softened considerably, finding the moment just so Goddamned endearing that he couldn’t help but reach out, tracing a fingertip down the stubborn, twisted strands.

For the briefest of moments they gazed at one another in absolute stillness. Red observed her irritation fall away as she intently searched his eyes.

His lips parted to once again say something reassuring to let her off the hook--but that was when her glistening expression turned from meditatively thoughtful to unshakably resolute.

Then she bent her head and determinedly took him in her mouth.

Liz wanted to do this. She would show him that she wasn't inhibited and that he didn't need to inhibit himself when he was with her.

Not any longer.

"Ahh.... Lizzy," the hoarse words burst from him.

Even with her eyes closed, she was aware of his hands tightening over the suede cushion. The guttural quality of his voice sent a wave of desire over her...and she shivered with it. Her own arousal spiked as she deeply inhaled his scent, an enthralling mixture of earthy cologne, of blatant male, of hot sex.

"That feels so good, honey...."

Elizabeth opened her eyes at that, admittedly pleased to get such a reaction from him so soon. She swallowed lightly, tasting his clean, salty skin, watching as more of his length appeared as she drew her mouth up it.
Everything—all that she was hearing, seeing, tasting—swiftly collided within her, whipping up together into a frenzied whirl before rushing through her veins, filling her to the brim with the feeling of empowerment.

As her confidence fervently bloomed, she continued to experimentally flick her small tongue over the mushroomed head, listening intently for his reactions. Every man was different, just as every woman was unique. What she’d done to Derek in high school probably wasn’t exactly what Red, an experienced man in his prime, desired.

And she wanted that intimate knowledge of what turned him on the most.

So Liz daringly lifted her eyes to his and held them in silent question as she kept lightly sucking on his tip to keep him steadily in place.

Red’s mouth fell agape at the riveting sight, his breathing coming faster as his arousal heightened.

She wanted direction, did she?

His intent eyes darkened with a hungry fervor as they searched hers.

Oh, he could oblige her.

He licked his lips before directing huskily, "A little lower...."

Elizabeth obediently slid her lips down.

"....Stop," Red ground out with difficulty.

Her brow puckered in confusion as she ignored his command, continuing to move her mouth toward the base. Wasn’t the idea to get as much of his flesh in her mouth as she could?

"No, love," he rasped, brushing his fingertips just under her chin, gently bidding her to lift very slightly back up his shaft.

As she followed his desire, something deep within her immediately throbbed and then tightened in elated pleasure at what he'd just called her.

He had never called her by that particular name before.

"Move your tongue around the--yes, " he stressed, eyes squeezing tightly shut.

Flattening her tongue, Elizabeth curiously repeated the motion that had abruptly halted his words, tracing the tight skin just around the edge before bringing her lips further up the tip. Then she suddenly ceased her movements when he cursed quietly, one fist clenching around the edge of the sofa.

"God, yes...." he growled deeply. "Like that. Exactly like that."

His tone of voice sent a shudder of white hot sparks rushing through her body, arousing her further. As her blood sang through her veins, she loosened her lips from around his length just long enough for her to release a shivering pant of longing before she forced all of her attention back to him and what she wanted to do to him.

As Liz dipped her mouth over him again, she felt his hips jerk slightly beneath her breasts in an instant reaction to her bold experimentation, the movement teasing her nipples pleasurably as her tongue laved just under and along that sensitive ridge of flesh.
She smiled knowingly.

Now focusing all her efforts on that particular spot, she bobbed her head slowly, rubbing the wrinkled skin with varying degrees of pressure, trying to determine what he liked the most. She kept one ear trained to him, very pleased to hear just how affected he was by her actions.

When Liz slid her tongue against his head just so while sucking at the same time, not only did his hips instantly writhe, but something...primal suddenly revealed itself to her in the form of an erotic sound that bordered between a sensual growl and a wildly fierce snarl.

Her breathing hitched and her eyes flew open, darting up to him. His head was thrown back in abandon, the line of his throat fully exposed to her as that aroused snarl once again tore itself from his mouth.

Before she knew what she was doing, she whined softly back at him in response.

Surprised at hearing her, at feeling that almost animalistic reply vibrating provocatively around his length, Red instantly lifted his head to look down his body at her. The sight of her agile mouth actually working him, of his thickness stretching her pink lips, of her blue gaze glittering with the same kind of feral passion that existed within him was almost his undoing.

His green eyes blazed with heat as he reached out, catching her face gently between his large palms.

"Come here, baby," he breathed harshly. "Please."

_I am here_, her confused expression answered.

"No--no, honey," he grated, the endearment ending in a groan as that tongue of hers continued to mercilessly tease him. "If you want to make love, you need to--ah, damn," he gasped as she suckled the slick head with even more pressure. "You need to stop," he gritted unsteadily.

So, he was close then.

Elizabeth's feminine vanity gracefully preened at the knowledge as she finally lifted her mouth from him.

She _did_ want to make love with him. Her aroused body sang for him, craved his touch, for he'd been gone for so long....

Red's hands fell away from her face as she swiftly sat up, peeling her tight clothing down her hips and ass. A split second of time passed before he was suddenly up and surrounding her, those large paws of his feverishly helping to tug at the unyielding fabrics.

"They're just so Goddamned _tight,_" he growled, yanking insistently.

"Just be caref--"

The awful sound of something ripping suddenly cut her off.

"Shit, Red!" she moaned in fretful dismay, hands splaying on the sofa as she obediently lifted her narrow hips for him.

Hissing, he impatiently shoved the rest of it all down her smooth legs and off her body completely.

"I'll pay for the damages," he rumbled firmly, unapologetically hurling everything away from them.
Firelight shimmered over them as he gathered her close, mouth fiercely taking hers. Familiar passion once again flared vibrantly between them as their lips clung wildly together, all other cares like torn clothing falling by the wayside.

Elizabeth grasped his shoulders, toned thighs wrapping tightly around his hips. She could feel his erection throbbing hotly between them...and she wanted to feel it inside of her...she wanted to feel him all around her.

"Come here," she whispered breathlessly, imperiously pulling him with her as she lay back, cradled now between soft suede and his hard body. Then she grinned impishly up into his shocked eyes. "What?"

"Are you sure you don't want to be on top?" he asked bluntly, flexing his hips, rubbing his thickness against her sleek inner thigh in anticipation.

Liz couldn't blame him for asking. It had been the position she'd been the most comfortable with over these last couple months. It had given her all the control over their pleasure...it had made her feel secure. Safe.

But she didn't need to make love with him only in that way anymore. After everything, especially after the events of tonight, she was now more than willing to share the dominant role.

And this was how she could express that to him.

"I want you...like this," she told him huskily, fingers sliding around to hold his waist even as her small feet hooked around his muscular calves.

Red gazed down into her delicate face, pride softly lighting his green eyes. The depth of emotion and what her surrender really meant wasn't lost on him.

No, he immediately thought, eagerly rising further up on his strong hands to position himself. Not a surrender. Or even an acquiescence.

His cock pulsed, weeping with his need for her as the tip slowly parted those soft, pink lips. This was her declaration of her certainty...of her resilience.

Her deep sigh of elation tickled the shell of his right ear as he spread her, took her, sank into her. As her fingers tightened enthusiastically over his back, he tenderly nuzzled her throat, lips seeking and finding her pulse. It threaded tenaciously against his laving tongue and nipping teeth, its pace quickening as he began to thrust.

God, the feeling was exquisite. As was she.

He shifted slightly up her curves, bracing his hands on either side of her head. The long fingers of one purposefully tangled themselves in her dark tresses to give them a quick yet gentle pull as he moved over her, suckling at the side of her white neck.

She growled heatedly, nails lightly biting into his back in passionate retaliation as her lithe form lapped against his over and over like waves before the prow.

After the way she had pleased him earlier, the sensation of her tight little body quiveringly opening to him and fervently enveloping his was almost too much to bear.

Red growled low in his throat, half in ardent lust and half in vicious frustration with himself. His
near-lack of self-control was startling--and infuriating.

He forcibly clamped down on his growing fervor while easing his steady movements to a gentler rhythm in order to prolong this joining--and was shocked when Elizabeth whipped her head to the side and snarled, "Don't you dare, Red."

Jerking his face up to look at her, he found himself staring down into her impassioned, unguarded eyes.

The beautiful, untamed ferocity in them stirred the restrained dark wildness in his soul.

"Don't hold back from me." Her fierce voice was low with her vehemence. "Not tonight."

Red released a shuddering, yearning breath. "I don't think you know what you're--"

"I do," she interrupted with an indignant hiss, her smarting pride gleaming in her eyes. "I'm done with holding back." The sweet gentleness of her touch tracing up his spine was at complete odds with the affronted vexation burning within her.

The fascinating duality of her conflicting behaviors, and her intimately passionate entreaty, utterly seduced him.

"All right," he breathed, enraptured, as he bent his head to kiss her ire away.

Giving in to temptation and releasing the hold on his raw sexuality, Red swiftly increased his pace, taking from her what he desperately wanted, and hopefully giving to her what she craved. But as Elizabeth languidly threw back her head and moaned loudly, slender hands grasping longingly at his arms, urging him on, he knew he didn't need to worry about whether or not he was pleasing her.

And so he willingly lost himself in her body and the stirring emotions this moment of sensuous intimacy wrought in him.

Their breathing grew hotter. Heavier.

The way the soft flesh of her breasts was heaving tantalizingly beneath him and the way she rose to sensually meet this thrusts again and again were the only things he could feel.

The sight of her glistening skin slipping bewitchingly against his and her long lashes fluttering with every powerful stroke he made were all that he could see.

The enthralling, complicated scents of her body and arousal were all that he breathed.

The rhythmic slapping of skin, of the breathless pants and snarling whines that escaped her parted lips as he pumped himself over her, into her, were all that he could hear.

....Until she rapturously cried his name.

Her throbbing release pulsed around him, mesmerizing him, drawing him in, body and soul, closer and closer to her...until he found what he sought right at the heart of her.

Red's own rough snarl echoed her shuddering mewls as he smoothly pulled out to come over her flat stomach.

The sensations that shook him as he crested were intense, staggering.

Breathing harshly, he bowed his head to hers, taking her mouth with fiery gentleness as his body's
release rippled throughout, draining him of everything except the near-overwhelming feelings he harbored for her, this beautiful, vivaciously confident young woman who had slipped into his guarded heart at the tender age of four and had never left.

After a few moments of relative quiet had passed, he finally slid off of her trembling, replete figure to considerately relieve her of the hard weight of his body. Then he slowly propped himself up on an elbow to regard her with a silent vulnerability rarely shown. Her eyes were closed, long lashes dark against her flushed skin.

*Beautiful girl,* he thought as he reached out to trace a finger lightly and tenderly down her warm cheek.

"You called me 'love.'"

Her silvery voice softly broke the stillness of the darkened room, her eyes flickering hazily open to gaze up at him. The orange glow from the fire glimmered across her face, making the blue depths of her eyes shine. They reflected her heart. As did that pretty smile.

He felt his lips gently curving in a natural response to it. "Did I?"

Elizabeth nodded slowly. "You've never called me that before."

Sharp girl.... She was right.

Over the years, he had called her every other endearment that existed except for that one....because he had reserved it for a beloved woman long deceased.

Perhaps he'd done it out of some kind of old, romantic notion. Perhaps he'd done it out of loyalty to her memory. Whatever the case was, he had adamantly refused to use the endearment for years—until tonight, when it had escaped past his lips as if it had been the most natural thing in the world to call Elizabeth.

"No.... I haven't," he conceded quietly, his thoughts as to why remaining private...for now.

She searched his grave eyes for a moment longer before confiding in a low murmur, "I liked it."

Red caressed his fingers down her cheek again before hooking them around the back of her neck.

"I liked it too," came his honest reply before he dipped his head to kiss her.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you to my betas (always!) for your amazing and seriously wonderful support :)

Thank you to my readers for reading ❤ your kindness and comments are very much appreciated
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
A Vulnerable Divulgence

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

*Pop. Pop-pop-pop.*

The crackling of the dying fire ravenously eating away at the last log brought Red out of his languid doze. His eyes blearily flickered open just as Elizabeth stirred reluctantly beside him.

The loud sizzling and popping must have woken her as well.

"What time is it?" she asked sleepily, quite unable to stifle her yawn as she lightly rubbed her cheek against the broad arm she rested on.

He carefully lifted his left wrist up behind her shoulders to glance up at his watch. As he twisted his arm, the golden timepiece caught and held the reflecting glare of the firelight, revealing the answer to her question.

"Twelve thirty-three exactly," he replied, catching her yawn and indulging it before draping his forearm over her small waist. "Do you want to go to the bedroom?" he inquired in a low murmur, lips tracing across her smooth brow.

While he was certainly comfortable lying here on his side, cradled between her body and the suede cushions of the large sofa, she might want to move to a plush surface where she had a bit more wiggle room.

The woman preferred to spread out like a starfish when she lounged about or slept.

But Lizzy's answer surprised him. "No," she sighed softly, lolling her head lazily to emphasize her reply as she snuggled up closer to him and further away from the edge of the sofa. "It's really warm and comfy here."

Smiling, he contentedly hummed his agreement.

"You know, Red," she suddenly chuckled quietly, "you're the only person I know who doesn't round up or down to the nearest five when telling time."

When he glanced sharply down at her, her blue eyes were gleaming with impish amusement up into his face.

"Do you have a problem with me being...precise?" he rumbled, tickling her side in retaliation to her tease.

Giggling, she jerked her head in denial, instantly wriggling her body to desperately try to escape his mischievously persistent touch--without leaving his warmth or falling gracelessly off the side of the couch. But when his naughty fingers continued to pursue their insistent course of playful stimulation, she slyly rethought her strategy and instead clamped her arm tightly down on his hand with a fierce growl.

Red grinned roguishly down into her lively, sparkling eyes as he gave her side a gentle squeeze with those trapped fingers, letting her know that he was giving her the victory--for now.
All her writhing about had caused the warm Sherpa blanket he'd thrown over them earlier to ripple down their bodies, baring them from the waist up. Smoothly sliding his palm from beneath her wary grasp, he grabbed the quilted edge and pulled it back up...but not completely to their shoulders.

He wanted to look at her.

Red's eyes traced admiringly over her slender body, beginning at her bosom. He stood firmly by the opinion that every woman was unique in her beauty, and felt that all people, especially women themselves, should feel the same way about it. But after accidentally overhearing frustrated mutters Lizzy had made to herself under her breath in the past, he knew that she didn't quite share his viewpoint...that she actually found herself lacking in physical beauty where that portion of her anatomy was concerned.

It was preposterous, of course. Elizabeth may not be as voluptuous as other women, but that didn't mean she wasn't beautiful.

While not particularly large, her breasts were in proportion to her petite and lithely athletic figure, cheekily pert and appealingly ample where they needed to be. And God, were they soft....

His eyes flicked down the pale slopes to her rosy nipples, which were hardening into buds since they were no longer concealed from the circulating air by the heavy blanket.

When he traced his lips over them, either while he was arousing her body with amorous foreplay or while he was insistently suckling them to make her hips buck passionately against him the way he loved, their satin feel turned to silk the nearer he drew to those dusky pink tips.

And when he pulled one of those silken buds into his mouth, applying gentle pressure as he laved and sucked, he could feel Elizabeth turn to molten silver beneath his ardent touch.

As those sensual memories flooded him, his blood began to heat and he felt himself stir. After a brief moment's hesitation, he gave in to the temptation to touch her. Reaching out, he lightly ran his fingertips over one breast, following the blue streams of her veins he could just glimpse beneath ivory sheen of her skin. His cock twitched again at the alluring sight and a half-smile ghosted over his lips as his fingers continued their tender exploration.

Obviously his body still wasn't quite satiated...and apparently wanted to make up for an entire month of lost time in one night.

*Patience.... he crooned silently to himself, tempering his longing. Patience.*

Red could feel her lowered eyes fixate on his hand as he carefully brushed his thumb over her nipple. Her breathing hitched slightly as he did it again...and then again. It was fascinating how such a simple touch could cause her chest to heave...pushing all that silky flesh into his waiting palm.

He cradled its weight for a moment, green eyes lifting to her face as he gave it a very gentle squeeze, thumb once again brushing over it in the way he knew she enjoyed. Upon observing her eyes fluttering closed, her dark brows drawing together as pleasure rippled pleasantly through her, he moved his desirous attentions over to her other breast. As he flicked and caressed that neglected dark bud to attention, her lips parted and she let out a soft pant.

Unable to resist that clear invitation, he leaned in closer and took her mouth with his.

Elizabeth gave a languid sigh as his lips caressed slowly and unhurriedly against hers. He could feel her heart begin to thump faster beneath his palm...her arousal was heightening. And while he was already hot and hard for her, he fiercely held himself in check, continuing to kiss her languorously.
They had all night. And in this very moment, all Red wanted was to savor the way her porcelain skin felt beneath his questing hand, how her heart ardently thrummed in time with his, and how sweet she tasted beneath his lips.

After several long, drawn-out moments, he lifted his mouth from hers and shifted even closer, lips moving to press a soft, lingering kiss to her temple as his hand drifted down between her breasts to pass over her flat stomach.

At long last, he was pleased to see--and feel--that Elizabeth was finally back to her healthy, normal weight. But as his fingertips traced her tight abdomen, he could definitely tell that she was much more toned than she had been even a month ago.

A knowing smile flitted across his lips. Her regular sessions with Baz in combination with her dancing were certainly paying off.

He could feel her muscles begin to quiver in wistful anticipation as his daring fingers ventured lower...past her navel to very gingerly cup her sex. And there he lightly stroked her outer lips, loving how he could now detect a very quiet whimpering tacked on to the end of her breathy pants.

"You like that, sweetheart?" he murmured in her ear before lightly nipping its curve.

Elizabeth arched her body, pushing her smooth mound into his teasing touch in a passionately wordless reply.

"Mmm...." Without removing his palm from her warmth, he purposefully maneuvered himself a tad further down her body until he was on eye-level with those lovely breasts of hers.

Red felt one of her hands loosely hook around the back of his neck, thumb eagerly stroking the base of his skull as he breathed a puff of hot air over one just before his tongue darted out to slowly lick her nipple.

Moaning softly, her slim fingers clamped down on his neck, urging him to take it into his mouth...to pleasure her.

So he indulged her desire.

And just like she had so many times before, she turned to liquid quicksilver beneath his fervent attentions. Her petite figure rippled smoothly into his touch, becoming more malleable the longer he suckled...the longer his deft fingers stroked her sex.

By the way her narrow hips began to wantonly shift and shove themselves toward him, he knew without a doubt that she wanted him to slip those baiting fingers of his inside of her.

But he wasn't going to give in to her. Not yet.

Lifting his head from her bosom, he gazed down at her.

There was almost nothing more arousing than seeing Elizabeth at the complete mercy of his ardor, becoming inflamed with her building desire...watching her eyes gleam with a feral light before they were hidden behind her dark, fluttering lashes...observing her iridescent skin flush with various shades of rose and scarlet as she undulated rhythmically...watching as she threw back her head in stimulated abandon, exposing her milky throat, the ultimate sign of complete trust and surrender.

"Red," she mewled, the last letter of his name turning into a hungry snarl as she opened her thighs wider in imperious invitation.
A knowing chuckle rolled through him as he slipped the tip of a long finger inside of her. "What do you want, baby?" he crooned, warm voice as smooth as honey. "Do you want...this?" Slowly he stroked her.

She moaned, grasping his wrist, her nails lightly piercing his skin as she attempted to push him further in.

"Or...this, perhaps?" he whispered against the corner of her mouth, resisting her as he slipped another fingertip into her warmth to join the other. And there they both lingered, lightly stroking her inner lips, persistent in their teasing movements.

Again, Elizabeth tried to push them farther within, her wanton impatience revealing itself in the assertive way she gripped his wrist, in the adamant way she rubbed herself against him, in the way her breathless sounds of arousal filled the charged air around them.

Christ, was she intoxicating.

His breath caught quietly in his throat as he felt himself pulse again and lengthen even more in response to avidly watching her. He shifted his lower half closer to hers until the tip of his hard member rested lightly on her sleek, inner thigh.

"How can I know what you want if you don't tell me, hmm?" he rumbled softly in her ear, tracing the lobe lightly with his tongue before nibbling on it, moving right towards that sweet spot just below that he knew so very well.

Red had always enjoyed being vocal during sex. Lizzy was naturally more quiet during foreplay and the actual, intimate act. Quiet, as in not purposefully speaking words...unless they were his name or other, rather animalistic noises that were incredibly titillating.

But, God, when he heard her husky voice while he was arousing her or even thrusting into her body, it was absolutely thrilling. He wanted to hear her lilting tones much more often, and the way to do that was to tease her...to goad her...into talking to him.

"T-Two," she gasped longingly when his lips found that point at the side of her neck, her lower back immediately arching at the sensual touch. "Oh God--two."

Pleased that she had taken his bait, a feral grin spread across his lips as he rewarded her by slipping both fingers fully inside of her warmth, slowly and sensuously stretching her. "Like this, honey?"

Elizabeth shuddered with pleasure, hand unconsciously tightening around his wrist as his fingers began to caress and stroke...and then pump.

"Yeah," she breathed, tone of voice slightly higher than usual as she relinquished herself to all the erotic, heady sensations stirring her riveted body.

Then, almost immediately after the word left her lips, she instinctively began to smoothly gyrate her hips in time with the strong movements of his dexterous fingers.

"That's my girl," he murmured, gleaming eyes raking hotly down her trembling body as he continued to steadily thrust into her, priming her for him.

Not that either of them needed much of that. It had been an interminably long five weeks of celibacy and it wasn't taking much at all for their bodies to insistently clamor for each other.

It wasn't long before Elizabeth was shifting, haughtily pushing at his shoulder until he was lying
down on his back. Then before he could blink she was sliding on top of him, forcing him to extract his fingers from her heat.

A soft whimper burst from her at the loss of his pleasurable touch, swiftly muted when she determinedly bit her lower lip.

As Red gazed up at her, he could feel her take his stiff erection into her slender palms, gently cradling it, small thumbs stroking up the thick shaft.

Only when her blue gaze flickered directly to his did he realize that he was growling long and low in his throat.

She silently bared her white teeth at him in a knowing, answering growl as she slipped one of those pale hands down to cup his sack, which was stretched taut with his arousal.

He groaned as her fingers caressingly played with him, his eyes darkening with unbridled lust as he fervently ran his hands up her sides to cup her full breasts, thumbs brushing over and relentlessly teasing her nipples even as she relentlessly teased his aching cock.

"Impertinent minx." His unsteady tone both gruffly reproached and complimented her.

That caused a flushing giggle to ripple from her. With impishly sparkling eyes, Elizabeth trailed her slim fingers of one hand up from his nether region to his navel, past his belly button, through the wiry hairs on his robust chest before placing it near his head so she could brace herself. Then she leaned down to take his mouth with hers in a deeply sensual kiss.

As their mouths heatedly melded together, Red slightly lifted his knees, the purposeful motion sliding her closer over him and pressing his throbbing cock—and her own, delicate hand—against his abdomen.

"Come on, sweetheart...." he muttered against her mouth, voice rough with need.

"So impatient!" she shakily chided with a silvery huff.

As she pulled back with the barest of movements, he got a fleeting glimpse of her laughing eyes.

"And you aren’t?" he asked in wry disbelief, his voice a low rumble as he caressed his hands enticingly up and then down the soft mounds of her breasts.

The amusement faded from her lovely gaze, the glittering haze of desire once again replacing it. "Oh.... I...."

Whatever thought that had been forming to bounce off the tip of her tongue came to an abrupt halt as she shivered, an immediate physical reaction to the way he began tugging and rolling her rosy nipples between his fingertips. Then she squeezed her eyes tightly shut as the seductive sensations crested over her, amorously washing through her...and she restlessly squirmed in his lap.

A knowing smile spread slowly across his lips as she fluidly rubbed herself against him.

He knew very well what that eager undulation meant.

Reaching out with one hand, he traced his fingers over her cheek, bringing her gaze to his. A thick brow rose teasingly at her as he searched her dazzling eyes, as if to say, Well?

"I want you," she admitted in a breathy murmur.
"Come on, then," he purred invitingly, one of his palms slipping down to caress her fingers that still gripped his swollen cock while the other drifted to encouragingly splay across the small of her back.

He watched fervidly as she lifted herself up on her knees...feeling the heat of her arousal saturating his tip as she hovered over him.

Red groaned, both hands suddenly finding and vigorously grasping her narrow hips as she slowly sank down over his stiff length. The way her body willingly opened for him, completely enveloped him, cradled him, made him burn with heightened desire. That scintillating passion sang through his veins as he thrust powerfully and deeply into her...and as she recoiled...but only to enthusiastically heave back into his waiting arms.

There wasn't anything gentle about this coupling. It was passionate, to be sure--but it was also rougher than the last...intensely intimate...and breathlessly exhilarating.

Soon his rasping grunts and groans and her high-pitched whines and moans drowned out even the hissing and crackling of the dying fire. His focus swiftly expanded and then dizzyingly narrowed down to the way her body gracelessly jerked and lunged over his own, beautifully agile even in its inelegance.

As Elizabeth ardently thrust, tightly clutching the suede beneath them, slender figure quivering as she edged closer and closer to her climax, he was aware of how his own body thumped rhythmically up and down into the cushions beneath them. The titillating sound compounded by the slapping of skin, by their heavy breathing, and by the highly erotic, physical sensations accompanying the movement was almost enough to propel him over the precipice of his own, yearning desire.

Snarling, he grasped her ass, fiercely urging her, driving her, to fucking come--and to his delighted shock, she immediately did.

A shuddering cry ripped itself from her throat as she rode him, her startling release mercilessly squeezing him and ridding him of any last vestiges of self-control he'd been harboring.

His own guttural snarl of fierce satisfaction echoed hers--it was the only warning he could utter. Luckily she clearly understood it, for she lifted quickly off of him as he lustily came mere seconds later.

Then Elizabeth collapsed on top of him, panting exhaustedly into the hollow of his neck as he steadily treaded the plunging waves of pleasure crashing through him.

"God, Red," she gasped, nuzzling his throat, pressing a kiss to his frantically beating pulse before resting her cheek against his burly chest.

"Indeed," he drawled, eyes closing as the thundering waves finally began to recede, leaving him drifting languidly in the warm afterglow of sex. Sighing contentedly, he kept one hand splayed on the small mound of her ass while he buried the other in her thick hair, gently holding the back of her head.

Red wasn't sure how long they rested together with her sprawled limply on top of him, cradled in his muscled arms. But it was certainly for a while. And eventually enough time passed them by to where their breathing finally quieted, their bodies were cooled down, and their minds were able to function coherently again.

He inhaled deeply through his nose, taking in her deliciously erotic scent and the heady musk of their lovemaking. When she shifted slightly against him, he tightened his hold on her and breathed in
again, this time through his mouth.

Christ, this potent bouquet of blatant male and coy female and raw sexuality was almost enough to prime him again.

Almost.

A sensual grin twitched at his lips. "You know, Lizzy..."

"What?" she murmured when his voice trailed off.

"If you keep this up, we'll both be rubbed raw before dawn."

"Red!" Elizabeth hissed in amused yet flustered reproach.

His green eyes gleamed mischievously up into hers when she lifted her head to blush hotly down at him.

"I didn't start this round, you know," she huffed indignantly. "You did!"

"I'd say it was a mutual effort," he disagreed with a fond chuckle, giving her locks an affectionate pull.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at him. "You do love to rewrite history, don't you?"

His smile immediately died at the words.

She was teasing him. He knew that. But, Christ, her statement struck much too close to home.

His heart felt like it was being mercilessly twisted in his chest and his lips parted slightly to release a sharp breath.

"Red?" She was regarding him curiously, clearly baffled by the apparent change in his mood.

*Goddamn it, pull yourself together*, he viciously hissed at himself.

"Would you mind sitting up for me, sweetheart?" he quietly deflected, releasing his hold on her. "I'll get us cleaned up."

Red ended up doing more than that. After wiping them both down and tossing the tissues into the trash can, he then bundled her back up into the quilted sherpa blanket.

As he smoothed the soft panels gently around her curves, Liz studied his face, which was peculiarly meditative...and closed off. She wanted to break the weighty silence that had grown between them, but she wasn't quite sure what to say to bring him back to her.

Her brow puckered in confusion as he pressed a tender kiss to it before rising to his full height.

What could she have possibly done or said to make him so pensive to the point of withdrawing from her?

Her eyes followed him as he padded naked to the expansive fireplace, tossing another two logs onto the dying fire. Then he paused, seeming to consider for a brief moment before he threw on a third.

Liz lightly bit her lower lip, unable to help the sudden burst of lustful admiration she felt for him—despite her uncertainty about his mood—as she watched him bend over at the waist to carefully stoke
the new, hungry flames with the fire iron. Her gaze flickered down his tight ass to the large bulge hanging between his slightly parted legs.

_Hung like an ox._ The blatantly descriptive thought entered into her mind unbidden.

God, where had she heard _that_ before?

Feeling her cheeks swiftly heat, she swallowed to wet her suddenly dry throat.

Well, wherever it came from, she had to admit...it was an apt observation.

Her eyes trailed over his broad back as he once again stood to his full height. His hard muscles rippled beneath his skin as he moved, the flickering firelight dancing over the knotted mass of puckering divots and rigid whorls on his left shoulder and trapezius, creating deep crevices of shadows amongst the scarring, drawing her attention to all of it.

_Oh, Red...._ Elizabeth thought emphatically, allowing pity to suffuse her while his back was turned.

It was the same, fierce sentiment that always drifted through her mind whenever she was able to look upon his scarring without him being fully aware of it.

A few months ago, before the attack, Liz had finally gathered enough courage to approach him about those terrible scars.

She had been watching him dress himself one Saturday morning. They had made love earlier, and she had been lazily basking in the afterglow, feeling languidly replete, thoroughly indulged, and, to be frank, quite full of herself.

The combination of those acute feelings had made her brahly confident...and cheekily thoughtless.

"Your scars, Red.... What happened?" she had bravely ventured in a voice still husky from their lovemaking.

Red had immediately paused in donning his clothing, his body going rigid.

An awful, uncomfortable silence had fallen tautly between them, making her instantly regret that she had even opened her mouth to utter the question.

God, what had possessed her to do it? Shame had permeated her, making her feel foolish, and so very small. She had known better!

But when he had at last slowly turned around to face her, his expression hadn't been angry. Withdrawn, yes. And grave. But not angry.

"I cannot speak of it," he had finally told her quietly, reflective eyes haunted as he stared intently beyond her into his past...a past that was still such a mystery to her. "One day, I will tell you," he had promised into her stunned silence after a couple heartbeats had passed them by. Then he'd blinked and had once again seen her lying down on his bed in front of him. "But not today, Elizabeth."

So, as much as her desire to know what had befallen him writhed and burned within her, she had never brought it up to him again. Liz respected and loved him too much to push him on such a personal and clearly traumatic subject.

A sad sort of half-smile ghosted over her mouth. She empathetically understood where he was coming from...now more than she ever had before.
The sound of heavy silver clanging and two glasses chiming abruptly pulled her out of her reverie. Liz started and blinked, watching as Red turned around. In his teeth was a smoking, perfecto-shaped cigar and in his fists were two small tumblers of alcohol.

Freeing both hands from her blanket cocoon, she graciously accepted the drink he offered to her while he set his on the coffee table in front of them. Then he eased himself smoothly down beside her, his brawny, nude form sinking into the plush suede as he threw one arm behind her to drape over the top edge of the sofa.

She eyed him over the foggy rim of her glass as she took a sip, observing how he brought the dark-colored cigar to his lips, how he sensually ran the tip of his tongue over the head before puffing on it a little, a curling of dark gray smoke drifting lazily up into the air as he slowly breathed out.

To be honest, Liz couldn't stand the smell of smoke. When she saw people on campus and in the city indulging in cigarettes and whatever else, she inwardly winced in pity for the state of their poisoned lungs.

But, God, to see Red savoring a cigar... There was just something so...enthralling about it. And it made her overlook the fact that she tended to very much dislike the smell of tobacco.

"I hope you don't mind?" Red twirled the Cuban in his fingers, eyes flicking knowingly to hers before he took another drag, rolling the smoke briefly around in his mouth before releasing it.

Apparently he had moved past whatever strangely pensive mood had been riding him. She threw back the hard liquor, wincing as it burned down her throat.

"It's your body," she replied pertly, undeniably captivated as more smoke was blown in a steady stream--but, this time, from his nostrils.

"How on Earth had he done that?"

"It is that," Red chuckled at her response. He seemed to be well aware of her avid attention, for Liz could suddenly detect a smug glint in his eyes and an arrogant smile twitching at the corner of his mouth as he once again purposefully ran his tongue over the head of the perfecto-shaped cigar.

Wrinkling her nose at him, she tore her gaze away to look down at her drink.

"I'm very glad you never picked up this habit," he told her seriously.

"Well, you did stop me cold that one spring," Liz remarked, a little embarrassed to even bring up the afternoon when he'd caught her behind the barn trying to smoke--and failing miserably.

She had been sixteen years old...dating and sleeping with Derek...drinking...partying...playing hooky...wrecking havoc on the small town she lived in and really just taking part in all kinds of shit that she hated to remember--all of which Red had already known about.

"It was a wonder she never got arrested!"

Derek had developed the habit of smoking cheap cigarettes long ago and had finally succeeded in goading her into doing it too. But she had been prideful and had haughtily refused to be made fun of by him or any of his douchebag friends...so she had stolen a cigarette pack and a lighter from the general store and had stubbornly decided to try and figure it out for herself back behind the barn.

As was the case with all teenagers, she had been so selfishly wrapped up in her own little world that she hadn't known Red had arrived earlier that afternoon...and had been watching her.
It had only taken one, long drag for Liz to know that smoking definitely wasn't her thing. It had been awful! As the smoke had writhed insidiously around in her chest, she'd felt as if she had inhaled an entire fireplace of soot and ash.

God, how her lungs had burned! How she had coughed and hacked!

Actual fear, intense and blinding, had suffused her as she had desperately tried to rid her body of the foreign substance. It was almost as if that botched foray into smoking had reminded her of something horrific...something traumatic she had experienced but couldn't quite remember--and yet it was there, lurking beneath the recesses of her subconscious.

It hadn't been until she had finally and shakily caught her breath, when blessedly clean and pure air had begun once more filtering into her, that she'd realized she hadn't been alone.

Someone had been kneeling behind her, supporting her convulsing body while holding her raised arms over her head to expand her lungs.

She'd only been able to expel the smoke--and her inexplicable terror with it--and breathe normally again because of his mercilessly strong grip.

Blearily concluding that the man had been Sam, she had whirled around, gasping and wheezing, to snarl indignantly at him--but it had been Red.

Shocked to her core, she had stared open-mouthed at him, all furious words immediately dying on her lips as she had taken in his livid expression.

Utterly humiliated, she had silently closed her watery eyes and had braced herself for the lecture she had undoubtedly deserved: how stupid she'd been to try smoking near the barn of all places, nevermind the fact that smoking cigarettes was insanely addictive and could very well kill her before her time.

But...it hadn't come.

Instead, Red had released her arms and had gently taken the pack of cigarettes and lighter away from her, tucking them into his jacket's inner pocket.

She hadn't dared put up any kind of fight to get them back.

His gentleness had been far worse than any yelling he could have inflicted on her....and, God, the disappointment gleaming in his fierce eyes had made a huge lump grow in her throat.

Then he had said her name.

Reluctantly, she had looked up at him.

Red had unwaveringly held her gaze while telling her in a dangerously quiet tone that had brooked no argument: "Wait a few more years and then decide if you want to sell yourself short."

God, how those intensely emphatic words had echoed in her mind for days afterward.

"You made the decision, not me, Lizzy," Red was saying, bringing her out of the rather shameful memory. "You could've ignored me. Or you could have tried again when you started college."

Embarrassed, she hitched a naked shoulder.

"In any case, honey.... I'm glad you didn't pursue it," he told her, flicking his cigar in wry emphasis.
"Smoking cigars is different from smoking cigarettes," she murmured, perversely defending him and the habit he occasionally indulged.

"Smoking is smoking is smoking." He let a wispy tendril of gray escape his mouth before continuing, "One kind of indulgence can very easily lead to another."

"It sounds like you speak from experience."

He shrugged his right shoulder noncommittally, but a sharp sort of musingly rueful smile slightly twitched at his lips.

Liz tilted her head to the side, her curiosity piqued as she regarded him closely. "What other...things have you indulged in?"

At first, she thought he wouldn't answer her. But then he crossed his left ankle on his right thigh, his left knee now a support for the hand that held the cigar.

"Well.... I've been drinking alcohol for longer than you've been alive," he began dryly.

She snorted, rolling her eyes even as a grin curved her lips.

"I've smoked cigarettes. And cigars, obviously. I prefer these." He lazily lifted the Cuban between his two fingers to drive his point home. "Pot, once, when I was a teenager."

Liz quickly stifled a laugh of amused disbelief.

His green eyes gleamed knowingly as they flicked to her face. "At the time, I didn't like how it screwed with my head...so I never did it again."

Liz swiftly schooled her face from cheeky impishness to polite attentiveness. It was rare for him to speak of the times before she knew him...and she didn't want him to stop anytime soon.

"And I had aspirations to join the Navy," he continued, his tone more reminiscently thoughtful. "The Naval Academy frowns on shit like smoking pot."

"You joined the Navy, Red?" she asked, astounded.

She had never known that!

"Mmm. I graduated high school a year early and joined the Naval Academy when I was seventeen," he replied, smiling at the startled amazement in her voice.

As he spoke, her eyes flickered to the massive tattoo painted in permanent black ink on his entire right shoulder. Of course, she had noticed it the moment she saw him naked for the first time, and had absently studied it over the past half-year when he'd been in various states of undress.

Liz had meant to ask him about it dozens and dozens of times before tonight. But now...now she knew what its significance was. Or, at least she thought she knew.

Gripping the tumbler with one hand, she wiped her other one clean of dewdrops before reaching out to run a cold, tentative finger over the fouled anchor...over the old-time ship's wheel that also seemed to be part of a compass...over the large, beautifully slender, many-pointed star that extended out from the middle of the anchor and wheel, completing the compass rose.

"That's when you got this, isn't it?" she asked, eyes darting curiously up to his as he lowered his arm so she could inspect the artwork easier.
"Mmhm. Well," he swiftly corrected himself, "I actually got that after I graduated from the Academy."

"It must have cost a pretty penny," Elizabeth murmured, genuinely admiring all the intricate detail and meticulous shading. "How old were you?"

"When I graduated? Twenty-four."

Once again, she was reminded of just how much older he was than her. Liz's interest in his old life flared even higher and hotter as she gently traced the lower end of the anchor.

"Can you explain what this means?" she questioned, cocking her head inquisitively as her finger followed the stippled, swirling rope that was closely twined around the anchor.

Red glanced down to where she was touching him, obviously entranced by the ornate artwork. "You mean the fouled anchor?"

She nodded slowly, lifting her sapphire eyes briefly back up to his. "Tattoos always have deeper meanings...especially to the people who have them."

"Do they, now?" His tone was amused as he gazed fondly down at her.

Her dimples fleetingly appeared before she ducked her head to intently study his ink again.

"Well, the fouled anchor has been a naval insignia for centuries," he explained easily. "Its roots can be traced back to British Naval tradition dating around the fifteen-hundreds."

"That's a really long time," she remarked, impressed.

Red nodded his agreement. "Though there are some who argue that a fouled anchor is the emblem of a disgraced Naval officer and should only be used as such." His smile was both pained and wry. "Something I can both agree and disagree with."

Liz frowned at his dry tone, brow puckering as she continued to caress the rope and anchor. "Why do you agree with that? You're hardly a disgrace, Red."

*Oh, my sweet, darling girl*....

"I did leave the Navy after a couple years," he confided by way of explanation.

The line between her eyebrows deepened as she caught on to what she thought he meant: that since he hadn't stayed, he'd failed. "But...you got the tattoo before you left, right?"

"Right...."

She smiled brightly at him. "Then it stands for the first thing, doesn't it? The historical significance. Not the other thing." Then she pursed her pink lips at him. "And just because you chose to leave the Navy doesn't make you a disgraced person, Red," she chided.

Christ, what innocence.

Deeply touched, Red brought his cigar to his lips to hide the sudden, profound emotion her purely artless words wrought in him.

How he desperately longed for what she so resolutely declared to be true!
It wasn't, of course. How could it possibly be with him being the man he was?

Red was nothing if not pragmatic. He knew the truth. He knew who he was. What he was.

But...perhaps for now, tonight with her...he could entertain the beautiful lie.

Clearing his throat, he muttered gruffly, "The fouled anchor is also a Victorian love symbol."

Unaware that he was trying to hide intensely poignant sentiments from her by changing the subject, Elizabeth flashed an intrigued smile up at him. "A love symbol?"

"I thought that would get your attention," he teased through wisps of gray smoke.

"I'm paying attention!" she defended herself indignantly, wrinkling her nose at him. "Tell me how it's a love symbol."

"The anchor takes on the meaning of 'steadfastness' and the fouling rope symbolizes 'forever entwined.'"

Her eyes sparkled with delight. "How romantic," she cooed softly, regarding his tattoo in a fascinated, new light. "I really love that."

"I thought you would." He watched as she brushed her index finger over the wheel. "That wheel and star make up the compass rose," he disclosed before she could ask. "But I like to think of the star as Polaris."

"The North Star?"

"Mmm. Do you remember why it's called that?"

"Are you seriously quizzing me?" she impishly demanded.

Red raised a querying brow at her. "Isn't astronomy one of your favorite subjects?"

Elizabeth bared her teeth at him in a wordless, feistily coy response that made him chuckle. "Isn't it called the North Star because it's located at the north celestial pole?" At his nod, she continued with more assurance, "And because it's located there, it doesn't seem to move."

"Right," he confirmed. "It seems to just hang there, shining brightly, while the rest of the sky moves around it."

Her enraptured touch was featherlight as she traced all the star's prongs.

"And...." Red smiled softly, "in that way...it is the polestar that guides all sailors home."

"You'd be lost without it."

He knew she meant the collective you, as in all the sailors, but.... "I would indeed," he agreed in a low, gravelly tone.

Unaware of the subtle, layered meaning behind his response, she examined the upper half of his tattoo more closely. "And what about this Latin phrase? Ad astra per aspera...." Her expression turned thoughtful as she tapped one of the scripted words. "I recognize astra. That means star."

"'Through hardships to the stars.'"
Pleasantly surprised, Elizabeth met his eyes. "It's rather poetic, Red."

He shrugged his shoulder self-consciously. "And applicable to many of life's...challenging situations," he replied quietly.

*His* life was really what he meant.

She reflectively searched his gaze. "Did you get the words tattooed when you got all of this?" she asked softly, gently spanning her slender hand over his shoulder.

"No." Closing his eyes, he turned his face away from hers and brought the Cuban back to his lips. "I requested that it be added years later. Many years later."

It was such a soul-stirring phrase, wrought with all kinds of hauntingly intricate, spiritual and metaphysical meanings.

*Why? What does it mean for you?* she wanted to ask. But when her eyes flickered to the two graceful calla lilies tattooed beneath the fouled anchor just before Red lifted his arm back up to rest behind her on the sofa, she thought that perhaps she had an inkling of why...and what the phrase might mean to him.

Shifting closer, Elizabeth brought her legs up onto the couch, propping her knees on his bare thigh while she rested her head gently against the place between his chest and shoulder. Then she unwrapped the blanket from her legs to share it, solicitously covering his lower half. As he gratefully whispered his thanks, she draped her glass carefully on her right knee, gazing pensively down at the amber liquid that remained in it.

"What made you want to leave the Navy?" she murmured into the comfortable silence growing between them.

"Politics." Genuine disgust crept into his voice and completely colored that one, highly-charged word.

Liz glanced sharply up at him, somewhat taken aback by his vehemence.

"I found out early on that I wasn't cut out to play the game. And it *was* a game, Lizzy...a game where there was only one winner." He jerked his head in aversion. "Even though I wanted to be a captain of my own ship more than anything else in this entire world, I wouldn't trade my honor for the title."

Then he gave a sort of snarling bark of rough, bitter laughter, letting loose an emotion that she didn't quite understand. "I refused to be a dishonorable pawn."

*Why did he now sound so sarcastic?*

"And so you left."

"And so I left."

"Then what did you do?"

Red slowly and steadily blew out more smoke from his nose as he attempted to reel in his true feelings on what he had done, for that fucking decision he'd made in a moment of passionate rage had been the beginning of his spiraling, downward descent into what he was now: a damned and damaged man, a murdering monster, the eater of others' sins, a mastermind criminal who owned the entire world, and yet who was on the run from it at the same, Goddamn time.
How was that for fucking irony?

He could feel her piercing eyes settling on him.

Careful, old son... he warned himself. Christ, tread carefully.

"I found another job," he replied calmly, affecting a breezy casualness he certainly didn't feel as he struggled to gloss over the extremely dark part of his life that he had to keep secret from most everyone, especially her. "And my wife...." his voice caught unexpectedly and he swiftly cleared his throat.

God, he hadn't meant to mention her at all. But now that he had started the sentence, he needed to finished it.

Bracing his heart, he murmured, "She gave birth to our daughter."

"What was her name?" Elizabeth asked, her tone very soft indeed.

Red ran the tip of his tongue over his Cuban, slowly inhaling the smoke so he could roll it around in his mouth for a moment and savor the sweet taste of it in a desperate attempt to steady his agitated nerves.

The name of his sweet little angel was a beautiful, heavenly pinprick of gold glittering deep down within him...but as his attention reluctantly turned toward it, it was suddenly rushing up through the darkness, tearing through all the blockaded, inner barriers of his mind.

Its howling ascent was both exquisitely painful and fiercely joyful. And then--

--there it was. Her lovely name. It agonizingly hovered in his mind and achingly trembled on his lips....

He physically shuddered, releasing that sacred piece of information he had secreted away deep in his heart for so, very long.

"Lilah," he rasped. "Her name was Lilah."

Elizabeth allowed a few moments of respectful silence to pass them by before whispering, "It's a beautiful name, Red."

Squeezing his eyes shut, he nodded his agreement. Then a burst of raw, wild laughter escaped him, catching hoarsely in his throat. "And to think I didn't like it at first."

"No?" she asked gently.

"I had wanted to name her something else." He shook his head angrily at himself, eyes flying open. "As if any other name would have suited her! But Aisling knew. She knew all along."

"Aisling was your wife?" Elizabeth's voice rippled compassionately through the silence that had once again fallen between them.

"Yes." Another bright soul who had been too angelic to exist happily on this Earth for very long.

Though he had tried to give her everything...his staunch loyalty and his unswerving love, a child to complete their perfect, nuclear family, stacks of money and unlimited credit, a fine, two-story house with a rose garden and a white picket fence, and any and all of the creature comforts a woman like her would ever want--and deserved.
And he had actually succeeded in achieving all of this for her...for them...for a time.

For years Red had managed to keep his glorious little family blissfully happy and hidden away in their Eden, fully and completely protected from the corrupt darkness and insidious evil that he’d had to immerse himself in nearly every single day of his life. He’d had his reasons for choosing the profession he’d chosen, just like he had his reasons for living the life he currently lead now as Raymond Reddington.

But he’d become overconfident and careless...and hadn’t seen that the evil he had provoked one too many times had at last sniffed out his trail...and had stalked him home.

During that horrific Christmas Eve, his Paradise had been lost.

He had become utterly and thoroughly bereft.

He had failed his beautiful family.

And he would never be able to forgive himself for it.

"Do you...." Elizabeth hesitated, unsure of how to continue, for she was young and somewhat overwhelmed with all she had become privy to tonight. "Do you want to talk about them?" she offered softly.

"I lost them, Lizzy," the grieving words escaped his lips before he could forcibly withhold them. "In one night, I lost them both." Agony squeezed his heart and he took another long drag of the perfecto to cover his lapse. "And there was a period of time afterward," he confided gravely, "....a dark time, a time I've spoken to you a little about before....when I became addicted opiates."

Shocked, she turned her head to stare up at him.

Then he gave a harsh laugh. "I don't even know why I'm telling you this."

Because your hurting soul needs to divulge itself, she wanted to say, but she wasn't quite brave enough. "Opiates...." she murmured. "God, Red. Aren't those highly addictive?"

An almost savage light gleamed in his eyes. "Oh yes. Quite."

"Are you still...." she hedged uncertainly. "I mean...." her voice trailed off as he shook his head.

He obviously knew what she was getting at.

"No, Lizzy. No. It was a long time ago. I'm not addicted anymore," he quietly reassured her. "But it would be very...easy to become dependent again." Sighing heavily, he shook his head at himself. "Too easy," he added in an undertone.

Elizabeth took a couple sips of her drink to steady her nerve. This was an entirely new side of Red she was discovering tonight.

No.

Not...new. Not exactly. She had known deep down for years now that a darker side existed within him, for she had caught glimpses of it before.

But that knowledge didn't make what she was uncovering little by little any easier to hear or process.

"What made you break the addiction?" she finally managed to ask.
Smoke once again drifted in a purposeful stream from his flared nostrils as he stared straight ahead. "There were things I needed to...accomplish," he began honestly. "And I couldn't succeed at what I had set before myself if I was wasting away in an opium den."

Liz shivered at his words. The awful, terrifying vision of Red collapsed on a dirty floor somewhere, head lolling, eyes rolling backward as he allowed the drug to work him was...surreal. The fact that she could actually imagine it though.... That was the frightening part. It was almost too much to bear. Her hands slowly tightened around her glass as she forcefully shoved that horrifying image of Red physically and emotionally numb, hallucinating his days away, out of her mind.

"So, I coerced myself into making a choice," Red continued quietly. "And it was difficult, Lizzy. When you're that addicted to something.... It warps your mind. It makes rational thought extremely arduous. But.... I was aware of the responsibilities I had and that knowledge forced me to make my choice." He met her eyes. "The right choice."

She searched his open and clear gaze. The mental strength that this man possessed was quite honestly staggering. "It must have been so hard to fight it, Red. The addiction."

"There were many nights when I would wake in a cold sweat, craving it."

Liz shuddered empathetically. "How on Earth did you fill the void?" For he must have filled it with something. A person couldn't just go cold turkey...not even him. Not after being mentally enslaved by opiates.

He hesitated, then tore his eyes away from hers to inspect his cigar. "Sex," he answered simply. His cheeks heated and she glanced down at the sweating drink cradled in her palms.

Elizabeth would be desperately lying if she tried to convince herself--and him--that his devastatingly truthful answer didn't disturb her. But she couldn't very well be angry with him about it. She had asked, after all. And if it had been his way to escape the entrapment of the drug....

Slowly she took in a deep, shuddering breath.

Red hadn't had to share this hard truth with her. The fact that he had confided something so deeply personal meant that he thought her mature enough to handle it.

Liz needed to prove to him that he was right.

Bravely she lifted her eyes to his face. "So...you traded one addiction for another," she murmured.

"It may have started off that way, Elizabeth," he replied carefully, his tone gentle, for he was keenly sensitive of her feelings, "but I didn't become...mired down in it for too long."

Visions of him loudly groaning and vigorously thrusting into dozens of faceless women passed swiftly through her mind's eye...and a shiver of an undeniably complicated swirl of emotions...disgust, disappointment, regret, sorrow, pity...ran down her spine.

"You were for a while though."

"Yes," he conceded, meeting her eyes fleetingly before she looked uncomfortably back down at her drink. "At the time, it was the sort of...stimulating outlet I needed to keep myself from crawling back into those fucking dens, defeated, with my metaphorical tail between my legs."

Liz could feel his avid eyes on her but she kept hers steadily fixed on the amber liquid in her glass.
"Were they...." She hesitated, wondering why she was insistently pursuing this painful subject. But....she wanted to know. "Were they prostitutes?"

"Some of them were, yes," came brutally honest...and vulnerable...reply. "And some were escorts."

Flushing a deeper red, she bit her lower lip. "But...not all of them."

Red couldn't bring himself to answer her. He was quite aware of the fact that the weighty silence now stretching between them spoke volumes. He knew that she would shrewdly read into it and understand he hadn't found physical release only in the company of women he'd paid...that he had bedded any woman who had shown sexual interest in him or who had been receptive to his advances.

*How could you?* Elizabeth was most likely thinking. After being so devotedly married to his wife, Aisling, a woman he truly loved, how could he defile her memory in such a way?

Christ, he had often accusatorily demanded himself to answer that very question.

But he always came up with a heavy, guilt-ridden silence.

Bringing the cigar to his lips, he once again ran his tongue over the head before taking in the smoke, trying to distract himself by attempting to enjoy the way it tasted. But even the sensual, full-bodied flavor of this illegal Cuban couldn't erase the foul taste now permeating his mouth caused by the disgraceful memories this profoundly revealing conversation had stirred up.

"It was a long time ago, Elizabeth," he finally murmured through the gray haze of smoke into the stillness between them. "I'm not saying what I did was right--" *far from it* --"but it kept me out of the opium dens. It helped me sober up so that I could actually live again."

He suddenly felt her small palm slide up onto his thigh in a gentle caress, and, surprised, he glanced down at it. She must have set her drink down at some point, for as she turned her body to fully face him, he noticed that both her hands were free.

His green eyes flickered to hers as she carefully braced her palms on his bare chest.

Elizabeth searched his eyes for a long moment.

As he gazed back at her, he wondered what she was looking for...and what she observed lingering there. Would all that he had revealed to her tonight change the way she felt about him?

Probably. How could it not?

Red found himself silently praying that what he had unexpectedly confided in her wouldn't make her love him less...but he would accept it if that's what would happen.

He was nothing if not pragmatic.

But then, to his astonishment, she leaned forward and kissed him.

It was tentative, at first. But as his lips slowly opened for her, as his hand lifted from the back of the sofa to hesitantly cup the side of her face, it grew more ardently confident, more fiercely desperate, more passionately tender.

And Red realized then that what they'd gravely spoken of tonight and the rare vulnerability he had exposed to her hadn't driven her away...but rather, it had further bound her irrevocably to him in a
way that neither of them had been expecting.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year! :D

Thank you to everyone for reading ❤️ your kindness and comments are very much appreciated!
God, she was beautiful.

Red shook his head slightly in wry amusement at himself as he tied the strings on his black satin pajama pants, wondering just how many times he'd put that particular sentiment out into the ether tonight.

Elizabeth was sound asleep, sprawled on her side over the sumptuous down comforter of his bed. Her bare arms were wound tightly around one of the huge, plush pillows that lined the antique cushioned headboard, her cheek nestled comfortably on the top of it.

She had forgone showering earlier, dryly informing him that she barely had enough strength to stand upright and since washing out all the gunk from her hair was probably going to be quite a challenging ordeal, she wanted to be well-rested for it. So after she'd fiercely scrubbed her face clean of all that heavy stage makeup and had then lazily brushed her teeth, she'd finally relinquished his own bathroom back to him so he could take a quick shower.

He eyed her in amused affection as he came closer. Lizzy was wearing mismatched lingerie, which was unusual. She must have blearily dug through her top drawer, haphazardly pulling out and shrugging into the first garments she came across before collapsing onto his bed in an exhausted heap.

His expression softened as he eased down onto the edge of the giant mattress beside her, his eyes caressing over her body. He admired the way the scalloped lace edges of the fuchsia and white polka-dotted panties hugged her pert little bottom, how the light gray camisole she wore had inched its way up her belly to expose much of her milky skin...and that adorable freckle to the far right of her navel.

Red shifted closer, careful not to disrupt her space and accidentally wake her. Not that he needed to concern himself too much about that.... She was breathing pretty heavily, which meant she was deeply lost in her dreams.

It wasn't too surprising. Elizabeth was undoubtedly drained physically and mentally...not to mention emotionally. Today had been such a profoundly momentous day for her, and tonight had been just as considerably significant. Not only had she publicly shucked her lingering uncertainties and inhibitions and had once again embraced herself as a confident and sensual young woman, she had also proven it to him in the most intimate way she possibly could have.

Twice.

A sensuous heat warmed his expression as he reached out to touch the curling tips of her hair that had drifted down her arm to the silken bedspread. The memory of this night would stay with him for a long time....

For more than one reason.

The erotic warmth faded from his gaze at the thought.

Quietly Red let out a resigned sigh as he slowly withdrew his hand from her, unable to quite
suppress the small but powerful pang of remorse he suddenly felt for divulging what he had to her. Even though she hadn't intimated it, he knew that the honest confession of his grave faults had altered her perception of him.

How could it not?

Perhaps it was selfish of him to feel this way, but despite the principles he now devoutly followed and his prevailing strength of will, he was still just a man...and not infallible.

However, not all of him regretted it. There was a larger part of him, that howling, dark wildness that resided deep down within him, that had obviously wanted her to know and had persuaded him to release the information in an attempt to find...what?

Certainly not closure. He would only find that after he had finally succeeded in hunting down the very last of those who were responsible for invading his Eden and brutally murdering his beloved family.

With practiced finesse, Red mentally--and swiftly--sidestepped that winding, murky path of vengeful thoughts and instead gazed down pensively at Elizabeth.

He could have lied to her when her questions had become more pointed...when they had delved more deeply into his disgrace. But he had never once lied outright to her in all his years of knowing her and he hadn't been about to start then.

The man also could have slyly evaded the nitty-gritty facts. That was definitely a conversational art he excelled in, and he'd engaged in it with her countless times before tonight.

But in baring the damning truth to her, maybe he'd been desperately searching for a kind of solace...perhaps even acceptance: that her incomplete perception of who he really was would become more whole if she discerned yet another, truer aspect of his character...and not flee from him.

The appallingly shameful choices he'd made certainly hadn't been easy for Elizabeth to hear. And while it was true that those actions had been committed in the past, the fact that he'd perpetrated them at all pointed to what kind of man he was still capable of being. Her discomfort and distress had been apparent in her stiff posture, in the hesitant way she'd scrutinized him now and again as he'd spoken, and in the low, husky tone of her voice as she had bravely asked her probing questions.

And while it had been extremely difficult on her to hear about his grim inadequacies, it had been especially difficult on him to confess them to her.

Red closed his eyes briefly, brow furrowing as that familiar feeling of oppressive shame once again stealthily twined around and mercilessly squeezed his heart.

He could still remember the faces of some of the women he'd taken into his bed or who had taken him into theirs, but that span of time was mostly a dark, hazy blur of an unknown number of months where he'd willingly drowned himself in piercing grief, savage fury, hot lust, and blindingly intense physical satiation.

Sometimes, in an effort to blatantly ignore the vicious self-contempt he'd harbored because of what he engaged in...but only when he'd been mentally strong enough...he had imagined they'd been Aisling. He had momentarily allowed himself to believe that he'd been curling his hands in her silky, golden hair, that he'd been glancing fleetingly down into her striking hazel eyes, that he'd been running his lips over the dusting of freckles sprinkled over her nose and cheeks as those women had sinuously arched beneath him, moaning loudly while he'd vigorously thrust into them.
But every time when he'd finally orgasmed and had then slipped his slackened member out of them, his horribly bitter situation would once again smash heavily over him, mercilessly shattering his fantasy. His ears would ring with the sharply discordant din of the shards of reality crashing unforgivably down around him as he'd peeled the condom off of himself, angrily whipping it away in disgust.

He'd never worn those Goddamned things with Aisling.

Just like he didn't with Elizabeth.

But during most of the times when he had been in the intoxicating company of those women, he had been shamefully weak and painfully writhing in the foul, twisting throes of opium deprivation. Since he hadn't been able to think rationally much at all, he had purposefully focused solely on how those women had made him feel physically, how their experienced and eager hands had pleasured his sweating and trembling body, how their sultry mouths and beautiful figures had taken his cock any way he had desired.

He loathed to remember those months of ruthless fucking and terribly severe physical and mental suffering he'd endured from the detox...which had made the loss of Aisling and Lilah even more agonizingly clear every day he had become more sober.

There had been countless days and nights when his emotional anguish had been so great that he'd been tempted to retreat from the carnal, sexual pleasures that grounded him in reality...and fall back into those fucking dens and mindlessly lose himself in the drug again so he wouldn't have to face the desolate truth--that he was utterly bereaved.

And broken because of it.

But...he hadn't caved.

It had literally taken all of the willpower he'd possessed, but Red had menacingly coerced himself into staying the turbulent course of getting sober, for it was the only way he'd be able to avenge his loved ones.

And while she hadn't been his daughter, he'd had another little girl in his life who had adored him just as much and had been depending on him.

There had been other reasons to fall into bed with all those women rather than reacquaint himself with that fucking drug, but thoughts of revenge...and thoughts of his young and innocent Lizzy who had still needed the intricate network of protection only he could provide for her...were what had further propelled him through the jagged, suffocating darkness into the bleak light of sobriety.

Tonight, Elizabeth had heard him out and had borne every single damning word better than he could have ever hoped for, and certainly better than he deserved. And to his complete and utter shock, he had found both solace and acceptance when she had closed the physical and emotional distance between them to tentatively take his mouth with her own.

He hadn't expected her kiss, but he'd welcomed it with all his heart. She had lead it in such a determinedly open and hesitantly vulnerable way...passionately expressing that despite every repugnant and loathsome thing he had revealed to her, she still accepted him...unforgivable flaws and all.

Because she loved him.

His eyes tenderly traced her face.
Where Elizabeth's love was concerned, there was no ulterior motive, no hidden agenda.

It was pure, and brightly beautiful in its purity.

He didn't deserve such love, but he couldn't, and wouldn't, turn away from it...because he loved her, too.

It had been similar with Aisling.

They'd been high school sweethearts and so she'd known him better than anyone....but not as well as she had thought. Aisling hadn't truly known what he'd done day in and day out after he'd departed the Navy in a furious rage. All she had known was that he had found a stable career soon afterward and that it had allowed them to live very comfortably indeed, more so than if he'd stayed in the Navy. She had seen him as her generous provider, her loyal friend, her devoted lover, and the proud father of her child. And she had loved him as purely as Lizzy did.

But Aisling’s love had eventually become tinged with a piercing sadness. Red had sometimes been able to feel it when he’d held her hand, when he’d caught her looking at him from across the dinner table...when they’d made love in the velvet darkness of their bedroom. He had warily wondered if she had known just how unhappy his job had truly made him, and that she’d been desperately attempting to mask the devastation aroused by the fact that he wouldn't confide in her.

It wasn't that he didn't want to bare his soul to her...to be completely open and sincerely forthright about everything. There had been many long nights when he'd come home, weary and heartsick, and the temptation to relieve his conscience had been paramount.

But he couldn't. Not only because he had been directly told by his superiors not to, but because it would have been unconscionably selfish of him to burden her sweet and glowing vitality with the abhorrent darkness that had oppressively plagued his days...and that sometimes had even stealthily seeped into his heart.

When Red had finally reached a point to where he'd managed to grasp onto sobriety and grimly ruminate upon the tragedy that had transpired, he had often wondered about whether or not he could have stopped it from happening: that if he had confided at least some of what he’d done to Aisling, then perhaps she would have been better prepared to defend herself against any enemy of his that would have managed to sniff them out.

Christ, how he’d fixated on that idea, obsessively latching onto it and worrying it until its mangled essence had been strewn to every fucking corner of his mind. And the more he had viciously torn into each and every bloody piece, the more the terrible thought had bled out and had consumed him, intensifying his feelings of boundless fury, stark guilt, and inexhaustible condemnation all directed within.

The fact of the matter was: he would never know if he could have prevented what had happened by confiding in Aisling. It had taken him a long time, but he had finally concluded, with much agonizing soul-searching, that hounding his guilt-ridden conscience about it would not bring her or Lilah back to him.

Elizabeth let out a light sigh just then into the bleak silence that was heavy with the gravity of his dark thoughts. The soft, peaceful sound abruptly jolted Red out of his solemn brooding. He glanced over at her, watching as one of her hands shifted from the pillow to splay out on top of the blanket beside her, her pale skin starkly contrasting against its deep, blood-red color.

_Blood-red._
The man shuddered, gazing numbly down at that slim, relaxed appendage...and it was almost as if he were suddenly staring down at Aisling's white, limp hand as her own life's blood pooled around her body, framing her in a cold, sticky sheen of sanguine.

When Red had frantically charged through the front door of their Cape May vacation home that fateful Christmas Eve night, his nostrils had flared as he'd immediately caught two scents: the faint, lingering aroma of baked cookies...and the awful, metallic tang of blood.

Severely disconcerted, his feet had instantly skidded to a halt as the golden light of the living room had surrounded him, as the deep voice of Bing Crosby crooning, "I'll be home for Christmas, you can plan on me...." had enveloped him...as his groggy mind had registered Aisling lying on the floor.

For the very briefest of moments, Red had thought that she'd been resting on a bed of all those scarlet poinsettias she had loved to line their windowsills with. And he'd wondered for a split-second: Why?

But then he had blinked and the harrowing reality of the ghastly scene before him had mercilessly struck his heart.

He hadn't been seeing poinsettias.

It had been blood.

So much blood.

Too much blood.

As the ghastly truth of what he'd been seeing overwhelmed him, his own blood had roared through his veins and had thundered in his ears. The swift rushing had cleared his mind of the drug-induced fog, sharpening it until all his senses had been painfully heightened from the swelling emotions of icy shock and white-hot fear.

No--no--no--

Lurching unsteadily forward, Red had fallen heavily to his knees beside the lifeless body of his dear one, shaking hands immediately moving to cradle her delicate face. As he had gently turned it up to his, as her limp neck had lolled, as her blank eyes had stared sightlessly past him into the beyond...her beautiful features forever frozen in an ashen mixture of fury and terror...he had been aware of something deep inside of him snapping free from all human constraint with ferocious savagery. It had gone completely berserk, viciously lunging forth and bellowing its fathomless rage while at the same time shrieking its heartrending sorrow.

Forcefully clamping down on the piercing scream that had threatened to erupt from his throat, his chest--his very soul--Red had fiercely sucked in a long, shivering breath through his nose. It had been the only sound he'd made as tears had scalded his pallid cheeks, as his trembling fingers had hopelessly checked Aisling for a pulse he'd already known wasn't there.

"Christmas Eve will find me," Crosby had soulfully mourned, "where the lovelight gleams...."

With agonizing effort, Red had torn his eyes away from his wife to numbly take stock of his surroundings--something he wouldn't normally have had to think twice about doing....but he'd been so consumed with near-suffocating distress and burgeoning grief that he hadn't been in his right mind.

The house had been deathly silent save for the music drifting tentatively out from the stereo, and it bore all the telltale signs of a ruthlessly violent struggle. Furniture had been aggressively displaced.
Area rugs had been roughly twisted and scrunched in upon themselves. The Christmas tree had keeled over at one point, for half of it had been smashed, all its branches split and fractured on one side. Shattered glass ornaments had glittered around the large room, perversely catching the warm light emanating from the chandelier above and the flickering embers of the dying fire in front of him.

Red had taken in every single, nightmarish detail of the horrifying scene before him within a few seconds, but for him, time had seemed to slow down and ooze insidiously outward. And while he had mostly been utterly paralyzed with shock while doing so, there'd been that grieving yet enraged and cunningly predatory side of him that had been fully conscious and actively locking all that grievous information away within the recesses of his memory so he would be able to sift through it later.

For he would need to.

Then his glassy eyes had flickered back down to the hardwood floor, a part of his traumatized mind registering that the pulverized porcelain scattered down the entryway were broken shards of the once beautifully painted pieces of the Nativity scene that had graced their coffee table.

Red had then lifted his gaze once again to look more closely at the violated room.

The coffee table had been overturned...one of its legs had been brutally snapped off from the harsh impact. And the Christmas cookie plate that had been set out on its polished surface every year for Santa Claus, the one that had been a part of his life since he'd been a child, had been destroyed, its ceramic fragments littering the bottom of the stairs that lead up to their room and Lilah's--

"Lilah!" Her name suddenly burst hoarsely from his lips. "Oh, God! Lilah!"

Gasping and panting, Red had clawed at the floorboards slick with blood until he had managed to scramble unsteadily upright. Both hope and terror had mercilessly squeezed his heart as he'd slipped and stumbled to the staircase, as he had gracelessly bolted up the steps two at a time, his palms leaving bloody streaks along the bannister.

Please! Oh God--please!

He had pounded down the hall and had surged toward the laundry shoot hidden behind the tapestry hung along the back wall--the safe space he and Aisling had told Lilah to hide in if she were ever in danger.

Perhaps she had made it. Perhaps she was huddled in there, cowering and weeping and terrified...but alive and waiting for him to come rescue her.

Please, God, he had wildly beseeched the Divine. Please!

But as he'd rounded the corner and had made to hurdle forward down the final stretch, his desperate eyes had instantly landed on a small, stationary form crumpled in the dark not five feet away from her safety.

With a low groan of anguish that had come from the very depths of his ravaged soul, Red's strength had given out all at once. His knees had buckled and he'd collapsed bonelessly to the floor.

But he hadn't stopped moving.

Weeping, he'd crawled over to her, heedless of the tiny shards of glass further embedding themselves deeper into his knees and palms with every movement he'd made.
With a devout tenderness, Red had gathered Lilah's lifeless little body into his lap. While his sticky hands had lovingly, mournfully, caressed over her angelic face, he had refused to acknowledge all of the cold, cold blood that had drenched her favorite nightgown.

"It's all right, Lilah. It's all right," he had rasped brokenly, cradling her tightly against him, trying in vain to warm her, for she had been so cold...far too cold. "You'll be all right."

Keening his despair, for despite his assurances he had known that she had passed from this world long before he'd come home, he'd tucked her up under his chin and had stroked her downy head over and over again while rocking her back and forth...back and forth....

An uncomfortable burning sensation in his eyes brought Red back to the present. Reaching up, he hastily wiped away the tears that threatened to escape his lashes.

Christ, he hadn't allowed himself to delve so deeply into that horrific and excruciatingly devastating memory in.... God. He couldn't even remember how long it had been.

Shuddering, he wearily rose to his feet and sluggishly paced away from Elizabeth, more to distract his exhausted, heartsick mind than to actually put physical distance between them. Reaching down, he blindly grasped and then shakily poured himself a glass of whatever decanter of alcohol was on the corner table. Then he lifted the crystal to his lips and threw the dark liquid back, relishing the way it stung its way down his throat. He bared his teeth, wincing as he swallowed before quickly sloshing more of the stuff into his glass and repeating the action once again. Then he did it yet again.

The gnawing sorrow he acutely felt in losing them was still unbearable, and it would always be so. He'd never be able to completely suppress it with hallucinogenic drugs, or evade it by losing himself in the carnal pleasures of a good fuck, or drown it with hard alcohol consumption.

Red clenched his fist around the crystal until his knuckles whitened with the tension and he snarled quietly down at the decanter disgust. Shaking his head, he denied the insistent clamor within him for more and decisively set the glass back down on the small table with a calmness he certainly wasn't feeling.

Slowly he took in a deep breath, and as the air entered his lungs, he attempted to steel his heart against the raw pain and rage he'd provoked and had then loosed upon himself. Whirling around, his intent gaze fell on Elizabeth, who was still slumbering peacefully on his bed. As his eyes slowly caressed over her slender, youthful form, they suddenly narrowed, his expression sharpening even more.

He didn't think he could survive the anguish of losing one so beloved again. And while he was already doing everything within his power to keep Lizzy safe, it was also his responsibility to equip her with the correct tools so she could keep herself safe.

When Red had abandoned his Naval career and had begun his descent into darkness, he had given Aisling a firearm. Even though he had been confident...arrogantly so...that he'd be able to protect her and Lilah himself, he'd possessed enough common sense to recognize that he couldn't leave them utterly defenseless.

Despite her own reservations about using it, Aisling hadn't resisted his will in the matter of bringing weapons into the home. And so he had taught her how to confidently use the handgun...how to shoot to kill.

When his rational mind slowly but surely had begun to come back to him later that heartbreakingly beautiful night, he had noticed that she had taken the downstairs gun out of its hiding place and had managed
to fire a shot before she'd gone down.

He had found the Smith and Wesson later beneath her body, but he had never found the bullet.

To this day, he savagely prayed that her aim had been true.

Red lifted his chin resolutely and sidled out of the bedroom to pad quietly down the hall to the living room where yesterday his men had deposited his luggage and purchases brought in from England and the east coast.

Kneeling down, he rummaged through one of the nondescript, black leather duffle bags until he found the small, sturdy plastic case he was looking for.

Clutching it to his chest, he rose to his feet and made his way quickly back to the bedroom.

It was truly alarming how swiftly life as one knew it could turn on its head. Lizzy had to be as prepared as she could be for such an inverted situation.

Slowly Red eased back down beside her on the edge of the mattress. Really, he could wait until later in the morning to do this...but after reliving the gruesome horror of his loved ones' brutal murder, he just couldn't allow one more moment to go by where he knew she didn't have a deadly weapon at least in her possession.

Carefully he set the pebbled plastic case on the tops of his thighs before reaching over to tenderly touch her shoulder. "Lizzy."

"Mmmph," she grunted petulantly, nestling her face deeper into the down pillow. Obviously she was still mostly caught up in whatever whimsical dreamland she currently traversed and was quite reluctant to leave it.

He couldn't blame her...but he needed to get this done for his own sake. For hers.

"Wake up." His fingers tightened slightly over her bare skin as he gave her a gentle, no-nonsense shake. "Please, honey."

Muttering incoherently, she finally cracked an eye open when he shook her again. Blearily she glanced up at him. "Red?"

He gave her a small smile.

"What time s'it?" she mumbled sleepily, yawning until her jaw cracked.

"Three forty-seven."

"In the morning?" she moaned in dismay.

"Mmm."

Elizabeth's brow puckered in tired puzzlement. Jesus, why on Earth was he awake at this Godforsaken hour? Not much time had passed since they'd gone to bed. Had he even slept at all?

It didn't seem like it.

Lifting her head from the pillow, she blinked both her eyes and then peered closer at him, now coherent enough to note his rather pale complexion and strained expression reflecting in the dim light of the bedside lamp.
"What's the matter?" she asked in sudden alarm, shifting to sit upright.

"Don't be concerned." He shook his head quickly to deter her train of worried thought. "I just...." Lightly he stroked a palm over the case in his lap. "I need to give you something."

She frowned at him, recognizing his deflection for what it was. He hadn't replied "nothing" to her question....so something was wrong. Or.....at least something was relentlessly hounding his mind to where he obviously felt that it was important enough to wake her now....before either of them had truly rested after such a profoundly busy day.

Her curious perplexity mounted.

"Give me something?" she queried, lifting her slim hands and rubbing her eyes and cheeks with her fingers before running them through the tangled mass of her hair, shaking it away from her face.

"Yes. And, no, this couldn't have waited until the sun came up," he quipped, attempting for a teasingly lighthearted tone, but it fell pathetically flat. Immediately abandoning the weak effort to bring wry humor into the situation, he let out a resigned sigh, eyes once more rather grave. "It's important to me that I give this to you now, Lizzy."

She sat up straighter, crossing her legs and pulling the scarlet blanket up and over them, very aware of his gaze following the movement. The peculiar light that gleamed there momentarily as he stared fiercely at the blanket took her aback.

It was almost as if the throw offended him in some way.

But.... God, why?

"An associate gave this to me as a gift." Red tore his eyes away from her as he flicked open the two metal tabs along the front of the case with his long thumbs. Then he lifted the cover. Reaching down, he picked up a small .38 Smith and Wesson from the gray foam it had been nestled in and held it steadily out to her. "I have no use for it...but you do." His tone was adamantly resolute.

Elizabeth's mouth fell open in shock as she stared down at the cobalt-black handgun he offered to her. She certainly hadn't been expecting that!

When Red impatiently jerked his hand, her wide eyes darted up to his.

"It's not loaded," came his gruff words of assurance before he once more proffered it to her.

Liz hesitantly reached out and plucked the gun from his large palm. "Baz talked to you, didn't he?"

A line of confusion creased Red's brow. "Baz?"

"Yeah." She caressed the fingers of her other hand over the smooth barrel. She wasn't afraid of guns. Sam had taught her how to shoot when she'd been a teenager. After overcoming her initial hesitancy about handling something so dangerous, she had eventually felt comfortable with shooting and had actually enjoyed practicing her marksmanship.

As she gazed down at the weapon, Liz could almost hear the metallic pinging and tinging as the bullets she had fired all those years ago hit the tin cans and pie plates she and Sam had used for target practice.

But this particular gun's purpose wasn't for shooting cheap hunks of thin metal off of a distant log or tree stump.
"Yeah," she murmured again, glancing back up at him. "He told you I wanted a gun, didn't he?"

Red gazed at her, nonplussed. Then almost immediately understanding swiftly dawned on him. "Ah-yes." He quickly cleared his throat. "He might have mentioned a rather serious topic of conversation that had passed between the two of you at one point last month."

The young woman pursed her pink lips in annoyance. "I had a feeling he'd tattle on me," she muttered, blue eyes flashing with irritation.

"I wouldn't call it **tattling** so much as **informing,**" he retorted, quirking a chiding brow at her. "Firearms are a grave business, Elizabeth. When you expressed explicit interest in owning one, he felt I needed know."

"You're not my father," she grumbled heatedly.

He gave a harsh bark of laughter. "Obviously. But I know quite a bit about firearms. More so than even Baz...which is yet another reason why he told me." He gave her a piercingly searching look. "You could have told me about your desire **yourself,**" he reproached softly.

Wrinkling her nose, she squirmed uncomfortably and quickly looked back down at the Smith and Wesson cradled in her palms.

"Why didn't you?" he pressed gently when she didn't lash out to defend herself like he had thought she would.

"I didn't want you to think I was...." Liz pressed her lips together nervously for a split-second before blurting out, "being paranoid." A hot flush suffused her cheeks as she peeked up at him.

Red stared at her, honestly bemused. "After all you've been through, why the Hell would I think **that?**" he demanded roughly.

Wincing, she turned her face away from him.

"Sometimes I think you don't give me enough credit, Lizzy. Or...." He paused significantly, considering his words carefully before continuing, "Do you think that perhaps you sometimes project how you see yourself onto the way you think I see you?"

But he already knew the answer to that. And so did she. He watched intently as her fingers tightened tellingly over the gun.

"Hmm?" he prodded when she stubbornly refused to answer.

After a span of several heartbeats passed, she finally hitched a slender shoulder. "Maybe," she hedged reluctantly.

"Wanting a real weapon to protect yourself isn't being paranoid. It's being proactive," he clarified firmly, his tone brooking no argument. "I'm glad you want this, Lizzy," he told her seriously, tapping a finger on the gun's polished cylinder. "Because I want you to have it, too."

Her eyes flickered up to his when she heard how the cadence of his voice lowered huskily the longer he spoke. Ah...and there it was, gleaming there in his green eyes: that rare vulnerability she'd glimpsed and had then engaged with earlier tonight.

The long conversation they'd had after they'd made love had, without a doubt, stirred much up within him...memories of his past and the intense emotions that came with them. And he wasn't used to
feeling so...raw. So exposed. That much was certainly apparent.

Earlier, Red had momentarily forgotten about his conversation with Baz, which meant he had hastily woken her up to give her this handgun for another reason.

Another, much more personal reason that was undoubtedly linked to Aisling...to Lilah.

"I need you to be prepared...." Red trailed off, eyes caressing intimately, almost hungrily, almost desperately, over her face. "There will always be evil in this world, Elizabeth. Depraved men and women will always find a way to hurt the good. The innocent. I want you to know that you can protect yourself from another Grady Forman, if the need should ever arise."

Liz flinched at the sound of that man’s name, eyes flicking back down to the .38.

"I know you went shooting with Sam when you were younger so you're not a complete novice. But I'd like to help you learn how this particular gun handles. I want to help you hone your skill."

As he spoke, she visualized herself holding this weapon with the stout confidence of one who saw her gun as a protective extension of herself.

"Will you let me help you?" Red asked quietly.

She so desperately wanted to become that poised and self-reliant woman she saw in her mind's eye.

"Yes," she nodded determinedly, bringing the Smith and Wesson closer against her body. Then she met his eyes. "Thank you," she whispered emphatically.

Liz observed the tension in Red's shoulders bleed slowly from him, a small smile ghosting at the right corner of his mouth in response to her heartfelt gratitude.

"I, um.... Well, Sam never went over all the details of gun ownership with me. How do I register this?" She lifted the handgun for emphasis. "I get an open carry...right?" she asked uncertainty.

"You do not," came the instant reply, his tone quite stern indeed. "Besides the fact you are most certainly not allowed to have weapons on campus," he pointedly reminded her, "I don't want anyone to be aware that you're armed, especially since you are relying on the element of surprise."

Elizabeth frowned at him.

"You're allowed to have an unregistered weapon," Red explained patiently, knowing exactly what she was thinking. "You're just not allowed to carry it."

The line between her thin brows deepened. "But...what if someone finds it on me?"

"You don't need to worry about that," he assured her calmly.

One of those brows arched in dry disbelief. "I don't?"

"No."

A part of her had thought he was joking. But the man's demeanor was serious and unwaveringly composed. He was actually completely unfazed by the possibility that she could very well get caught breaking the law. His confident--almost arrogant--and unperturbed attitude both unnerved and reassured her.

And Liz found herself wondering yet again about Red and just what kind of influential position he
Something in her open expression must have given the conflicted gist of her thoughts away, for he suddenly extended his left hand and gently covered both of hers and the firearm with it.

Elizabeth tilted her head down to watch as his fingers curled around hers, giving them a light squeeze.

"Do you trust me?" he asked in the quiet, gravelly tone she knew so well.

Once again, everything that he had ever done for her throughout her life flashed through her mind. Blurred memories of him playing with her and drying her tears when she’d been a little girl skipped whimsically through her thoughts, followed swiftly by the graver moments of startlingly profound sympathy that they’d unexpectedly shared when she’d been maturing from teenager to young woman.

Then she remembered all of the significant events of the past year, especially those of the most recent months...especially those of the past day. They all were like shining rays of beautiful light bursting behind her eyes, warmly flooding her mind and heart with shimmering gold.

"I trust you," she affirmed, smiling fiercely up into his gaze. "When do we start training?"

"Tomorrow," Red confirmed, his pride in her softly glistening in his eyes. "We'll start tomorrow."
Thank you so much for reading, for your kudos, and for your comments :) (and for your patience in waiting for this chapter!)

An infinite thank you always to my awesome and inspiring betas :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission.
Thank you!
Elizabeth had just finished swiping the finishing touches of black mascara onto her eyelashes when she heard the faint echo of the front door to the penthouse suite opening from all the way down the hall.

An excited grin spread across her lips as she whirled around and all but skipped through the master bedroom and down the corridor to meet Red in the grand foyer.

Hearing her jubilant approach, the man turned around to greet her--and she happily observed his eyes widen in joyful surprise right as she twined her slim arms tightly around his neck. Before he could utter a single word, she caught his lips in a thorough kiss.

It took mere seconds for his mouth to hungrily open for hers, his hands trailing smoothly up her sides to clasp her right beneath her breasts so he could hold her firmly against his hard body.

"Happy Friday," she beamed at him once she pulled back to look into his eyes.

"It is now," he grinned affectionately back at her, his ardent and appreciative gaze sweeping down her lithe figure. "You look positively radiant, Elizabeth."

Glowing with pleasure at the compliment, she released him and took a small step backwards so he could get a better view. "It's new. I thought you'd like it," she smiled as his large palms slipped down her sides to gently hold her tiny waist.

"What's not to like?" he rumbled playfully, thumbs stroking the satin material of her dress as he continued to take in the sensual sight before him.

She had done up her face in heavier makeup than usual. It was most definitely a bold look for her, and a little startling for him...but in an exciting way. Not only had she lengthened her already-long lashes with mascara, she had also smudged eyeliner in-between them all the way around her eyes. Shades of smokey charcoal and warm bronze were painted over her lids and buffed into the creases, making her beautiful eyes seem even bigger, even bluer.

A lovely little cocktail frock hugged her figure with a close intimacy he almost envied. His fingers tightened around her in response to that thought as he gazed hungrily at her. It had a sweetheart neckline and ruching detail all along the clinging bodice and wide, delicate halter straps, drawing his admiration to her slender torso and the gentle swell of her milky white bosom. The dress's deep cranberry hue complemented her winter coloring beautifully, and the cut of the expensive fabric that swirled and flared out around her knees flattered her lissome body perfectly.

Really, the woman could wear a damned potato sack and no makeup whatsoever and she'd still look resplendent. She had a natural, shining loveliness that would continue to blossom as she kept maturing, and it would undoubtedly make her the envy of most women she'd come into contact with out in the world.

In Lizzy's particular case, makeup and any clothing she wore only served to accentuate her beauty. It didn't matter what it was.

But....there was just something about his girl sheathed in a dress--any kind of dress--that made his
mouth go especially dry and eyes darken with heady desire.

And by the way she slanted a mischievous glance up at him from beneath her inky lashes, she knew it, too.

The coy, little minx.

Reaching up with one hand, Red brushed the backs of his fingers along the wavy, loose flow of her dark hair, admiring the way the burgundy lowlights caught the light as he tucked the heavy fall of it behind her bare shoulders. "How did you know I was taking you out tonight?" he asked curiously.

She shot him a puzzled glance. "What?"

"I made dinner reservations at Maximilien," he explained, the look of confusion on his face mirroring hers almost exactly.

"You did?" she asked excitedly, both elation and humor suddenly lighting her sapphire eyes. "How funny! I was actually planning on taking you out tonight. That's why I got dressed up!"

Admittedly surprised, Red felt a wide smile of delight curve his mouth. "You were?"

Honestly, he was quite touched by all her efforts and the sincere enthusiasm behind her animated pronouncement.

Many, if not most, of the women of his past acquaintance had expected him to be the one to entertain them. To wine and dine them. To flatter and excite them. It had been his responsibility to not only make sure they had a grand time, but that he chose just the right restaurant or club to be the perfect setting for their recreational enjoyment.

And while Red was old-fashioned in the sense that he truly had taken great pleasure in accepting creative responsibility for his numerous dates, sometimes a part of him had longed for the tables to be turned at least once in a while.

It had been foolish to even hope for that, of course. In the last decade and a half or so, he had only ever been involved with women who had important ties and significant connections to the dangerous and affluent sphere he frequently traversed. So naturally it would follow that since those evenings out were mostly related to business, not necessarily his own personal pleasure, he'd taken the metaphorical reins and had suavely lead them all.

Elizabeth was the first woman in...Jesus, he didn't even know how many years, to offer to take him out for a diverting night on the town. It was yet more proof that despite her youth, she was more than capable of putting him before herself....and that she actually wanted to spend time with him in her sphere because she genuinely enjoyed his company.

And he found that he liked intimately knowing all of this very much indeed.

His eyes softened considerably as he watched her nod enthusiastically at him.

"It's been a long week--we deserve to have some fun!" Elizabeth declared. "Besides, we haven't been out since you got back from your trip across the pond last Friday."

When Elizabeth hadn't been at the university or working out with Baz, she had been spending her nights in Red's suite with him, using the spare key he'd had made for her months ago to let herself in and out. Bronn was here too, of course, and had made himself right at home out on the sprawling veranda like he had while Lizzy had been recovering from the assault.
For half the evening every night, she would spread all her textbooks out in front of her on the dining room table and immerse herself conscientiously in her studies. Sometimes Red would get home early enough to eat dinner with her, and at other times he would get home later than usual...but she always had a meal set aside for him.

And it was always from the grand hotel's room service, of course--by his permission. The woman still stubbornly avoided cooking at all costs. Red knew he'd have to help her at some point soon with that. She couldn't survive all the rest of the long years ahead of her just by eating out. And it would be a fucking crime against her life if he allowed her to keep throwing bags of frozen food into the oven--or microwave--and call the slop that came out twenty minutes later actual meals.

But until he found the time to give her cooking lessons, room service was just fine. And he thoroughly enjoyed coming home to a suite that wasn't dark with daily disuse anymore, but one that was welcoming, where literally all the warm lights were flicked on, where the aromas of fine cuisine lingered in the air.

What he loved most about both those simple yet meaningful details was that they signified Elizabeth was here.

It almost felt as if she had never moved into her own place because she had fallen very easily back into the old habits she'd cultivated when she'd been living with him after the assault--except that now she was back in school, had rediscovered her inner strength and confidence....and was unabashedly exploring her uninhibited desire for him.

Over the course of the entire week, when the hour turned very late each and every night, she would turn to him with an almost feverish passion shining in her eyes.

Of course Red never hesitated to indulge it, for he had missed her as much as she had missed him.

Though, admittedly, sometimes he had been the one to initiate sex first. It had just depended upon which of them had been more patient that night...or rather, impatient.

"I suppose we have kept ourselves holed up in here, haven't we?" Red grinned, quirking an eyebrow knowingly at her.

In response to that, she slanted a flirtatious look back at him. "And while I really enjoy our...nightly activities--"

He chuckled warmly at her phrasing.

"--I was thinking it would be really fun to go out drinking and dancing!"

"On an empty stomach?" he teased gently.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at him. "The club I was thinking of taking you to has food...."

"Olives in martinis don't count, sweetheart."

His wry humor and accompanying, wide grin instantly earned him a fierce scowl of mock-irritation from her.

"It has bar food, Red!"

Chortling quietly at her affronted pique, he rewrapped both his arms loosely around her and gave her a light squeeze.
“Let me take you to dinner at Maximilien. I know how much you've been wanting to go there,” he coaxed seriously, lips brushing against the shell of her ear right before he placed a kiss to her temple. “Then we will go out to your club.”

Elizabeth abandoned playing annoyed and instead dimpled happily when he pulled back to look at her. “That sounds really great, Red.” Then she pursed her lips thoughtfully, cocking her head quizzically up at him. "But, um...are you sure you want to do both?"

"Why not?"

She shrugged a defensive shoulder in response to the obvious amusement in his voice and eyes. "Wouldn't that be...like...too much?"

"Are you implying that due to my age, I cannot keep up with you?" Red demanded as he arched a jauntily indignant brow at her.

Elizabeth had the grace to blush a deep scarlet as he shook his head in dramatic, woeful disappointment while clucking his tongue admonishingly at her.

Her lips parted to splutter either an apology or something in defense of herself, but Red swiftly and firmly planted a finger over them.

"Make no mistake, honey,” he purred suggestively before she could verbally backpedal, cupping a very warm cheek in his palm, "I may not be in my twenties, but I most certainly can keep pace with you. And I will."

Liz had been dying to eat at Maximilien for as long as she'd been living in Washington.

When she had first come to Seattle to attend the university three years ago, anyone of her acquaintance who had spoken of the fine French restaurant had whispered about it in longingly wistful tones.

There was an extensive waitlist one had to be on to even secure a reservation. If a person managed to snag one of the few elusive time slots, actually push apart the old building’s heavy glass doors to set foot across the threshold...and then finally sit down to enjoy a world-class meal that was just as much art as it was food, it was extremely difficult to choose just one entrée to order from the menu because all the delectable delicacies were "to die for."

The ambience of the famed establishment itself was rumored to not only be authentically charming, seemingly transporting lucky patrons to an actual restaurant located in the shining heart of Paris, but it was said to be beautifully romantic as well, what with its dusky lighting, its spectacular panoramic views overlooking the ocean, and its intimate, candlelit tables for two.

Liz had then been gravely informed that it was definitely one of those places where one never dared to dine alone.

Now that she was actually here, standing inside this exclusive restaurant on the arm of her man, she knew firsthand that all speculative talk she had heard in her circles about it was undeniably true.

Even after only being under its roof for less than five minutes, Elizabeth knew enough about eateries catered specifically to the wealthy (thanks to Red's influence) to graciously concede that Maximilien absolutely deserved the reputation for being one of the finest French cuisine restaurants in all of Seattle.
So it really did not come as much of a shock to her that Red had already known of its existence--and apparently for years, too, for he was on a comfortable first name basis with the man who owned it.

"Ah, Vincent, mon ami!" Red smiled jovially as the owner of Maximilien approached them with his burly arms outstretched to grasp Red in a strong hug.

Liz swiftly stepped to the side and out of the way right before Red was enthusiastically engulfed in the Frenchman's friendly embrace.

"Cole Davies! It has been too long, mon ami, much too long!" Vincent Beaumont replied with a heavily-accented, booming voice that seemed to set the very wine glasses hanging along the back wall of the lounge to trembling and clinking cheerfully against one another.

*Cole Davies?*

Elizabeth glanced sharply at Red.

Apparently he had decided to "go incognito" again tonight.

She watched as the two men ritualistically slapped one another twice on the back, speaking swift and fluid words in French before parting. Then Red politely gestured her forward to stand directly beside him, pressing a reassuring hand to the small of her back as he introduced her to Vincent.

The Frenchman gently took her hand in his and ran his lips lightly over her smooth knuckles, warm brown eyes twinkling merrily as he glanced knowingly from her to Red.

Vincent then murmured something silkily in his native language to him.

Smiling, Red smoothly responded without missing a beat, the French words rolling gracefully off of his tongue as his gaze flickered from Vincent to Elizabeth.

As the Frenchman hummed appreciatively in response to whatever Red had said, the expression in Red's green eyes as they held hers was quite intimate, and she suddenly felt her toes curling in on themselves within the strappy heels she wore.

God, it was the same look he sometimes gave her when they were in bed together!

"Enchanted, Miss Scott," the big man rumbled with a cordial smile, bringing her attention back to him. "Welcome to Maximilien! I was just telling Cole here that I will be taking care of you both personally tonight. If there is anything you need, you will let me know immediately, yes?"

Blushing, Liz barely managed to stammer out her yes's and thank you's before the big man whirled amiably away to guide her and Red to their private table set along the dining room's back wall, which was actually one gigantic window. The thick glass rose from floor to ceiling all around the restaurant, showcasing the famous Pike Place Market and the rippling gray-blue water of the Pacific Ocean that stretched out as far as the eye could see in both directions.

"You never told me you could speak French!" the woman exclaimed quietly once they were both seated and alone.

Red's eyes gleamed mischievously in the flickering candlelight as they rose to meet hers over the rim of his water glass.

"You never asked," came the blithe reply before he took a drink.
Wrinkling her nose at him, she lifted her own glass and took a sip of the cool refreshment.

"What did he say to you?" she asked curiously after swallowing.

Red raised a brow, purposefully pretending to misunderstand her. "You heard what he said, Lizzy."

"Oh no you don't!" she muttered fiercely, wagging a chiding finger at him. "You know what I mean. When he kissed my hand, he said something to you in French."

"Did he?"

"Red!" Liz snarled in aggrieved frustration at his less-than-forthcoming attitude.

Completely unruffled by her fiery irritation, the man chuckled and leaned comfortably back in his chair.

"If it's about me, I have a right to know!"

"It was a compliment about you," he confirmed, eyes glittering with amusement. "But it was meant for a man's ears, sweetheart."

Her jaw dropped slightly. "Are you saying you were talking...dirty?"

"Not I."

"That he was, then?" she ground out her clarification.

The man held up a placating hand. "You know I wouldn't stand for anyone insulting you, Elizabeth," he soothed, expression much more serious than it had been a moment ago.

"I can handle hearing raunchy compliments," Liz grumbled resentfully. "You wouldn't believe what I overheard in high school. Not always directed at me, by the way. Just guys talking about girls in general. And I still overhear stuff even on campus! In bars, in clubs...." She narrowed her eyes at him, lifting a defiant chin. "I can handle it. I'm certainly old enough!"

"Your youth has nothing to do with me not telling you, honey."

Her nostrils flared stubbornly. "I don't like it when people talk about me behind my back."

"Even if they're paying you compliments?" he asked gently.

Liz frowned at him, swiftly changing tactics. "Did you promise him that you wouldn't tell me?"

"No...."

Her eyes sparkled as a triumphant smile spread across her lips. "So...?" she prodded with impish impatience.

Red sighed, shaking his head in amused exasperation. "If I tell you, you have to promise not to hold it against him," he warned her. "Vincent and I go back many years. There is mutual respect between us, and since you are with me, that same respect extends to you. He doesn't mean any harm by what he says, Lizzy."

"Okay...."

He leaned forward then, casually resting his forearms on the edge of the table.
She copied his movements, meeting his eyes expectantly.

"He said," Red began in a low, almost drawling tone, "that he is jealous of me. He said that I am extremely lucky to have a beautiful young woman such as yourself warming my bed at night."

Heat immediately suffused her cheeks.

"But you don't just 'warm my bed,' sweetheart." His eyes glinted at her. "You set fire to it."

The bright color in her face flared hotter. "You said that?"

The man smiled.

Liz blindly reached for her water glass once again and took a couple steadying sips to give herself some time to primly regather her composure.

It was one thing to sometimes playfully mention her sex life to Katie. Or to even have Baz tease her about it. But to know without a doubt that Red and his...friends...were making similar, suggestive remarks about it to each other as well....

God.

What did it say about her character that a part of her actually liked knowing that the men were doing that?

Elizabeth swiftly took another drink of her ice-cold water, trying to ignore Red's all too-knowing and amused stare.

"How many other languages do you speak...Cole?" she abruptly changed the subject to something much less embarrassing, her tone caught between honest curiosity and dry cheekiness at the pointed use of his current alias.

The man's gaze never left her face as he slowly lounged back in his chair again, his expression now a rather curious mixture of delight and thoughtfulness. "Six. Possibly seven?" Then he waved a dismissive hand. "Naturally I'm much more fluent in some than others."

Her eyes held his, expression intently searching. "And are you answering as yourself, or as Cole?"

"Both," he replied as a slow smile curved his lips.

Elizabeth gave an exasperated huff at his coy ambiguity. "Why are you using a different name tonight, Red? Surely it's not because you don't want your...business associates...to be able to find you again?" She shook her head in disbelief. "It's Friday night! Who the heck works this late on a Friday, anyway?"

"Haven't you ever wanted to be someone else for a day, Lizzy?" he softly countered her question with one of his own. "Someone who has your same looks and mannerisms, and yet who is freed from the burdens and worries that can sometimes weigh heavily on your mind? Your heart?"

She regarded him silently for a moment before reluctantly hedging, "I think everyone has...."

"Ah, but I'm not asking about 'everyone.' I'm asking you," he calmly returned with a small smile.

He had been successful in diverting her train of thought, for her sapphire eyes flicked away from his to look pensively down at the fork she was now absentely twirling on the table between her two fingers.
"I remember there was a period of time when I was really little," she began after a moment of reflection, "when I would pretend that I was a princess and that my mother was the queen of all prima ballerinas."

A faint smile touched her lips as she finally confided this almost painful truth she had long kept secret from everyone...even her beloved Sam.

"I guess it was my way of coping with her death--pretending she was alive. I know it doesn't make much sense...."

Red reached out then and gently touched her fingers that held the fork with two of his own in empathetic tenderness.

She gazed down at his hand, aware and appreciative of his caress, but her eyes had a faraway look to them. "I imagined that she was just so beautiful and so talented that she was always called away to dance before other queens and their kings all over the world. Since she was constantly traveling far and wide, she had no choice but to leave me with Sam until she could finally come home to stay."

Elizabeth shook her head ruefully at herself. "I imagined that she would show up one night by the light of the full moon and gather me into her arms and then sweep me away in a burst of pearly light...." Her voice trailed off and she hitched a narrow shoulder self-consciously before finally glancing up at him.

The piercing compassion gleaming in his sympathetic eyes made her throat constrict unexpectedly.

"Do you have any memories of her?" Red asked quietly.

To hide her sudden and gaping vulnerability, Elizabeth quickly looked away and savored a couple swallows of water. Once she was certain she could trust her voice not to waver, she shook her head slowly while replying, "Nothing concrete."

Since her eyes were lowered, she didn't see Red exhale an almost imperceptible breath of relief.

"But...." she continued after a brief pause, "sometimes, when I think back hard enough, I can sort of recall a scent. Maybe it was a perfume she used to wear. Something like...chestnuts, I think. And sugar. Cloves."

Then Liz laughed softly, flushing. "I honestly don't know why I thought she was a queen of *prima ballerinas*, of all things. Maybe it was because whenever I saw pictures of all those graceful dancers, I noticed how they were always dressed in glittering outfits. I guess I just assumed they were royalty...."

Carefully she pressed her entire hand down on the pristine tablecloth beside the fork to try and hide the fact that it was trembling slightly. "Obviously I had a fanciful imagination."

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," he assured her in a murmur.

She gave a breathy snort as she reached up and ran diffident fingers through her wavy hair, idly twirling the feathery ends as her mind continued to wander down paths she hadn't traversed in a long while.

"When I was older, in grade school, but before you gave me Bronn and Sam gave me Conny.... I still pretended I was a princess. But instead of just waiting around for things to happen to me, I began to command my territory."
The bitter pangs of old disappointments and sorrows faded as she began to remember those innocent, happier times. "I gossiped with rabbits, leaped with frogs, sang with birds, and chased fireflies in my forest of windflowers."

"And you escaped all the worries a youngster has at that age by becoming that willful, wildling princess."

As she shyly lifted her eyes to his once again, the smile he bestowed on her was one full of tenderness.

"Didn't you?"

"Every time," she confirmed softly.

Red leaned forward then, closing the distance between them a little more. "And who do you want to be tonight?" he questioned in a low voice.

Liz blinked at him, somewhat taken aback. "Tonight?"

"Mmm. If I am Cole Davies, you get to be someone else, too."

Her voice shook with demurely nervous laughter. "I don't know, Red...."

"Cole," he chided gently. "Please, Elizabeth. Indulge me in this...game."

"Why?" she blushed.

"Why not?" he countered with a coaxing smile.

She bit her lower lip, rather curious to see how it would be to play along, despite her uncertainty. "You won't...laugh at me, right?"

Red slowly shook his head, expression full of affection. "Who are you, sweetheart?"

"I can be anyone?"

"Anyone," he affirmed warmly.

Elizabeth pressed her lips together thoughtfully as she briefly considered the endless options laid out before her.

It was all suddenly rather overwhelming. Who on Earth should she be? Could she be?

The funny part of this whole thing was that if she were ten years younger, she would have absolutely jumped at the chance to play with Red in this way.

But the fact of the matter was, she wasn't eleven years old. This entire idea of becoming someone else was now completely alien to her!

She was an adult, for God's sake.

But Red does it, remember? a part of herself reminded. And he's an adult too. Older than you!

And she had slipped into all kinds of various roles as a child as easily as she now breathed. Perhaps if she grasped onto those memories that still floated around deep down within her, she could successfully take part in this game Red seemed so intent on pursuing....
Gathering her courage, Liz tentatively held out her hand to him. "Cole Davies, was it?" she asked, affecting a more formal tone of voice as she clumsily tried to slip into a new role. "My name is---"

"Shit, what's my name?" --Meghan Powell."

"Meghan Powell... That's a lovely name," Red smiled, meeting her eyes as he lightly clasped her hand in his. "It's very nice to meet you."

He had a good handshake, she decided. And if she really were meeting him for the first time, she certainly wouldn't be intimidated because his grip was politely gentle, yet firm enough to leave the favorable impression that he was genuinely paying attention to her.

"And what is it that you do here in Seattle?" he inquired amiably.

Embarrassment overwhelmed her then because he was speaking to her as if he hadn't known her for seventeen years--most of her entire life!

It was weird. Surreal!

A bashful giggle burst from her and she quickly shook her head, snatching her fingers out of his grasp. "This is really silly, Red!"

"Cole," he corrected patiently, eyes glinting with fond amusement. "Humor me, darling. Let's see how far we can take this, hmm?"

Once again, Liz ran shy fingers uncertainly through her hair as the notion of how hilariously absurd the whole concept of role playing really was flitted through her mind. But as he quirked a brow at her as if to prod, Well?...she felt the hesitant tendrils of her own stubborn pride begin to suffuse her, and she suddenly found herself eagerly rising to meet his challenge.

"I'm an artist," she answered his previous question. "No. Wait. I'm a photographer, which I guess is a type of artist...." She knew she was babbling, but as she spoke, her new persona began to take a more solid shape in her mind.

"A photographer? Sounds delightful!" His gravelly voice was encouraging and she took heart in that. "I've always admired those who have a gift for photography. What is your subject matter, Meghan?"

"People," she replied promptly. "Architecture. Nature. Anything, really." Her enthusiasm in playing this new character began to build and overtake her feelings of shyness as she continued, "What I really try to photograph is beauty. I look for it in something new every day...and then I try to capture it as best as I can."

"Would I have seen any of your work?"

Liz thought that over for a brief moment before shaking her head. "I'm still at the university, studying and learning....trying to find my breakthrough." She flicked a modest hand. "You know."

"And once you do, I'll see your photographs in galleries here around the city?"

"That's the plan!" Liz replied with a bright smile, eyes sparkling as she finally dared to look up into his face again.

She was shocked to stillness to find a completely different man sitting across from her.

He was Red. Of course he was Red. She knew he was Red. And yet....he wasn't. Perhaps it was his posture, the way he was watching her...perhaps it was something in his smile....but it was as if she
were now conversing with a stranger.

Sure, that was the point of this game they were playing, but still....

As if sensing her unease, Red's expression gentled very slightly, and suddenly a glimpse of the man she knew through and through was visible.

Elizabeth felt the tension in her shoulders begin to loosen as she observed the familiarity of that intimate glint in his eyes, that faint twitch of his lips...and she slowly returned his smile.

"How do you think you'll get your breakthrough?" he asked curiously.

"Um...well...." She racked her mind for an interesting answer. "I think if I were to travel to other countries...places like Nepal, or India...places where I can immerse myself in different, really vibrant cultures and see beauty from their perspective...." She shrugged a hesitant shoulder. "Then maybe everything will come together for me."

Red was smiling. "I've been to India."

"You have?" Her genuine curiosity was instantly piqued, her embarrassment momentarily forgotten as she leaned forward eagerly. "What's it like?"

"Words almost can't describe it...but I'll do my best." The man rubbed his chin contemplatively. "The entire land is teeming with all kinds of diverse peoples and strangely wonderful animals, both domesticated and savagely wild." He met her eyes. "Have you ever seen a Bengal tiger, Meghan?"

She shook her head.

"While I was there, I did. And she was probably one of the most beautiful...and most terrifying...sights I've ever laid eyes on. And I have seen many exquisite and horrifying things in my life, Meghan."

The man shook his head at the memory. "Luckily she had just fed, and I only knew that because of the bright red blood staining the entire area around her jaws. It was because she was sated that my group and I were able to warily pass her by without having to use the weapons we brought with us."

Elizabeth stared at him in silent amazement.

"When you walk the streets of cities like Mumbai or Jaipur, there is a spiritual energy that resonates all around you. You cannot help but allow it to permeate you. It makes your lifeblood rush with joyful intensity through your veins. It stimulates your mind. Your heart. And, I swear to God, Meghan, that energy is almost palpable. You can reach out with both hands and nearly grasp the vibrations with your fingers."

Her wide eyes were completely focused on him as she avidly basked in his vivid descriptions.

"All your senses have this unusual ability of coming alive in India in ways you'll never experience anywhere else," Red explained quietly as he lost himself in his memories. "The jeweled vibrancy of colors is multiplied tenfold. And not only do you see colors amplified, you can actually smell them. Even taste them. The very air you breathe shimmers with each and every single hue found in the rainbow."

Her lips parted in wonder.

"When a rare breeze flows past you, and you turn your face into it and inhale deeply, it is warm and
heavily laden with the scents of the jungle, the aromas of exotic spices, and the intriguing fragrances of sandalwood, of citrus and mangoes...and the sweet perfumes of tuberoses and jasmine."

The man gave her an intimate smile. "It is an incredibly sensual feeling...having your all senses heightened like that. Yet sex is the furthest thing from your mind because you are completely inundated with this magnificently raw and pure feeling of...awe."

Liz was so swept up in his alluring and enticing words that it took a moment for her to realize that he had stopped speaking. She blinked once, slowly, as she came back to herself. Then she closed her mouth before swallowing thickly.

"W-what did you say you did for a living, Cole?" she asked faintly.

Red hid an amused grin behind his water glass before taking a long swig to wet his dry throat, quite enjoying the fact that she had managed to stay in character despite her obviously distracted state.

"I believe I haven't told you that yet."

"You could be a poet with the way you spin words like you do," she flirted impishly.

That roused a genuine chuckle from him. "You flatter me, Meghan, but I'm afraid I wouldn't be able to support myself the way I need to if I attempted to change careers now."

And so the foundation for their personas was laid and they continued to role play, she with predictable hesitancy and yet also with a keen willingness, and he with cheerful and spirited ease. Over the course of their entire, delicious meal, Elizabeth learned that both Cole and Red shared a very similar histories and career paths.

They both had been in the Navy for a few years before deciding to leave on their own terms. Both were widowers. Both ran businesses that required near-constant international travel. Both admitted that their businesses yielded an abundance of profits that allowed them to live very comfortably indeed...to the point of extravagance if they so chose to flaunt it. Cole confided that he had used a portion of his wealth over the years to purchase a couple vacation homes, one on the east coast in the pristine, well-manicured Hamptons, and one on the west coast in California's luxuriant Pacific Palisades.

Soon, it was extremely difficult for Liz to separate which anecdotes were Red's fantastical embellishments and which were the true facts about his actual life. The shrouded ambiguity of it all began to frustrate her, which Red immediately sensed as she began to rephrase her questions to try to catch him up in a slip of the tongue.

"You're trying to cheat, Meghan," he admonished softly.

Flushing, she broke character and gave him a beseeching look. "You'll tell me what's real and what's not later tonight, won't you, Red?"

"Cole," he reproached gently.

"Cole," she repeated dutifully, making a face at him.

"Everything I'm telling you is real in a way, honey. Just like everything you're revealing to me as Meghan has elements of truth."

Her expression grew thoughtful as she studied him.
He was right. She hadn't fully realized it until just now that, apparently like him, she also had been mixing truth and fiction until it was difficult to separate one from the other...especially since the fictional parts of her tale happened to come from moments of her life that she had twisted just enough to fit her current role as Meghan Powell.

While both Liz and Meghan had been adopted by Sam when they'd been four years old, Meghan had been not been an orphan. Her parents were still alive out there in the wide world somewhere, and she hoped to meet them one day. Both young women had grown up in the Nebraskan countryside riding horses and learning how to take care of the land. Both young women had admitted to their yearning for adventure beyond their small hometowns and had decided to try living in the big city, which was why they were both attending the University of Washington. Meghan desperately longed to travel outside the States and really experience the wonders of the world for herself, which she willingly admitted to Cole more than once.

As Liz contemplated how she had created her alias, she also realized that she'd been inflating aspects of her own personality that were indeed very real, just now uninhibited because right now she was Meghan Powell, not Elizabeth Scott.

Meghan was more confident at twenty-one years old than Liz was, for she already had her dreams and life goals figured out. Her blazing self-assurance made her much more open and outgoing than cautious and reserved Liz.

It was utterly fascinating how weaving absolute truths and versions of the truth made it that much easier to slip into her persona.

Certainly it must be the same for Red!

By the time they had finished their extravagant dinner and were walking out beneath the glimmering stars arm in arm to Red's town car, Elizabeth was well and truly immersed in her new role as Meghan. And she had to admit that Red was right: now that she was really into it, playacting in this way was so...freeing.

She had cut herself loose--and she was soaring.

"And where exactly are you taking me tonight, Meggie?" Red asked--as Cole--once he had finished settling himself onto the black leather seat beside her, raising an arm to rest comfortably along the cushioned back directly behind her shoulders.

Meggie.

Immediately slipping back into her persona, her eyes flickered to his and she dimpled somewhat shyly at him.

Red had found a way to call her by a nickname even while they role played. She knew it was his way of showing her affection.

And she loved it.

"Trinity Nightclub," Liz declared, making her voice loud enough so George would be able to hear as well before he rolled the partition up to give she and Red privacy. "It's on Yesler Way and Occidental," she added for their chauffeur's benefit.

"I've never been there before," Red remarked as George activated the partition and then began driving.
"It's not your typical, run-of-the-mill nightclub," she attempted to reassure any misgivings he might be secretly harboring. While she certainly wasn't taking him to a seedy part of town, they definitely weren't going to an upscale destination like the one they just left, either! "It does have some class...."

He chuckled at that. "I know you have standards, sweetheart. So I certainly wouldn't expect you to take me to a place that didn't meet them!"

Liz threw a pleased smile his way before saying, "There's sushi...not that we'll be eating any of that!" She was quite full from dinner and no doubt he was too. "There's a bar with a wide array of drinks available for all kinds of budgets." They'd had a little wine at dinner, but it was almost a certainty that they'd be indulging in some of the vintages Trinity had to offer. "And there's dancing, of course." She slanted him an inquisitive look. "Do you like to dance...Cole?" She knew without a doubt that Red did, but did his current persona?

"If I'm with the right woman, I thoroughly enjoy the activity," he replied slowly, his suggestive tone flowing over her like warm honey as he caught and held her eyes.

A blush crept up her neck to blossom in her cheeks as his piercingly intense gaze searched hers...as he lifted his hand from the back of the seat so he could brush his thumb against the high arch of her cheekbone and trace it down to the delicate line of her jaw.

"Are you implying that I could be the right woman?" she heard herself impishly asking Red's persona.

"I'm heading to a nightclub with you right now, aren't I?"

"Yeah, but I didn't really give you a choice, Cole. This is basically me kidnapping you."

"In my own town car?" he asked with playful incredulity.

Elizabeth giggled. "You got me there...."

"Meggie, if I were averse to this late night plan you've concocted for us, I would've found a way to back out long before now."

"So you really want to dance with me?"

A desirous smile curved his lips as he began to loosen his tie to take it off. "I'm very much looking forward to it."

Strobe lights split the heavy darkness of the close, smoky room like silver lightning streaking across a stormy sky. The thrumming bass of the electronica song just beginning immediately captivated all of Elizabeth's heightened senses and her body began to sensually gyrate to its new, enthralling beat. She felt Red's large hands tighten on her narrow hips--a subtle invitation for her to press further back against him if she so desired.

Her white teeth flashed briefly in an almost feral grin as she did so, hungrily relishing the way the muscles in his chest and core rhythmically tensed and released over and over again into her back as he guided their smooth undulating with confidence borne from dancing like this dozens of times before.

Liz's hands slipped down to rest on top of his, fervently pressing, asking him to give her more of himself. In response to her wordless desire, she felt him lower his mouth to the sloping curve between her neck and shoulder. His breath was hot against her bare skin, and the kiss he gave her
there seared its way through her entire body. Her eyes closed of their own volition, breath catching silently in her throat as his palms slid to the tops of her thighs, suggestively stroking her there up and down...up and down.

She could feel the warmth of his fingers through the thin folds of her dress. The way he flexed them, drawing the silken material across her bare flesh before releasing it, only to repeat the motion all over again as they danced was startlingly erotic. The riveting sensation made a vivid fantasy of him pursuing her onto his bed, hands slowly stroking up her thighs to bunch the skirt of her dress at her waist so he could eagerly peel off the wisp of lace she wore beneath, flash through her mind--and she trembled with yearning, wondering what it would be like to be so frenzied with arousal that they wouldn't even bother undressing one another all the way before succumbing to their passions.

Red then nipped gently at the soft flesh of her neck, bringing her back to him, silently asking her permission if he could give her more...if he could take more. As she very willingly turned her head to the side to give him better access, she felt him nudge his pelvis provocatively against her ass. Then almost immediately a strong arm wrapped itself across her front and around her small waist, pulling her flush against him as he began kissing the sensitive place right below her earlobe in the way he knew she loved.

If Elizabeth had been completely herself tonight, she probably wouldn't have breathed an aroused growl at him, and she most likely wouldn't have grabbed his arm with both hands like she suddenly did, fingers digging longingly into his taut flesh as she purposefully rolled her ass into his hard erection again and again.

But she wasn't just herself tonight. She was Meghan, too. And Meghan had no qualms whatsoever about showing an entire roomful of drinking and dancing strangers just how much she was turned on and thoroughly enjoying grinding with this man named Cole.

Red loosed a quiet snarl in her ear and a tremor of anticipation ran sharply down her spine, for that primal sound reminded her of the way he could get when he deftly tumbled her between the sheets of his bed.

"With the way you're teasing me like that, Meggie, I'll be loathe to go home alone tonight."

"Is that your not-so-subtle way of inviting me to come back to your place when we're done here, Cole?" she asked with a grin, eyes slitting open so she could glance back at him.

"Would you like to hear the more direct phrasing?"

At his challenge, Liz would have immediately and shyly shaken her head while swiftly attempting to change the subject so she could once again possess the upper hand of the conversation.

But Meghan was bolder than Liz.

"Go on," she invited in a throaty purr that made Red's eyes widen slightly in delighted surprise. "Shock me."

A streak of strobe light briefly flashed over them, lighting his face and revealing the intense heat in his green eyes as they caught and held hers even as their bodies continued to surge together as one to the steady beat of the music.

"I want to take you back to my place tonight," he rumbled, squeezing her tightly against him. "I want to bend you over my bed, part your thighs, and bury myself deep inside of you." He bowed his head closer to hers until the tips of their noses TOUCHED. "I want to make you tremble and ache with
pleasure." Then his gravelly voice lowered considerably, gaze very intimate indeed. "I want to make you scream my name."

Completely stunned speechless, Liz's mouth fell open and she couldn't keep the scarlet color from hotly flooding her cheeks even as her thrilled heart gave an excited thump.

She might be playing Meghan and he might be playing Cole, but she was still Elizabeth, and for her to actually hear those downright graphic words coming out of Red's mouth was totally unnerving—and yet, at the same time...if she were honest with herself...it was also startlingly titillating.

Upon seeing her shocked and frankly conflicted expression, Red took immediate pity on her. His eyes glimmered with amused affection as he released one of her hips and brushed the knuckle of his index finger just beneath her hanging chin, applying gentle pressure, teasingly helping her close her own mouth.

That instantly earned him a fiery scowl from her and he chuckled warmly, admittedly relieved to see some of Elizabeth's familiar self come back into her beautiful eyes.

"Thirsty, darling girl?" he asked in a solicitous murmur just as the song came to an end.

Well, wasn't that fortuitous timing!

"Actually...yes," Liz replied, licking her dry lips in anticipation as she slowly straightened. "I really am. Are you, Cole?"

Red's eyebrow twitched slightly and a slow grin curved his mouth.

So, she still wanted to play.

He had honestly thought their game had come to an abrupt end after he'd risen to her sultry challenge. And if she had called a stop to it like he had thought she would have, then it would have been more than fine with him. The man was actually impressed that she had role played for as long as she had!

But it seemed as though Elizabeth wasn't too keen on giving up the freedom being Meghan Powell brought her. Not that Red could really blame her for that. His girl had needed this kind of uninhibited liberation tonight...just like he had.

So he was quite pleased indeed that she wanted to keep playing the part of Meggie for the time being...because he wanted to keep himself shrouded in the persona of Cole for as long as he could.

"I am," he admitted. "Come on.... Let's find the bar."

Red placed a considerate palm against the small of Elizabeth's back and guided her toward the lounge area located at the other end of the expansive club. His touch accomplished a couple things: one, with him keeping a hand on her body like this, she remained close to him so they wouldn't get accidentally separated by all couples and large groups of people dancing enthusiastically around them, and, two, it was a subtle warning directed to other men that declared she was most certainly not available.

The man had already noticed a few interested males sniffing after her earlier tonight. Elizabeth had been completely oblivious to their curiously intent stares, and he desired for her to remain that way. The very last thing he wanted her to worry about tonight was unwanted, masculine attention that would make her nervous and self-conscious. So one, ruthlessly fierce glare from him had sent them all to slinking back into the shadows...gone, but not completely out of the picture.
Those who hadn't found a woman by now were probably still out there somewhere along the sidelines. Watching. Perhaps waiting.

As a man himself, Red understood their position. It probably wasn't often a woman like Elizabeth came into a club like this--she was younger, to be sure, but she was an intriguing catch--and while they didn't know why exactly, they instinctively were aware that there was just something about Elizabeth Scott.

He had been in their shoes before...when he'd been much younger himself and desperately searching for a woman who wasn't like all the rest to satisfy his deep craving for something more.

Of course, he and Aisling hadn't been together at the time. He'd been a foolish and stupidly arrogant idiot who had hurled some extremely hurtful words at her one too many times. Aisling, the classy and intelligent woman she had been, had finally drawn the line and had refused to stand for any more his shit, so they'd been on a break until he could figure himself out.

Red had frequented environments similar to this one, looking for what he had already found in Aisling. It had taken him a while, but he had eventually figured that out and had gone back to her, sincerely contrite and highly appreciative of all she wanted to give him and all that she was.

He'd been extremely lucky that she had wanted to take him back...but she had loved him deeply, like he had loved her.

So, yes, Red understood what some of those men were probably searching for. He could even empathize to a degree.

But Elizabeth wasn't for them.

When they finally arrived at the bar, it was extremely crowded...so much so that to even land a couple drinks, Red would have to either shove his way through the middle of the raucous pack separating him from the bar's counter, or he would have to stalk all the way around to the other side near the building's wall and pinch a bottle of whatever he could easily grab.

A rueful grimace flickered across his lips and he sighed, none too pleased with either choice available to him. But to get the martini he knew she wanted, he didn't have any other options. And since he wasn't one to steal from innocent businesses unless he absolutely had to....

He glanced at Lizzy, admittedly loathe to leave her alone here out in the open, especially after having to wordlessly intimidate a few other men away from her. But he wasn't going to make her fight her way through that horde just for drinks.

And besides, if any prick had the gall to treat her inappropriately while he was gone, they had another fucking thing coming their way. Baz was currently out there prowling this club and had been surreptitiously watching over them all night.

If a situation got bad, he'd immediately jump in if Red wasn't already there.

It made the man feel a little better to know that Baz was watching their backs, but it was still with reluctance that he released her.

"I'm going in," Red dryly nodded with dramatic gravity to the flood of people before them.

"Call me when you get there so I know you made it okay," Liz joked back with a playful smirk.

He laughed merrily at that before turning around to determinedly shoulder his way into the fray.
Elizabeth gazed after him as he disappeared into the throng of bodies, knowing it could be a little while before he came back out. She appreciated being left someplace where she could breathe relatively fresher air and actually move her body without careening into someone.

Folding her slim arms under her breasts, she cast a roving glance around at her surroundings, idly wondering if she would see anyone she knew here tonight. So far, all the faces she had glimpsed in the dim lighting were complete strangers.

Suddenly Liz caught a pungent whiff of cheap cologne and then felt a very *male* presence invade her personal space.

"Hey."

Startled, she took a slightly stumbling half-step backwards to put a little more distance between herself the man who had decided to stand so annoyingly close to her.

"Uh--hi," she replied somewhat awkwardly and with more than a little irritation. She inwardly winced at how grating and unpleasant her tone of voice sounded. Obviously it had been a while since she'd been single and completely alone in a nightclub!

"How's it going?" the man, who seemed to be in his mid-twenties, inquired with a smile that seemed to ooze around his mouth.

"Fine." Liz quickly darted an uneasy glance to the spot where Red had disappeared...but he didn't magically reappear like she was desperately hoping he would.

She was on her own.

"Do you live around here?"

_What a seriously creepy thing to ask_, she thought, staring at him in disgust. He was probably trying to quickly figure out if he should take her back to his place or invite himself to hers for his weekly Friday night fuck.

Wrapping her arms even tighter around herself, she felt her tongue grow heavy inside of her mouth as she tried to rack her suddenly overwrought mind for something succinct to say to get rid of him, and quickly.

But her brain seemed to be stalled out. Or made of mush. Or _both_!

God, what in the Hell was _wrong_ with her? It wasn't as if she hadn't encountered douchey guys before!

_But that was before the assault._

A shudder of revulsion ran through her body as that horrifying memory was plucked, then strummed to life.

This was the very first time since the attack that she actually had to deal with unwanted, lustful male attention.

_You were assaulted by a man, yes_, the unconcerned, predatory side of her softly agreed as it roused to wakefulness, stretching languidly. _But was Meghan?_

A small, almost fierce smile twitched at Liz's lips as she defiantly lifted her chin, her tongue _finally_
untying itself.

"Kind of," she shrugged apathetically.

Maybe this guy would take the hint and leave her alone now that she had shown him she wasn't interested by giving him a curt answer.

"What's your name?"

Okay, maybe not.

"Meghan."

As she said the name of her bold and self-assured persona, she felt a little more confidence suffusing her heart, bolstering her.

"Have you been here before?" The man's eyes lasciviously flicked down her body.

He probably thought she wouldn't notice since he had done it so quickly.

But she did.

"I don't think I've ever seen you around."

"You're not very observant then, are you?" she drawled, resisting the urge to fidget uncomfortably. Instead, she bravely gathered her poise and composedly held herself very still.

If it was one thing she knew about desperate and insecure guys, because that's all this prick was, it was that an impassive, self-assured woman eventually ended up putting them ill at ease.

His eyes snapped back up to her face as he gave a bark of harsh laughter. He hadn't been expecting that kind of retort and her quick wit intrigued him.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"No."

The man's gaze narrowed slightly at her immediate rejection but he tried to play it off as if he weren't offended.

"Why not?" he tried for levity...but his smile was much too forced, and therefore it came across as aggressive to Liz.

Stay calm, she cautioned herself. Stay indifferent.

"Because I'm with someone," came her stoic reply.

"Where? I don't see anyone," he leered.

"She means me," came Red's pleasantly upbeat voice from behind her. How the man managed to bare his teeth in a warning smile that was both winning and malicious at the same time was a mystery for the ages. "Here's your drink, baby," he told Elizabeth, handing her the martini.

The younger man stared at Red. He knew just by meeting Red's piercingly green eyes that he couldn't compete with him. But unfortunately he had too much pride to just turn around and slink away in defeat.
Doing his damnedest to ignore the older man's imposing presence, he turned his attention back to Liz. "You're serious? This guy?"

Elizabeth felt Red tense beside her, immediately readying himself for a verbal or even a physical fight. But before he could snarl a word of furious reproach in her defense, she gently pressed her hand to his forearm for a brief moment, stilling his tongue. Once she felt him relax slightly beneath her touch, she released him to stand on her own.

"You don't need to be rude," she straight up told the younger man.

Upon hearing Liz's firm and rather sharp tone of voice, people crowded around in their immediate vicinity began to nudge each other and gape openly at the three of them.

The younger man's eyes widened in angry shock, his nostrils flaring as his cheeks heated in an ugly, ruddy flush. His less-than-chivalrous actions had been called out publicly and it was downright humiliating for him.

"I'm with someone," Elizabeth succinctly informed him--again. "So I'm not interested." It was extremely difficult for her, but she met the man's eyes so her words would have more of an impact. "Learn some Goddamned tact or you'll be alone more often than not."

Then she looked at Red, inclining her head for him to follow her before brushing purposefully past the prick.

Her heartbeat was thundering loudly in her ears, and her hands were shaking from the sudden release of adrenaline as she brought them up to hold the martini close against her chest--but she'd done it! Well, with a bit of inspiration from "Meghan." But some of her old self was resurfacing, for she'd faced an uncomfortable situation with a strange man who couldn't take fucking no for an answer and had walked away with her head held high and her dignity intact.

Liz was highly aware of Red keeping pace beside her, but neither of them said anything to each other until they were well away from that particular area of the club.

When she finally felt secure enough in her new surroundings to stop walking, she turned around to face him, her sapphire eyes alight with triumph.

"I got rid of him," she proclaimed with quiet vehemence.

He was smiling fiercely at her. "That you did."

Then he raised his glass of scotch and tapped the rim of it to hers, pride gleaming in his eyes as they both drank to that.

By the time Elizabeth had consumed two entire martinis and their accompanying olives, she was feeling wonderful. She didn't think she was drunk, exactly, but neither was she entirely sober.

Red had indulged in a few of his preferred drinks as well, but his alcohol tolerance was undeniably higher than hers, so he was much more cognizant of their surroundings than she was.

And that was just fine with her.

She trusted him more than anyone else in this entire world.

Which meant that tonight, Meghan was putting her trust in Cole.
There was a brief lull in the music she and Red were dancing to, with only the bass sounding in an even tempo, when suddenly the lighting of the entire club darkened dramatically to a hazy black tinged with dusky purple.

A chorus of ooh’s and aah’s sighed dreamily out of the mouths of most all the dancers—including Liz—as small, white lights began to glitter out of the blackness above, twinkling like the river of stars she used to gaze longingly up at for hours and hours back home in Nebraska.

A powerful feeling of nostalgia swept over her as she turned around in Red's arms, one of her own twining around his back while her other hand came to rest lightly against his hard bicep.

Then the alluring music swelled and dipped into a sensually slow beat as a new song began to echo provocatively throughout the entire club.

*I wanna trust you tonight
I'm sick and tired of running
And I wanna do something right
Baby, are you coming?*

Liz felt him edge closer and slowly part her smooth thighs with his knee. Curving forward, she willingly straddled him so that she’d be able to feel his hips languidly move in unison with hers.

*Whoever told you you're not good enough, damn them
They lied, they lied
‘Cos behind every heart of sadness
I know there's a fire burning bright
So I'm gonna tell it to you straight
And I'm gonna do it to you right*

*I'm gonna take you back to the old town
I'm gonna make you dance, spin you around
I'm gonna shout it out from the rooftops
I want you, and I never want it to stop
Come the break of day we'll be stronger
Won't be nothing that we can't conquer
Baby, you and me we are fire
And all I wanna do is take you just a little higher
I want to take you higher*

Completely surrendering themselves to the moment, they canted and swayed to the rhythm of the soft and sultry vocals caressing over them. Elizabeth felt Red slide his warm hands down her sides to grasp her back, bringing her tighter against his body.

*I know you've been broken down
I know somebody hurt you
But that was then, this is now
And I'll never desert you*

Like she had earlier, she could feel the muscles in his robust torso constricting and relaxing over and over again as they moved languorously together. And while she had thoroughly enjoyed dancing with him when he'd been behind her, there was just something much more...*intimately sensual* in the way she could feel him wheeling and pressing against her when they were face to face like this.

*Whoever told you you're not brave enough, damn them*
They lied, they lied
’Cos behind every heart of sadness
I know, there’s a fire burning bright
So I'm gonna tell it to you straight
And I'm gonna give it to you right

I'm gonna take you back to the old town
I'm gonna make you dance, spin you around
I'm gonna shout it out from the rooftops
I want you, and I never want it to stop
Come the break of day we'll be stronger
Won't be nothing that we can't conquer
Baby, you and me we are fire
And all I wanna do is take you just a little higher
I want to take you higher

The tips of her breasts brushed lightly against his shirt as they moved, the repetitive motion teasing her nipples to hardened buds beneath the thin material of her dress. God, it reminded her of when she would sometimes arch over him while they loved, the friction created by her breasts rubbing over and over against his bare chest highly sensitizing her body, stimulating her physical and emotional passions even more.

As the incredibly erotic sensation paired with that steamy memory suffused her, a warm blush blossomed in her cheeks and she lowered her head to rest it against his broad shoulder.

Liz felt Red lift his hand to briefly cradle the back of her neck beneath the heavy fall of her hair in a wordless, affectionate response before he trailed it slowly down the arch of her spine. Her breathing quickened as his long fingers spanned the dip of her back just above the mound of her ass, applying gentle pressure there to keep her in place.

Then he began to grind his pelvis slowly and unhurriedly against hers.

So show me where it hurts
Show me where it hurts

Her fingers tightened in his shirt as she found his rhythm and matched his movements, softly thrusting and then rolling her hips in time with his.

And let me be the one to show you
I won't let you down

His heart began to pound fervently beneath her ear as they undulated as one. A part of him was probably trying to temper his rising passion and lust, but Elizabeth could feel his body naturally beginning to ardently respond to hers like it had earlier tonight. And just like earlier, his physical reaction to her closeness and the way they danced so amorously didn't offend her.

If anything, it actually flattered her.

Lifting her head, she slanted a knowing and rather coquettish look at him. But beyond the coy impishness, her expression was one of sweetness and gentle intimacy.

Without breaking their seductively fluid rhythm, Red cupped one of her silken cheeks in his palm. "Come back with me tonight?" he requested softly.
A smile gleamed in her sapphire eyes. "Naturally, Red."

"Cole," he murmured with an answering smile before he leaned forward, mouth seeking and then finding hers.

"Cole," she breathed in agreement against his lips.
Thank you so much for reading, for your patience in waiting for this chapter, and for your support ❤

An infinite thank you always goes out to my betas, Daniel and Jami ❤

If you're curious and want to listen to it, the song Red and Liz dance to at the end of this chapter is Kwamie Liv's "Higher"

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
The second the front door to the penthouse suite shut heavily behind them with a resounding *slam*, Red immediately snaked a hard arm around Elizabeth's slender body and whirled her quickly around.

Gasperng in surprise, the woman dizzily clutched his waistcoat with both hands, fingers digging into the silky material as she braced herself for the impact she instinctively knew was coming--but the large palm of his other hand instantly went to the back of her head, protectively cradling it right before her spine hit the wood paneling with a dull *thud*.

She was now securely locked between Red's muscular body and the door.

Then before Liz could even blink, his warm mouth descended upon hers and he was kissing her with the single-minded intensity of a man long-deprived of sexual stimulation.

Which was ridiculously absurd, of course! Considering the amount of times they'd indulged in kissing--and sex!--this past week, the man was *anything* but deprived.

But...perhaps Cole hadn't made love in a while.

An excited grin curved her full lips even as they continued to be covetously plundered by his.

As Meghan, she could play along with that scenario.

In fact, it thrilled her to do so.

With a mewling growl she clung to him, allowing him to lead their lips in this feverish, bruising dance. He tasted of biting scotch and salty sweat and completely uninhibited sexuality. The way his mouth swiftly and skillfully caught and released hers over and over again while the tip of his tongue flicked possessively against hers every so often was enough to fan the flames of her already-kindled desire.

And it flared higher, hotter, dazzling her.

All her senses reeled with unbridled passion as Red eagerly tightened his strong hold on her scalp and her body so he could keep her still as he shoved his pelvis roughly against hers, the proof of his own fervid desire rampant against her flat stomach.

*It's a good thing he's propping me up,* she thought rather giddily through the glowing haze of alcohol and lust as her hands fumbled down his front to grasp his hips. *Otherwise I'd fall down!*

Red rolled himself deliberately against her a couple times, low and provocative growling noises emitting from deep within his chest as the raw pleasure from the delicious friction boldly swept over him. And when one of her shapely legs hooked tightly around one of his, bringing him unexpectedly closer....

*"God, baby...."* he rumbled fiercely, pulling back very slightly to look into her flushed face.

She hummed softly back at him, both dimples impishly appearing as the fingertips of one pale hand purposefully wedged their way into the sliver of space between their bodies to drift over the
impressive bulge straining against his slacks.

His nostrils flared, his keen hunger for her sharpening as those slim fingers of hers slowly and unabashedly attempted to encircle his girth through the layers of fabric. Her thumb ran over his length, soon finding the blunt head of his member before inching slightly lower to blatantly rub that sensitive ridge of flesh.

Red hissed softly, green eyes slitting as he gazed downwards, intently captivated by what she was doing to him.

Her small palm was now spanning his white-hot shaft, shamelessly moving downward away from the large, mushroomed tip, all fingers save her index and middle curling as much as they could around his thickness.

Moaning under his breath, he pushed himself further into her nimble hand, wishing to God that she was able to grasp him fully around--that her efforts weren't impeded by all his damned clothing!

However, despite the heavy material separating their bare skin, Elizabeth was still able to cause streaks of hot pleasure to sear deliciously through his body. The erotic pressure that her thumb, ring, and pinky fingers slowly applied to his stiff cock while her delicate index and middle ones slowly stroked him lengthwise...tenderly massaging him...made him earnestly pulse not once, but fucking twice with ever-growing lust.

As his mouth lowered to insistently suckle the side of her neck in response to her ardent caresses, he could feel a knowing giggle suddenly bubble saucily in her chest, making her tremble with cheekily wicked laughter.

Lizzy undoubtedly knew exactly just how much power she had over him right now and was obviously loving every Goddamned second wielding it!

A heated growl escaped his throat as he tore himself away from her silken neck to swiftly catch her mischievous lips with his own, plunging his tongue into her mouth with every intention to make her positively burn with arousal as much as he was!

Her skin instantly heated even more against his body in reaction to his fierce kiss, and her hold tightened convulsively on his member, thumb now swirling over the head--clumsily graceless because he had successfully diverted her attention...but her haphazard groping didn't make the touch any less pleasurable for him.

Christ, how he wanted to feel her actual hand stroking his erection without any fucking clothing between them....how he longed to feel her palm slick with his own wetness circling him, pumping him....

"I need your hands on me," Red muttered gruffly against her lips, sliding both his palms around to cup the sides of her warm neck even as he flexed his hips, wantonly rubbing himself into her shaking fingers, mercilessly teasing himself even as she continued to taunt him.

Hearing her quietly loose a hot breath of yearning against his cheek, he angled his face down to hers and ardently took her plant mouth with his own once again, deftly working her lips with a potent mixture of fervency and gentleness until he finally felt her shudder and then fold languidly against his body.

"And what do you need, hmm?" he asked in a gravelly purr, nipping her bottom lip lightly with his teeth as his thumbs slid past her collarbones to brush over her hard nipples hidden beneath her satin
dress. "What do you need?"

As he steadily, almost painfully, drew those sensitive buds even more sharply erect with his practiced touch, Elizabeth's heavy breathing hitched audibly, her arousal spiking dizzily as heady sparks of titillating pleasure suddenly raged through her body...brought about by his insistent pulling and flicking--and by his seductive, murmuring tone.

"You," she rasped longingly, rousing her lax fingers to gently squeeze his thick shaft, emphasizing her point.

Red's eyes gleamed as he caught her fiery gaze with his, profoundly intrigued by the differences in her arch behavior and finally recognizing with certainty that he was actually fooling around with Meghan, not Elizabeth.

Of course, his Lizzy was there, too. But the second they had burst into the suite and he had driven her forcefully up against the door, a frank boldness had appealingly manifested in her flirtatious attitude...a candid, rather foxy brazenness that she was still openly expressing.

It was both fascinatingly unusual and extremely compelling.

He had interacted with Meghan's uninhibited sensuality at the nightclub earlier, and even though Elizabeth had arrived back home with him, it was apparent by her forward show of atypical ardency that she still wanted to keep ahold of "Meghan"...to fully engage her persona and explore everything being that young, carefree, and stimulating woman represented.

A slow, fierce smile curved his lips as he slipped his long fingers down to hers that were still slyly fondling him.

If she wanted to continue to throw her heart into playing the role of Meghan so she could freely explore her sexuality without feeling self-conscious about it, that honestly suited him just fine indeed.

There was nothing wrong with a little fantasy. And by allowing herself to indulge in this persona, she could very well discover aspects of her personality or character that she could have been suppressing without even realizing it.

Elizabeth needed this outlet tonight...perhaps almost as much as he did.

Red cupped his large hand over hers, pressing her touch firmly against his throbbing rigidity for a brief moment, savoring the intimacy, before taking her palm away from him and lifting it in his.

"Come on, then," he murmured hoarsely, stepping back, but only to pull her imperiously after him.

Elizabeth stumbled up against his chest, kittenishly fitting her soft curves to his body as he turned her firmly around, their lips hungrily latching together once more as he began to walk her backwards deeper into the penthouse.

Red did the best he could. He really did. But attempting to guide her through the maze of rich furnishings--why the fuck did he have so many Goddamned pieces of furniture, anyway?--in a pitch-black hotel suite while their mouths were heatedly locked in passion, distracting him until he was near-mindless with lust, proved to be insanely difficult.

When Lizzy let loose a frustrated hiss for the fourth time, grimacing in annoyance--again--as the backs of her heels banged against one of the legs of what Red realized was the dining room table, he abruptly halted their progress.
Tearing his lips away from hers, he glanced over her shoulder and across the huge room to the dark, long hallway that lead to the bedroom. That path seemed to stretch and stretch before him, seemingly defying all the laws of physics.

Why the fuck was this place so Goddamned big, anyway?

Aggravated, he bared his teeth menacingly at that dark and winding pathway before his intent gaze fell back onto the aroused woman in his arms, taking in her flushed cheeks and her very pink lips, which were parted slightly as she took advantage of their brief respite to catch her breath....noticing just how lusciously swollen they were from his attentive ministrations....

Then his hungry eyes lifted to meet hers. Those beautiful, sapphire depths were bright beneath the dark fringe of her lashes...and they glittered with desire for him that mirrored his for her.

And it was in that moment that Red made his decision.

"Fuck it," he gritted, tightly grasping her small waist and lifting her onto the table in one fluid motion.

A breathless squeak of surprise escaped her, pale hands grasping his hard forearms for balance as she steadied herself. Then she gazed with wide eyes into Red's face, her heart giving a sharply excited thump at the blatantly heated look he bestowed upon her.

"I can't wait," he ground out, deftly slipping his palms under her dress to hold her smooth thighs, fingers tightening over her skin as he pushed them apart before swiftly edging into the open space he created. "I want you.

[Here?] her mind stuttered, an intense feeling of thrilled trepidation sweeping through her as his mouth dipped to hers again, parting her lips hungrily and adeptly taking from her what she very willingly gave him.

"I need you...too fucking much," he confided in a hard voice once he lifted his mouth from hers, hands greedily slipping further up her slender legs until his thumbs rested just below the triangle of her sex, eagerly stroking the scalloped edge of her panties...and her highly sensitized skin.

God, the way he was touching her, looking at her...the way that raw confession rolled off of his tongue in that incredibly masculine and sensuous way....

Elizabeth shivered, goosebumps rising in a rushing wave over her body as the pulsating heat centered right there where his caress teased her gave a heaving throb. And it was almost as if he could sense it, or even feel it, for the fingers of one hand immediately hooked over the delicate string of lace, suggestively pulling it down over her hip while his other hand slipped around her body to splay across the small of her back.

She felt him clutch her skin possessively there, curled fingertips sliding easily under the silken triangle of her thong, dipping erotically down her ass even as he pressed himself further between her thighs, face lowering to where the swell of her breasts began, his tongue and teeth trailing fire just above the shadowy cleft.

As all the titillating sensations mercilessly--gloriously--bombarded her at once, swiftly carrying away any lingering apprehension she harbored about having passionate sex on a table, Elizabeth's breath caught sharply in her throat, her fingers clenching around his forearms in heightening desire.

"Please, sweetheart," he muttered urgently under his breath, finally lifting his fierce and ardent gaze to hers.
The intensely heady look in his green eyes made her heart thrill excitedly once again within her.

Red had always made her feel beautiful and desirable...with his words, his touch. And when those happened to fail him, which wasn't often, his body always spoke sweetly enough for him...always reassuring her that he was captivated by her inherent charms.

*But tonight*....

With the way the waves of lustful desperation were rolling powerfully off of him, near-mesmerizing her with the strength of their intensity because he wanted her *that* much....

God, he was making her feel incredibly...sexy. Hot.

Enthralling.

To know that she could ensnare a man *like him* and maintain his amorous interest to the point where he wanted to take her on a table made her feel even more assured in herself and her abilities to assertively explore this deeply primal side of him...and this new, rather bewitching side of herself.

As Elizabeth confidently held his watchful eyes with her own, her hands went to his belt buckle and quickly loosened it for him before her nimble fingers flicked the button on his pants from its catch and then slowly slid the zipper down its metallic path.

She watched with avid interest as his dress slacks slid down his firm buttocks...as his swollen cock jutted out from in-between the metal teeth of the zip. It was still swathed behind his tight boxers, but its rigid heaviness stretched the flap so she was able to catch a fleeting glimpse of the hot flesh just beneath the gaping hole.

The moment her fingers drifted into the opening to caress him, he finally released the clenching hold on his ardent impatience and raw desire for her.

Growling, his hands roughly pulled that slinky bit of lace off of her shapely hips, over the small mound of her bottom, and then down her legs. Quickly he pivoted around to slide it all the way off her body and toss it carelessly to the floor before turning his full attention onto her once again.

His breathing began to grow ragged with his building need as she shoved his boxers down just past his ass. He let out a deep sigh as his impressive erection sprang free from confinement...only to weigh downwards heavily in a rigid curve, and he watched as her slim fingers admiringly encircled him...then started to pump him.

Red moaned as he flexed himself into her willing palm.

Not that the man needed readying, but Goddamn it, he wasn't about to stop her!

Not until he absolutely had to.

There was just something so fucking erotic about seeing Elizabeth's dainty, graceful hand touching his dick...in observing her pale fingers working the reddened flesh with the firm gentleness she knew he preferred.

What made the sight even more alluring to him was that she wasn't as practiced in hand jobs as many of the other women who'd done this to him over the years...and it was apparent in the way she held him. Stroked him.

Her relative inexperience was just so damned *charming*, reminding him of her vivacious youth and
how no other man had ever had her...had ever known her body or soul as fully and completely as he
had the privilege to.

And it was a privilege.

At the thought, Red immediately tightened his hold considerably on her in a sudden burst of almost
primal possessiveness--enough to make her gasp, her palm suddenly pumping him faster in response.

Groaning, he thrust his cock into her hold once...twice...and then again, at once both guiding her
touch and succumbing to it.

Then his gleaming eyes lifted to hers and he reached out, following the fierce yearning to give her
same sort of pleasure she was giving him...to solidify the bond between them.

Elizabeth's kiss-roughened lips parted and a soft, panting moan escaped her as his two fingers
smoothly divided the exquisite folds of her sex and slid easily into her.

Her sapphire gaze instantly veiled itself in sultry relish, her lithe body giving an eagerly spirited roll
as he adroitly fingered her, further arousing her.

Christ, she was stunning.

His piercing eyes devoured her as she sinuously writhed into his practiced, caressing touch even as
she continued to earnestly stimulate him.

This beautiful and mercurial young woman was his.

The intimate knowledge filled him to the brim with a potent whirling of joyous pride and fierce
exhilaration.

And in that moment, he instantly felt the instinctive, overwhelming need to take her body with his
own, to claim it, to claim her, to make her his again while this incredible feeling rode him.

With a fiery snarl, Red slipped his fingers out of her slick depths and swiftly pushed himself forward,
gathering her in his arms. As her startled fingers fell away from his erection to tightly grab his biceps,
his large hands cradled her gently even despite his roiling impatience and he carefully laid her down
on the polished mahogany of the long dining room table as if she were made of the finest porcelain
china.

Their eyes met as he cupped his hands under her ass and drew her closer. Elizabeth's trembling legs
wound around his hips at the exact moment his palms raked her dress up to just below her heaving
breasts. He paid those gorgeous mounds brief but thorough homage through the glossy satin,
watching as her eyes fluttered closed in ecstasy before he ran his hands roughly down her lithe
nakedness to eagerly grasp her narrow hips.

The dark thatch of crisp, trimmed curls below beckoned him.

"God, you're beautiful," Red murmured, one of his hands keeping a firm hold on her while the other
reached down to hold his cock.

He felt her caressing touch lightly brush against his arms in a tender, wordless response to his
compliment. Then she spread her creamy thighs even more.

The sight of her opening herself wider for him almost undid his already-tenuous self-control.
He wanted to fucking take her right then, but he restrained himself for the perverse pleasure of it, knowing that if he held himself back right now, it was going to feel *that much better* when he finally did sink into her tight little body.

His eyes gleamed with a feral light as he lightly pushed the fat head of his dick against her opening, which was still slick with the heat of her arousal. And there he prodded her, mercilessly teasing her until he finally heard those breathy little growls he loved so much escaping her parted lips.

"Are you ready for me, baby girl?" he crooned softly, releasing himself to slide his index and long middle fingers inside of her once again. "You feel ready...."

"Red...." she whimpered, hips unconsciously writhing in compulsive encouragement for him to pleasure her.

Pressing himself as close to her as he could, he raised his other hand from her hip to cup the side of her delicate, blushing face.

At the loving touch, her hazy eyes flickered to his.

He gazed steadily down at her, holding those lovely, clear blue depths with his as he gently moved his fingers deeper inside of her, stroking her arousal, relishing the way she immediately arched her back smoothly into his touch.

"Cole," he corrected in a low voice, lustful heat warring with sensual tenderness in his smiling eyes.

"....Cole," she moaned longingly, hands tightening pleadingly on his arms.

And as her breathy voice washed over him, through him, utterly and completely seducing him, his fragile control finally snapped free from his mental constraints with an eager, shuddering howl.

The man did not hesitate.

Surrendering to his irrepressible *need* for her and the indomitable instinct that was ingrained deeply within his masculinity, Red seized her roughly by the waist and drove into her in one, long, powerful stroke.

Elizabeth cried out loudly, echoing his triumphant snarl as their bodies joined swiftly together.

She was admittedly shocked that he had plunged into her so abruptly. Normally he took his time about such things by slowly easing into her, allowing her time to adjust to his wide girth before he began to move--he was so big....

But as he hunched over her and pumped quickly and effortlessly into her, she found that she *liked* this show of passionately commanding dominance.

And that realization honestly surprised her.

Lifting her head slightly, Liz curled her slender arms tightly around his arched back, fingers digging into the slippery material of his waistcoat as she wantonly raised her hips to meet his earnest thrusts.

She could feel his large hands move to gently cup the small of her back, protecting it from the worst of the harsh impact as he bluntly propelled forward against her again and again.

It utterly fascinated her that he could be so tenderly soft and yet so tumultuously forceful all at once.

The swelling intrigue his conflicting behaviors aroused in her made her molten desire for him blaze...
even hotter. With a rasping whine she sought and found his mouth with her own, letting him know just how much she burned for him.

Their teeth clicked and their tongues danced heatedly together as he continued to set the hard, unrelenting pace that steadily whisked them both toward the pinnacle of physical release.

Since her petite figure was almost completely covered by the bulk of his heavy frame, she found herself enveloped in the startling but not unpleasant sensation of the various textures of his clothing rubbing against the bare skin of her arms, stomach, and thighs. This unexpected sensation coupled with the way he was zealously impelling into her made this an entirely new experience for her...and it was breathlessly exciting because it was so novel.

God, hadn't she just been fantasizing about Red fervently taking her while they both were still mostly dressed because he couldn't bear to wait?

Elizabeth moaned against his bruising lips, clutching lustfully at him as he roughly dragged his heavy cock in and out of her.

It felt amazing.

No. It felt so damned wonderful.

And she felt like she was the only woman in the entire world. Coveted. Protected. And utterly and completely sensual because he desired her so.

"You feel so fucking good," Red grated in her ear once his mouth had lifted from hers. "So tight. So hot...."

A tremor ran through Liz at his gruff tone, her wide eyes lifting to meet his.

He gazed back at her, his momentum slowing slightly, but the rhythm of his thrusts remained unflagging, sternly controlled, and so very powerful.

The slight smile ghosting knowingly at the corners of his mouth informed her that he was well-aware of the fact that his words had astonished her.

Was this a test? To see how she'd respond?

Perhaps Liz would balk and shyly hide her face in his chest.

But would Meghan?

Jutting her pointed chin out defiantly, she clenched her thighs around him even more, driving him deeper into her body.

His impassioned eyes darkened with delight at that. "Irresistible minx," he purred sensuously, completely stilling the strong movement of his hips as he stared intently down into her flushed face.

Elizabeth squirmed impatiently beneath him, trying to rut up against the massive hardness sheathed deeply inside of her...but he pinned her hips tightly down against the table with his, palms clutching her back to keep her in place.

"What do you want, baby, hmm?" he teased in a low voice, moving his cock the barest of an inch. "Do you want...this?"

She sucked in a desirous breath as his raging erection pushed very lightly against her arousal. But
after the way he had passionately ravaged her body earlier, setting it on fire with his near-overwhelmingly rough pace, she wanted more than just a slight rolling.

Once again, she stubbornly attempted to thrust herself up into his dick to ease the growing pressure within her body.

But he tauntingly withdrew. "Use your words, honey," he rumbled, eyes glinting down into hers.

"Come on," she heard herself gasp in frustrated longing.

Christ, it was the hardest fucking thing to do in this entire world to hold himself back from her when all he really wanted was to make her orgasm...and then bring himself to an intense release soon after.

But Red intuited she was on the cusp of discovering something about herself, and he didn't want her to shy away from it by losing herself in physical pleasure.

"Tell me what you want," he encouraged in a murmuring growl, lowering his mouth to kiss her even as he softly edged further into her again--but not enough to hit her in the highly sensitive place she most desired him to.

She quivered violently beneath him...and as he lifted his lips away from hers, he could sense her shy hesitation to voice what he knew she really wanted.

Taking pity on her, he gave her the words to work with. "Do you want me to fuck you?" he asked quietly, gently kissing the corner of her mouth before briefly capturing her lips once more in a warm caress. "Hmm?"

"Y-yes," Elizabeth released the vehement sentiment in a long breath.

"Tell me," he commanded gently, suggestively rolling his hips as incentive.

As he moved, his own lust for her thrummed powerfully throughout his body, his cock throbbing within her...and her glistening eyes lifted to his expectant ones at the deliciously titillating sensation.

"I want you to...to..." her voice grew even softer, "....fuck me," she breathed, a very scarlet blush flooding her cheeks as she closed her eyes and turned her face to the side, demurely hiding herself from his scrutiny.

As soon as she had uttered the graphic words, she instantly realized that that's what they had been engaging in: fucking.

The heat suffusing her face burned brighter and hotter as she felt Red press a smiling kiss to her very pink cheek right before he began to thrust, finally fulfilling her aching desire.

"You don't need to be embarrassed, darling girl," he rasped in her ear as his hold on her back tightened again, his gentle rhythm seamlessly increasing to a fervent pounding.

Elizabeth kept her eyes squeezed shut as the uncomfortable pressure in her body began to build into something much more pleurally marvelous.

"It's okay to want to--fuck," he panted. "To give yourself over to instinct. Raw passion. It doesn't mean you love me less."

Her slim fingers grasped the folds of his shirt wound around his muscular arms as she at last gathered the courage to turn her face back up to his.
"Or that--you love me less?" she queried breathlessly, swiftly lifting her slender hips even more into his hard body again and again, chasing and gaining on that bursting propulsion of thrilling satisfaction.

"Most certainly not," he confirmed with an aroused snarl. "God--honey, I'm getting close."

So was she.

Liz mentally reached and caught that trembling, glowing sensation of erotic stimulation. And suddenly she was whirling within it, body and heart, swiftly ascending to its peak.

Her rapid breathing became acutely sharper. The almost feral, higher-pitched noises that escaped her parted lips were sounding closer and closer together as she hurtled toward the pinnacle of orgasm.

"Say my name," Red demanded hoarsely, head descending toward her so he could bury his nose in that silken curve between her neck and shoulder and inhale her pure, unadulterated scent. "Say it."

His two, hard thrusts significantly accentuated the words.

And suddenly she was completely overwhelmed by the heavy, thrashing and scintillating passion between them. Emotionally and physically losing herself in the pulsating rapture of her release, she lurched forward, embracing Red tightly.

"...Cole!" she huskily cried out, her silvery voice threading throughout the darkness around them as her hips jerked and bucked against his. "Ohhh...oh, God....Cole!"

With a low groan of fierce gratification, he surged urgently against her, deeply into her--and then--Inhaling sharply, Red swiftly pulled out of Elizabeth's lissome body, one hand immediately reaching down to hold his pulsating cock as his warm essence spurted thickly onto the milky white flesh of her taut stomach.

Grunting softly, he pressed his sweaty brow against the heaving, naked swell where her breasts began, vigorously losing himself in the ricocheting pleasures of his own fervor as he pumped himself dry.

Christ, that had been close--he had almost come directly inside of her.

Red quietly breathed out a shuddering sigh as he finally lifted his head to gaze down into her flushed, replete face.

The primal, near-desperate need to orgasm inside of her, to stake the ultimate claim on her body, had been extremely powerful...more so tonight than ever before.

And there were significant reasons for it.

Elizabeth's big, striking eyes flickered open to gaze up into his. A shyly awed, almost wonderingly meditative smile twitched at her lips as she serenely hooked a languid hand around the back of his neck.

Willingly obliging her unspoken wish, he caressed his hands up her sides and leaned in to kiss her with passion that was now more warmly molten than blazingly hot...but it still seared them both with an ardently irresistible heat.

The rational part of himself vehemently berated that wildly possessive, fiercely aroused and defiantly growling darkness in his soul for nearly overwhelming his good sense.
Even though Elizabeth was on birth control and had been since she was a teenager, she wasn't ready for that weighty step forward in their relationship. He instinctively knew it. She was young yet, and to accept his physical release inside of her was too large of a commitment for her—and it was a commitment...for it possessed implications of a myriad of responsibilities that she just wasn't prepared for.

And he couldn't blame her for that. *Didn't* blame her for that.

He was an extremely patient man, and would continue to be so for her sake.

Red sensually traced the tip of her tongue with his before gently releasing her mouth. Then he shifted, carefully disengaging his tight hold from her slender body before slowly standing upright.

As soon as he arrived at his full height, he winced slightly, one of his hands immediately pressing into the firm curve where his ass cheek met his left thigh.

"What's wrong?" Lizzy asked softly in concern, propping herself shakily up on her elbows.

"Oh...." His grimace turned into a wryly rueful grin as he met her eyes. "I'm just feeling some...pulling down here," he lightly slapped both his palms to just below his tight rear, "due to the rather...spirited...pastime we just indulged in."

Her expression shone with sly amusement. "I guess this means we'll have to do it here more often," she suggested playfully, patting the polished wooden surface beneath her. "You know, to build up your muscles down there." She then flicked her fingers in the general direction of his ass.

"I suppose we'll have to," he drawled. "I doubt you'd want me stiffening up on you while we're in the middle of making love." His green eyes gleamed with a slow, suggestive smile. "....Or fucking."

"Yeah. At least not in *that* way," she agreed cheekily without missing a beat.

He arched a delightedly surprised brow at her perfectly-inflected tease. "Oh, well done, sweetheart," he purred, impressed that she hadn't bashfully withdrawn from his baiting. "Very well done."

Elizabeth couldn't keep the hot blush from coloring her cheeks at his praise for her boldly flirtatious retort....but her white teeth flashed confidently in the dark as she dimpled impishly back up at him.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading and for your amazing support ❤

An infinite thank you goes out to my awesome betas :)

❤
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
November 16, 2006

"The recipe says now we need ricotta cheese and eggs," Elizabeth called to Red over the loud buzzing of the food processor.

The man glanced up from puréeing the fluffy, golden potatoes to arch a chiding brow at her. "Are you sure it says eggs?" he called back.

Pursing her lips, she studied the recipe again, squinting at the beautifully precise handwriting flowing neatly across the wrinkled, yellowed paper. Then her mouth formed itself into a round circle and her cheeks colored a little just as Red hit the stop button on the food processor.

"Oh. It says...egg." She slanted a sheepish look over at him. "One egg."

He nodded, eyeing his handiwork with pride. Those beautiful potatoes were now mashed to smooth and consistent perfection!

A pleased smile tugged at his mouth before he turned his full attention back to Elizabeth.

"Right," he confirmed. "Just one. If we were doubling or tripling the recipe, we'd use two or three...and so on and so forth."

"But we're not," she nodded her understanding. Then her eyes lit in admiration as she glanced down into his bowl of creamy tubers. "That looks really nice, Red."

"Thank you." The man gestured patiently to the stainless steel refrigerator. "Now grab the egg and ricotta cheese. I bought the ricotta special for this recipe," he smiled, watching as she opened the fridge door. "It's in a small, white paper bag—yes, that's it. And you know where the eggs are...."

He observed her set the bag of rather expensive ricotta he'd had his preferred Seattle bakery import directly from Italy down on the granite countertop before returning to the refrigerator to ferret out her needed egg.

Tonight, he was teaching Elizabeth how to make gnocchi with rosemary parmesan cream sauce. He'd chosen this particular dish as her maiden voyage into the expansive, tumultuous waters of cooking—as an adult—for a few reasons.

First, she thoroughly enjoyed Italian food more than any other cuisine.

Second, the pasta was delicious, and, like anyone, she would be much more inclined to pursue cooking after tonight's venture if she were especially satisfied with the evening's results.

Third, this recipe was extremely easy to follow. He remembered his mother teaching it to him when he'd been thirteen...no, perhaps as young as twelve years old. And if he had succeeded in making it when he'd been a hopelessly clumsy and preoccupied youth, there was absolutely no question that Elizabeth, a keenly sharp and clever young woman in her early twenties, would triumph as well.

Red had a feeling that after tonight, using real ingredients to cook a delectable meal wouldn't be
nearly as unnerving of an activity as it had once been to her.

His expression softened as he gazed affectionately at her move slightly up on the balls of her feet to flick open the egg carton that was nestled in the door's top shelf.

When Elizabeth had happily breezed into his suite about an hour or so ago for their date, she had exclaimed over how wonderful the aromas permeating the kitchen had been.

Then her eyes had fallen on the oven which had been on, baking the potatoes.

Her inquisitive gaze had then flicked to the counter where a few mixing bowls had been purposefully stacked beneath the cupboards, where the food processor sat plugged into the wall's outlet, waiting to be used, and where some of the various spices and herbs needed had been arranged in a neat and tidy row....and she'd nervously pulled up short.

Upon seeing her questioning glance predictably slanting his way, he had enthusiastically explained what his plans were for their night in while tying a crisp, white apron around his waist.

Then, with an encouraging smile, he'd held out a matching one for her to wear.

At first, she had eyed it uncertainly, obviously warily hesitant about cooking an entire meal, even if she'd be doing it under his tutelage.

Embarrassing memories of causing havoc in the kitchen and burning more dinners than she could possibly count had probably flashed mercilessly before her mind's eye.

But as he had jovially explained that the recipe they'd be following had been passed down from his great-great-grandmother on his mother's side...generation after generation, all the way down to him...he'd actually felt Elizabeth's resistance melt as she had beamed brightly at him, obviously warming very considerably to his plan for their romantic night in.

Then she had decisively taken the apron from his grasp and had slipped it on over her head before resolutely tying it tightly around her slim waist.

It was admittedly an intimately significant gesture on his part to share such an old, almost sacred family recipe with her. And it had been a very long time since he'd made this gnocchi himself.

Decades, if he were to be honest.

But when he'd dug into the locked mahogany chest he kept in the bedroom to bring out the box of hand-written recipes his mother had given him before she'd passed away and had carefully rifled through the aged papers until he'd found the recipe, he hadn't felt sorrow upon revisiting the past like he'd thought he was going to. Rather, feelings of reminiscent thoughtfulness and then glad anticipation had grown in him and had slowly seeped throughout until a genuine smile had curved his mouth.

A very old, delicious recipe like this deserved to be resurrected, and he had instantly realized that he sincerely wanted to share this piece of his private past with her.

Red knew she appreciated his truly heartfelt gesture, and it was making her first real cooking experience as an adult that much more meaningful for her tonight.

It pleased him that he could tell she was enjoying herself in this endeavor thus far, despite her anxiousness about looking inept and awkward in front of him.
But so far, the woman hadn't made any kind of ungainly error she would probably consider embarrassing. As tended to be her habit when attempting something new for the very first time, she was fretting and worrying needless—

*Splat.*

"Oh shit!" immediately came the despairing moan.

Red instantly pinched his lips firmly together to hide an amused grin.

Perhaps he'd put that particular thought out into the ether too soon!

"I dropped the freaking egg!"

As if she needed to explain that very distinct sound.

This incredibly minor incident was bringing back vibrant—and, quite honestly, fond—memories he had of her when she had whirled through the kitchen like a klutzy tornado when she'd been younger...burning food, scorching the bottoms of pots and pans, allowing water, sauces, and oils to boil over said pots and pans...amongst other, hilarious escapades.

One botched cooking stunt in particular came clearly to mind...when Lizzy had attempted to make potato leek soup one evening from scratch for he and Sam.

She must have been about thirteen or fourteen years old at the time. Despite her rather abysmal track record in the kitchen, Sam had asked—no, had quite literally challenged—the stubborn girl to make dinner.

It was how he had gotten her to do anything she didn’t really want to do at that age.

The teenager had been defiantly determined to rise to her adoptive father’s challenge and prove to the both of them that she could follow a recipe and successfully make something as simple as soup.

Red had admired her spunky fortitude and had been genuinely proud of her, for she had managed to plow through most of the cooking process without burning something or lighting something else on fire.

And, oh, how she had smugly crowed her superiority at the two of them as she had poured all of the aromatic, piping hot ingredients into the blender!

But, unfortunately, his darling girl had forgotten to lock down the blender's plastic lid.

The second she had proudly punched her thumb into the red purée button, the top had blown off.

Steaming soup had then erupted from the glass like lava bursting from a fucking volcano and had splattered *everywhere!* Gobs of the sticky—yet delicious—concoction had sprayed thickly onto the floor, all over the walls, curtains, and windows--even up onto the ceiling!

Naturally, it went without saying that the three of them had been absolutely drenched in creamy mashed potatoes and chopped leeks.

Red could remember doubling over, clutching helplessly at his sides as laughter had boomed from him while Sam had been roaring Elizabeth's name over her panicked yelping—and then they both had dived for the blender to turn it off at the same exact time.

For the life of him, he couldn't remember if Lizzy had scrabbled at the off button first or if Sam had
yanked the cord out of the wall. But he *did* remember their identical howls of pain as their skulls had collided with a loud *thunk* just as the blender had fallen deathly silent.

The poor things.

Red could still recall that the tantalizing scent of leeks and salted potatoes had permeated the kitchen for literally days afterward...even after the thoroughly intensive—and extensive—cleanup they all had partaken in!

And speaking of cleanup....

"I'll get you something to wipe up the shell and yolk," he told Elizabeth in a slightly strangled voice as he valiantly attempted to hold back the powerful ripple of chuckles that wanted to slyly escape his chest. "One moment." His jaw quivered with the effort to keep his mirth in check as he ran a hand towel under the warm water streaming from the sink's shiny chrome faucet.

Elizabeth threw a fierce glare over her shoulder at him as she knelt down in front of the gooey mess oozing over the pristine, tiled floor...as if she wanted to hide it from him.

"You're laughing at me!" she sharply accused him with an indignant huff.

The man purposefully widened his eyes, affecting a look of innocence as he came toward her with the damp towel.

"I?"

"I?" she mimicked, making a face at him.

"Here," he grinned, slapping the cloth into her outstretched hand.

Rolling her eyes, she looked away and braced her free palm on the cold floor as she bent over the mess of running yolk and egg shards to swiftly wipe everything up.

As she moved, the gauzy hem of her mauve-colored blouse rode up her back before finally catching on the knotted tie of her apron while her tight jeans slipped a little down her ass, exposing some of the white arch of her spine to his idle stare...and also revealing the barest glimpse of the pale lavender lace of her panties.

He couldn't help but wonder if what she wore beneath her shirt tonight matched them in texture and color.

His eyes gleamed at the thought.

He couldn't wait to find out.

But later, of course.

Later.

Red resisted the sudden urge to place his hand on that patch of silken flesh and slide it around her slender waist to grab her beneath her belly button and pull her flush against him...and instead quickly leaned over to swipe another hand towel from off of the counter. Then he knelt down beside her to briskly dry the tile she had just finished cleaning.

"Do you want me to get the egg this time?" he teased her as they discarded both dirty cloths.
"Oh, shut up," Elizabeth grumbled, wrinkling her nose at him as she defiantly opened the refrigerator door. Then she raised herself onto the balls of her feet again, gingerly lifting the carton's lid before snatching yet another egg firmly in her palm.

"Careful.... If you squeeze it any harder, it'll shatter in your hands," he warned her in a serious tone—but his green eyes were dancing. "Though as luck would have it, we have ten more eggs, so you have ten more chances to successfully carry an egg from the refrigerator to the counter without breaking it prematurely."

She hissed crossly as she stalked past him, but he noticed that her nervous grip had eased as she cradled the egg with both hands against her chest...and her step suddenly had a bit of a bounce to it.

Despite her embarrassment and haughty pique, he knew that a part of her actually enjoyed it when he teased her. After all these years, she was quite conscious of the fact that it was one of his ways of showing her affection.

Grinning, he came over to stand beside her.

"Now crack it in that little bowl there," he directed, pointing to the glass Pyrex.

Elizabeth pursed her lips in confusion. "Isn't it supposed to go in with the potatoes?"

"Yes, but it's better to crack eggs in a different bowl than that of your main course," Red explained. "That way, if any shards drop in with the yolk, they can be extracted with ease."

He felt her stiffen slightly beside him, but before she could slant him a tetchy look out of the corner of her eye and bite out a retort, he quickly added, "And I'm not instructing you to do this because I don't have faith that you're able to crack an egg and crack it well, Lizzy."

He couldn't help the dry, playful lilt coloring his tone, which of course earned him a soft, rather nettled snarl from her.

God, he loved to rile her up.

Chuckling quietly, he reached out and took her small wrist in his gentle grip and extended her hand out to the Pyrex bowl where he helped her tap the side of the egg against the lip until it cracked.

"Even the most expert of chefs who practice their trade in world-renowned restaurants make use of this ingenious, egg-cracking method."

"Do they?" Elizabeth asked curiously, staring down at the yolk floating in the bowl.

Undoubtedly she was closely checking for little bits of shards.

"Mmm."

"You know, Red," she began slowly, lifting her eyes to his once she was satisfied not to have discovered any unseemly shell pieces, "sometimes I still can't tell when you're teasing me or telling me the truth."

"I enjoy smoothly blending the two," he smiled affably. "It makes our conversations...frothy."

Even as she shot him an exasperated look, an appreciative smile for his thematic play on words twitched at the corners of her mouth.

The man tapped a finger on the recipe laid out in front of them. "Now what do you do?" he asked,
assuming a more business-like tone as he redirected her attention back to the task at hand.

She glanced obediently down at the paper.

“Now it says we mix the egg, ricotta, flour, and salt in with the potatoes.”

“Well, go on then,” he encouraged. “And I recommend transferring the potatoes into one of those mixing bowls there first before you add the other ingredients.”

Red watched as Elizabeth did as he suggested before she measured out the correct amount of flour and ricotta. He knew she was aware that he was studying her movements, for—much to his amusement—she was adding the new ingredients to the bowl of mashed potatoes with such gentle and precise care.

Then she began to mix them all with the wooden spoon.

At first, she whipped up everything a little too vigorously and Red quickly passed a hand over his mouth to hide his mirth as a large puff of flour misted over their hands and aprons.

Elizabeth paused in her work to frown down at her dirty front even as he wiped the backs of his powdered hands on the lower portion of his apron.

Then she let out a resigned sigh before throwing a good-natured grin over at him. “I guess that’s why we’re wearing these aprons, right?”

His eyes twinkled at her. “That’s exactly why.”

“At least it’s just flour,” she remarked, releasing her hold on the bowl to lift a wrist, rubbing the back of it against her cheek to lazily scratch an itch.

The streak of powder she accidentally left there was quite endearing, and Red didn’t have the heart to tell her it was there, or to wipe it away himself for her.

At least, not yet.

He would in a little while. But for now he’d enjoy the sweet sight it afforded him.

Once he showed her how to roll and then cut the twists of gnocchi dough into bite-sized pieces and she was comfortable enough to slice the rest herself without his guidance, he began preparing the stovetop for the rosemary parmesan cream sauce.

“When you’re done cutting the dough, come over here and I’ll walk you through how to make the sauce.”

“Don’t we need to boil these first?” she asked, gesturing to the rows of gnocchi pieces that were lined neatly on the powdered cutting board.

“The sauce comes first because it takes longer to make.” He paused in his prepping to meet her attentive eyes. “When you’re at a restaurant and you order a hot meal, you want it to be as fresh and as warm as possible, right?”

“Right....”

“Well, when the chef is preparing your food, he takes into account just how much time needs to be devoted to each portion of the recipe so the meal can be as close to perfection as he can make it,” he smiled. “Boiling all that dough there won’t take long at all. And you want your pasta to be as hot and
as fresh as possible when you serve it. That’s why we’ll make the sauce first.”

Lizzy pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Won’t the sauce get cold when we’re boiling the dough?”

It was a fair question.

The man shook his head. “The recipe already calls for low heat when cooking the sauce. So when we’re done mixing everything together, we’ll just make sure to keep the heat of the saucepan on simmer as we boil the gnocchi.”

A look of apprehension briefly crossed Elizabeth’s face. “It won’t burn, right?”

“The sauce?” Again, he shook his head. “Not if we keep it to that very low simmer,” he reassured her with another smile.

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that,” she mumbled, wrinkling her nose self-deprecatingly. “I have a knack for burning things, as you know!”

“You won’t be burning anything tonight,” the man reaffirmed emphatically. “Now, is that the last twist you’re cutting? Very nice. Finish that up and rinse your hands.... Good. Come on over here and let’s talk sauce.”

And so Red showed her step by step how to make the wonderfully fragrant and delicious sauce. He taught her how to tell by look and smell when the butter was successfully browned but not burned, how to pour the heavy cream into the pan little by little while whisking in fresh rosemary, parmesan, nutmeg, and cayenne, and how to season it all with salt and pepper without overdoing it.

“I do remember that from when I was younger,” Elizabeth commented lightly as he set a big, copper pot filled with salted water down on the other burner. “Being advised not to over-salt things, I mean. Sam told me you can always add more salt later on the food on your plate...if it needs it.”

The man nodded as he switched on the flame beneath the pot, turning the knob to high so the water within would begin to boil as quickly as possible. Then he edged closer to her, watching as she enthusiastically kept on whisking everything in the pan to make the sauce even smoother and thicker than it already was.

“He was trying to protect you from the dreadful and disappointing experience of tasting an over-salted meal,” Red grinned. “It’s not something one forgets quickly—or easily!”

“But I did have that experience!” she exclaimed with a giggle. “Sam over-salted chicken noodle soup one time,” she reminisced with a fond yet gently bittersweet smile. “It tasted like how I think the ocean would taste like if I swallowed a big gulp of it.” A shudder ran down her body. “It was seriously disgusting!”

Then a long laugh rippled from her as she shook her head at the memory. “He was so pissed. I remember he took one look at my face after I swallowed—it must’ve been really squished up—and then he hesitantly slurped some himself. He grimaced in complete disgust and then surged to his feet and angrily cleared the table.”

Red could just picture it! “How old were you?” he asked with a curious smile.

Elizabeth rubbed her lips together thoughtfully. “Oh.... God, I must’ve been eight or nine years old. Old enough to understand that he wasn’t mad at me, but still young enough to think that he could be....” She shrugged a shoulder. “If that makes any sense.”
It did.

“And so I nervously watched him yank the pot of soup off of the stovetop, flick on the garbage disposal, and then furiously dump it all down the drain.”

Her blue gaze was alight with merriment as she relived her childhood. “When that was done, he spent a moment wiping down the counter. Probably to gather his cool.”

Red chuckled at that and she slanted a knowing grin at him.

“Then,” she continued, “he slowly turned around to face me and leaned back against the counter. He raked a hand through his hair before he folded his arms across his chest. Do you remember how he would do that when he was upset?”

A small smile flickered across Red’s mouth as he nodded.

Oh yes, he remembered.

And it just so happened that Lizzy did the same exact thing when she was irritated or perturbed.

“Then he said, ‘So that was kind of salty, huh?’” Her wry, drawling tone mimicked Sam’s dry inflection perfectly. “And then he smiled, so I knew he wasn’t angry anymore...and I think I told him it was pretty salty. Or maybe I just nodded vigorously at him. I don’t quite remember.”

Her eyes glinted as she glanced again over at Red. “Then he laughed and asked, ‘How does pizza sound?’”

“That sounds like Sam!”

“He really loved his pizza!” she tittered fondly. “And that was always his fall-back meal if either of us screwed up dinner. Usually it was me.” Her grin faded slightly into something of a more wistful nature as she looked back down at the white sauce she was stirring.

Silence fell between them for a moment, broken only by the flickering flames of the stove, the tiny, popping bubbles of the sauce, and the tinging of the whisk hitting the bottom and sides of the pan as it move to and fro...to and fro.

Then came her soft voice, “I really miss him, Red.”

“I know you do, honey,” he murmured compassionately, wrapping an arm around her narrow shoulders and giving her a gentle squeeze. “I know.”

“I wish he could see me tonight.” The longing for what could never be was apparent in her husky tone. “What I’m doing.”

The expression in the man’s face was tender as he met her eyes. “He’d be proud of your efforts here.”

One of her dimples appeared as she gave him a lopsided smile. “He really would, wouldn’t he?”

“Most definitely.”

Hearing sudden lapping and frothing, the two of them quickly looked over at the pot. The water was now foaming and roiling spiritedly inside.

“It’s ready,” Red declared with quiet enthusiasm, gently rubbing his palm supportively up and down
her arm once before releasing her. “Are you ready to cook your gnocchi?”

“Yes!”

He watched Elizabeth lift her chin, physical evidence of her mental effort to brush aside her melancholy as she set the steel whisk down on the spoon rest before double-checking the level of heat on her beautiful sauce. Then she switched places with him so she could drop the pieces of dough into the boiling water.

And so the two of them together cooked the gnocchi dough to puffy and pillowy perfection. It warmed his heart to see her beaming proudly, gaze shining with newfound confidence as she scooped the pieces of pasta out of the hot, bubbling water to gently add them to the decadent sauce that was simmering merrily in its pan.

“It smells so good!” she remarked in almost breathless excitement.

“And it’ll taste even better!” he proclaimed definitively. “Is the wooden trivet on the table?”

Elizabeth glanced over at the polished, mahogany antique. He had set the half of it they frequented the most in a very romantic way long before she had arrived.

The Venetian glass plates she loved so much were set out amongst the fine, ivory linen napkins and place settings, a heavy glass vase of fresh flowers, crystal wine glasses, a dark bottle of undoubtedly expensive wine, and two candles that were already lit and glowing dreamily.

She could just catch a glimpse of the trivet amidst it all.

“It’s there,” she confirmed as he switched off the heat to both burners they’d been using.

“Excellent. I couldn’t remember if I had placed it over there or not.” Reaching out to the right, Red slid his hand into the quilted, jet-black oven mitt. “Stand back, Lizzy. Hot pan coming through!”

Fleet as a doe, she sprang lightly away as he lifted the steaming pan from the stove and then quickly yet steadily walked into the dining room with it to carefully set it down on the sturdy trivet.

While he situated the pasta, she retrieved the bowl of tossed salad made from various crisp, green lettuces, plump olives, and deep red tomato slices from the refrigerator. After setting the rather heavy bowl on the counter, she competently dressed the salad with the small jar of Italian dressing and then sprinkled the perfectly golden-brown croutons over the top of it.

Red helped her clear a bigger spot on the table for the salad bowl before settling it by their plates.

The mouthwatering fragrance of their scrumptious, home-cooked Italian meal beckoned invitingly. As one, they both eagerly reached around their backs to untie their aprons so they could finally sit down to eat.

“Need some help?” he asked after he had pulled his off, a teasing lilt coloring his tone as he observed her moue of frustration while she continued to pull and then yank impatiently at the ties.

“I think I just double-knotted it,” she grumbled, a vexed flush heating her cheeks.

Chuckling, the man folded his apron and set it down on one of the spare chairs before he walked around her and reached out, stilling her fumbling hands with his own.

“Sssh,” he soothed in her ear as he firmly removed those slim appendages from the tight knot. “All
that twisting you’re doing is making it worse.”

He could feel the annoyance and tension bleed from her as he dipped his head even closer so he could run his lips down the side of her neck.

Red just hadn’t been able to resist touching that lovely, pale curve of soft flesh.

Then he pressed her suddenly limp palms to the sides of her thighs for the briefest of moments before his dexterous fingers moved back behind her to pluck at the stubborn ties until they finally came loose.

“Thanks, Red,” she murmured, and his virile masculinity was pleased to hear the familiar, slight huskiness in her voice that betrayed she was affected by his proximity...and his advances.

Before she could gather her poise and step away to lift the apron over her head, he indulged his desire from earlier and swiftly curled an arm around her lithe body, hand sensually creeping around the apron and under her shirt to press just below her belly button as he brought her against him.

He exhaled slowly against the side of her neck before kissing her there, thoroughly enjoying the way she was languidly melting back into his chest, how her perfectly round bottom pushed against his pelvis, how she caressingly gripped his forearm with both her fervent hands to augment their physical connection.

The temptation to take advantage of the sudden sensuous mood he had provoked in her was strong...but he resisted.

They had an important meal to eat while it was still hot, after all!

Lovemaking could wait.

It was with reluctance that he loosened his hold on her body. “You’re welcome,” he smiled as he trailed his mouth up along her skin until it reached her cheek.

After giving her a loving little peck, he released her, but only to reach down and then lift the apron up and over her head.

Elizabeth turned around and smiled softly back at him as he folded it and placed it with his on the chair. “If we hadn’t spent so much time cooking everything, I’d say....” Her gaze glinted impishly. “‘To Hell with it!’”

“Funny—I thought the same,” the man chuckled deeply in his throat, reaching up to finally brush away the streak of flour that curved up her cheek in an affectionate caress. His eyes gleamed knowingly at her as he then guided her to her chair and solicitously seated her. “But after all this hard work, we really should eat your pasta while it’s hot! We’ll be glad we did.”

“I know,” she dimpled as he joined her.

Soon, the wine was smoothly poured and their plates were filled with both the colorful salad and the creamy pasta.

“Oh,” Red uttered, “and before I forget....” He reached into the pocket of his waistcoat and carefully withdrew a breathtakingly gorgeous bracelet. As the linked, deep blue sapphires spilled into his palm, they instantly caught and held the soft light from the chandelier above and the flickering candles around them.
His eyes lifted to hers. “Let me put this back on for you.”

“Oh, yeah.... Thanks, Red,” Elizabeth smiled, eagerly extending her left wrist out to him.

She had given over the precious piece into his safekeeping before they had started cooking, for she hadn’t wanted it to become smudged or dirty while she traipsed around in the kitchen.

The perfect, sparkling gemstones appeared to pulsate with a vivid, almost violet brilliancy for a moment before glowing steadily with a fierce, inner fire all their own as he gently clasped them around her pale skin.

Red could remember with distinct clarity when he had given this bracelet to her. It had been exactly one year ago to the very day: November 16th, 2005.

He had flown into Seattle late that afternoon to check in on her, as he had taken it upon himself to do ever since she had started attending the university. Once his private jet had landed, he had called to invite her out to dinner.

“I wish you would’ve told me you were coming sooner!” Elizabeth had scolded him once her initial pleasure upon hearing his voice on the other end of the line had leveled.

It had been a very familiar admonishment.

She had been chastising him for last couple years for arriving in the city to visit her only at highly irregular intervals. The young woman preferred to plan ahead, and this was the one area in her life where she had always tended to be caught off-guard.

“You should know how erratic my schedule is by now, Lizzy,” he’d returned blithely, grinning at the fiery scowl in her voice. “I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: if I could give you more notice, I would!”

Elizabeth had given an exasperated huff.

His grin had then turned into a fond smile. “But back to my invitation.... I’d really like to see you tonight, if you’re available.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to see you,” she’d sighed, tone a little more contrite to make up for her earlier irritation. “But it’s Wednesday night and I have a paper due tomorrow. I want to see you, but...I need to get my work done.”

“I won’t keep you out too late.”

She’d snorted lightly in disbelief at that, and he had envisioned her wryly rolling her eyes.

And she probably really had, too!

“Red, you say that now, but we both know it’s a lie.”

“You know I’ve never lied to you,” he’d chided with a gentle sternness. “I promise I’ll get you home at a reasonable hour so you will be able to get all your writing done.”

“Well....” she had hedged, clearly desiring to take him up on his offer but feeling guilty about putting off her homework.

“And if I don’t,” the man had cajoled, deciding to sweeten the deal, “I’ll help you finish writing it myself.”
“You don’t even know what it’s about!” she’d laughed, seemingly both amused and surprised that he had offered.

“I know a great deal about a great many things,” he had chuckled. “We’d probably get it done together in no time at all.”

She’d given another soft snort at his rather conceited arrogance. “It definitely wouldn’t be the first time you’ve helped me with my homework!”

Wasn’t that the truth!

A knowing smile had curved his lips. “So you’ll come to dinner with me?”

“Yeah,” she’d smiled back. “Yeah, I’ll come. But,” she’d playfully warned in all seriousness, “I’ll be holding you to your word, you know!”

“My word is my bond, darling,” he’d drawled back teasingly...although the sentiment behind his dry phrasing was completely genuine.

And so once the sun had set, they had met downtown at a casual little Italian place that had an outdoor patio attached to it.

Red always had preferred to eat outdoors unless he knew the proprietor of the establishment through and through. Naturally, the primary reason for this particular preference was for security reasons...so that his men would be able to interfere swiftly and easily if an issue were to ever arise. The secondary reason for this particular preference of his was that he truly did enjoy being outdoors. There was just something about fresh air and open skies that stirred his soul, whether he was in the country or in the city.

Luckily it hadn’t been raining that mid-November evening so he’d managed to secure a private table outside in the back corner beneath a circle of wrought iron heat lamps and away from most of the restaurant’s patrons.

Red could still remember what she had worn that night...and how he had felt when he had seen the young woman walking towards him, her boot heels clicking rhythmically on the cobblestones as she’d come closer and closer.

He’d risen to his feet to greet her, desperately trying not to openly stare at how the floor-length, dusky black dress had clung sensually to her curves, which had seemed to have filled out more since the last time he’d seen her. She would always be lithe of figure, but there had been a new deepening of her hip and breast that he, a virile man and ardent admirer of feminine beauty, had found quite appealing indeed.

Elizabeth had worn her long, dark brown hair swept off to the side and loose down her back. A couple of thick, silky locks had drifted carelessly down her front, drawing his reluctant but appreciative attention to her outfit’s plunging neckline.

He had known exactly what she’d been trying to do, dressing like that.

Despite the fact that she had been dating other men, and had been even going relatively steady with one of them at the time, she’d still desired him to notice her as a man notices a woman.

By wearing that flattering, long-sleeved dress, which had tread a very fine line between either being categorized as casually informal or as blatantly sultry, for it had been made of thick, ribbed cotton yet had also slinkily hugged her body like a second skin before gently flaring out at her hips, Elizabeth
had been imperiously challenging him to not only acknowledge her sexuality, but to also
acknowledge and even act on the growing attraction between them.

All throughout dinner, Red had done his best to manipulate her subtle flirtations, when she had
attempted any, into something of a more...innocent and friendly nature. It hadn’t been difficult for
him to do, for he was a master conversationalist—if he did say so himself.

But as the evening had worn on, what had eventually shocked him was that he’d been slowly
realizing a part of him hadn’t wanted to temper her coy attitude any longer.

And when he had finally heard himself quip flirtatiously back to her in a low, gravelly purr, and had
felt his blood heat startlingly as she’d leaned forward in hesitantly triumphant curiosity,
unconsciously displaying the milky white flesh of her décolletage to its full advantage, he had met
her eyes and had looked at her.

Really looked at her.

And something new and tentative had begun to quiver intriguingly there between them while the
almost haughty expression in her striking eyes had melted into something much more vulnerable.

Then the waiter had chosen that exact moment to come by their table, interrupting them to refill their
drinks and in so doing, successfully chasing away the charged—and unspoken—sentiments lingering
in the air between them.

At the time, Red hadn’t been entirely certain if he’d been relieved by or disappointed in the young
man’s...inconvenient—or convenient?—timing.

Perhaps he had felt both emotions in equal measure. Perhaps he’d felt one more than the other.

He hadn’t been able to say decisively.

But he certainly hadn’t been so much of a fool as to not take advantage of the waiter’s interruption to
turn his conversation with Lizzy to a much safer avenue.

Soon, he’d been regaling her with a few, longer tales of his most recent and rather amusing
transcontinental misadventures.

And as always, she had given him her complete and undivided attention, avidly listening to the
incredible yarns he’d spun while she had sometimes rolled her eyes in amusement, or had given him
an exasperated grin, or had burst out laughing...since his comments and declarations had warranted
such varied reactions.

Then she had reciprocated in kind, telling him all about her classes and the hijinks she and her friends
had gotten up to since the last time she’d spoken to him.

Red had thoroughly enjoyed hearing about the relatively harmless shenanigans she’d participated in.
And just like she had, he’d shaken his head in amusement, had shared some dryly pithy remarks, and
had laughed jovially when appropriate. Sometimes he’d felt his hackles rise once or twice during a
couple of her stories, but he’d made sure not to show it.

If he’d started to pass judgement and chide her, like Sam probably would have done if he’d caught
wind of some of this, Lizzy most likely would have stopped confiding so much in him.

And Red certainly hadn’t wanted that.
He had wanted her to continue to be able to feel like she could come to him about anything and tell him any kind of story, no matter what kind of details it encompassed.

So it had been since she’d been a little girl, and so it should remain.

As dinner had progressed, the feeling between them had grown so familiarly easy that Red had wanted to keep that sparkle of laughter and delight shining in her eyes for as long as he could.

She had certainly more than deserved a night out like this.

Which had reminded him....

After the waiter had taken their dessert orders and had then melted back into the shadows of the patio to give them their privacy, Red had reached inside his jacket to retrieve a long, velvet box from the inner pocket.

Her shrewd gaze had darted curiously to the box before flicking to his face, head tilting slightly to the side in an unasked, but rather hopeful, query.

“Yes,” the man had confirmed, smiling fondly, “this is for you, Lizzy.” He had then pushed the gift that had traveled halfway around the world toward her in offering.

And just as he’d desired, her lovely eyes had brightened even more with excitement. “But—it’s not my birthday!” she had exclaimed, eager fingertips just brushing against the thick, navy blue velvet. “My birthday isn’t until April!”

“Then would you like to wait and open it in April?” the man had asked, cocking an eyebrow at her. “If that’s the case,” he’d laughingly teased her, “I’ll just take it back and hold on to it for you until then...."

The young woman’s palm had quickly pressed down on its soft top, stilling his attempt to slide it back towards his side of the table.

“I didn’t say that!”

He had chuckled knowingly as she’d wrinkled her nose at him.

“Well,” he’d drawled encouragingly, “go ahead and open it then!”

The man had leaned back in his chair, intently watching as she’d carefully lifted the box’s top with slow but earnest anticipation.

Then she had gasped loudly, and a wide smile had split Red’s face as her shocked and elated eyes had lifted to his.

“Oh my God—are these real?” she had demanded breathlessly, gingerly running her almost hesitant fingers reverently over the sparkling length of the bracelet.

“Yes,” he’d grinned affectionately. Christ, as if he were the kind of man to give her imitation jewels! “Very much so.”

Elizabeth had then stared down at the glittering treasure, completely enraptured. “It’s.... God, Red, it’s so beautiful!” she had breathed. “The color—they’re so blue they’re almost purple!”

“The Burmese sapphires are known for their highly saturated, midnight blue, almost violet coloring,” he’d enthusiastically informed her. “I’ve seen many, very fine sapphires in my time, but these are
truly some of the finest I’ve ever laid eyes on,” he had admitted, gaze flickering down to proudly admire the gemstones.

Flushing, she had looked up at him again. “These must’ve cost a fortune,” she’d hedged uncertainly.

“Actually,” the man had grinned mischievously, “they didn’t cost me a cent.”

She had given him a look of sheer disbelief.

“A jeweler I’ve known for years owed me a favor,” he’d explained seriously.

“It must’ve been some favor!”

The man had shrugged a shoulder, unwilling to go into further detail...so he had instead diverted her attention.

“I don’t ever wear jewelry besides my watch,” he’d tapped a fingertip once over the thick glass protecting the mother-of-pearl face for emphasis, “and while I was perusing his wares, this little beauty here caught my eye.” He had met her gaze with a genuine smile. “I thought of you. And I didn’t want to wait until April to give it to you.”

Flattered and moved all at once, the woman had dimpled her pleasure. “Can I wear it right now?”

Red had laughed outright at her sweet hesitancy. “What are you asking me for? It’s yours!”

“Oh, God, I don’t know! Let’s just chalk it up to giddiness,” she’d mumbled, flushing with embarrassment—but she wasn’t so abashed that she hadn’t been able to adoringly pick up the gorgeous bracelet from its bed of crushed velvet.

“Here, allow me, Elizabeth,” he had smiled, suavely extending a courteous hand.

“Oh—uh, thank you,” she’d stammered as she had reached out to him, somewhat taken aback by his sudden, genteel manner.

Before taking the circlet of shining sapphires from her grasp, he’d gently wrapped the fingers of one hand around hers while using his other to slowly push her sleeve up to bare the pale skin of her narrow wrist.

Her flesh had been so soft beneath his fingertips. He had admired that about her while also taking notice of her delicate bone structure as he’d carefully turned her small wrist so that her palm had been facing up toward the starlit sky.

She may have inherited her bold coloring from her father, but her petite build and graceful hands were most definitely gifts from Katarina.

And those eyes.

They were as deep and as beautiful as the sapphires he’d given her. Those unusual yet striking eyes were a gift from Katarina as well.

But while the Russian agent’s eyes had been shadowed with severe unhappiness, dreadful secrets, crippling insecurities, and boundless rage, Elizabeth’s—as they had slowly lifted to meet his—had been exquisitely liquid, clearly honest, and completely guileless.

Then her enticing gaze had dropped from his down to the skin he had bared...to the slender wisps of red scar tissue that flowed from the inside of her wrist down to the heel of her hand.
Red had followed her line of sight, observing how she’d begun to curl her slim fingers inwards...as if she’d been attempting to hide her marred skin from his view.

A frown had briefly creased his brow at that.

Lizzy had always felt fiercely self-conscious about that scar. In the past, she had covered it up with clothing whenever she’d been able to.

And even though she’d known he had seen it countless times before, that night out with him hadn’t been an exception—the sleeves of her dress had extended fairly far down her hands.

He had known that had been by her design. And he had even empathized with her efforts, for he had his own share of scars he covered up because he didn’t want anyone to catch a glimpse of—or stare at—them.

But his inching the thick cotton up her forearm had blatantly exposed the imperfection, the physical reminder that she’d experienced an extremely sorrowful and emotionally painful past even though she couldn’t recall it, to her eyes...and to his.

Red still couldn’t say what had possessed him to do what he’d done next. Perhaps he’d wanted her to know she’d had no reason to be ashamed of the scar...that she was quite a beauty, not to mention a vivaciously spirited and accomplished young woman who was well-loved by those who knew her best, despite its being there. But before he’d known it, he had begun tracing the discolored and puckered flesh, running two of his fingers lightly down its entire length, following its languid swirls.

Elizabeth had gone very still then, a blush slowly suffusing her cheeks while her shining eyes had been intent on his gentle caress...the most intimate touch he’d ever given her.

It was the kind of touch a virile man gave a sexually mature woman he was especially drawn to.

The sound of her breath catching softly in her throat and the way her pulse had begun to thread quickly beneath his fingertips had immediately brought him back to himself.

Christ, what the fuck had he been doing, touching her like that?

Inwardly cursing himself for his complete lapse in judgement—even though touching her like that had felt like the most natural thing in the world to have done—he had cleared his throat quietly before he’d pressed four fingers over her scar, holding them there for the briefest of moments.

Then he’d reached around and had clasped the sparkling bracelet securely around her wrist.

As soon as he had released her, their eyes had met. Hers, sharp with wondering, had searched his, which had gleamed with keen interest...and guarded reticence.

He’d been quite certain that his wary reserve had been what had kept her from pursuing that warm and sensuous spark of attraction they both had intimately felt.

To his surprise, it had been Elizabeth who had then swiftly taken the reins of the delicate moment, competently leading them out of that charged something growing sensually between them by bestowing a genuine smile on him.

“Thank you, Red,” she’d told him emphatically, fingering the jewels glittering around her wrist. “Really. It’s so beautiful, and I love it so much!”

His gaze had flashed with regard for how she’d maturely diffused the awkward situation he had
brought about. And he couldn’t quite remember what he’d said in return...but he most likely had blithely waved away her gratitude while saying something that had probably made her laugh as he’d attempted to recapture the mood from before.

Like he had that night exactly a year ago, Red admired how the bracelet looked on her. It wasn’t too large or too small...it was the perfect size and length for her petite hand. But unlike that night exactly a year ago, he was now free to gather that hand firmly in his and raise it to press a tender kiss to the inside of her wrist, directly over the thin, flowering vines of her scar.

Once he allowed their fingers to drift apart, he met her smiling eyes from across the short distance separating them. “Are you ready to eat?”

Grinning, Elizabeth picked up her heavy silver fork in answer. “This is the moment of truth!” she declared earnestly, spearing a piece of gnocchi onto the tines.

Red watched amusedly as she stared at it for a moment before resolutely popping it into her mouth. His lips curved into a slow smile as she chewed, her eyes half-closing in pleasure.

“It’s delicious!” she exclaimed happily once she had finished swallowing.

Well, of course it was!

“Delicious indeed,” he agreed, humming his own delight after he swallowed his own mouthful. “And the sauce...I’d forgotten how creamy and flavorful it is! It’s as delectable as any five-star Italian restaurant’s.”

“No!”

“I’m serious,” he nodded sagely.

“Well, I guess you’d know,” she giggled before scooping up another forkful of pasta and sliding it gracefully into her mouth. “And to think that we actually cooked this!”

“It was mostly you, Lizzy,” the man smiled.

She shook her head while she crunched on the bite of salad she had just taken. “I couldn’t have done it without you showing me.”

He inclined his head, gracefully conceding her point. Then he lifted his wine glass, gesturing for her to do the same. “To partnership, then.”

“To partnership,” she smiled, clinking the rim of her glass against his before they both took a drink.

“And to you,” he smiled back, touching his glass to hers yet again.

“Me?” She wrinkled her nose. “I thought you just agreed that it took the both of us to do it!”

“Yes, but this is a big day for you! You just successfully cooked your first meal without causing significant mishap or chaotic mayhem in the kitchen,” he teased, laughing as she made a face at him. “But in all seriousness, sweetheart, you put forth the effort and it’s such a nice meal you helped make. So...” He lifted his glass to her. “To you.”

Blushing, she took a delicate swallow of the expensive vintage.

“I guess I have caused a bit of ‘mishap and mayhem in the kitchen’—in the past,” she grinned, shaking her head at herself.
“I was thinking about some of those times earlier,” Red confessed, green eyes glinting with amusement.

“And it wasn’t just cooking and baking that I...struggled with,” Elizabeth grimaced. “Any time I tried to do something in the kitchen, something else usually ended up going wrong!”

“Perhaps especially if Sam wasn’t home?”

She moaned, rubbing her hand across her face in exasperation as more embarrassing memories began cropping up. “Like that night he was out on a date with the town’s librarian. Ms. Leeves, if I remember right...? Anyway. Right before he left he told me to start the dishwasher.”

Red was grinning. “Was that the time you poured dish washing hand soap into the dishwasher’s slot instead of dish washing detergent?”

“Yes!” she wailed, blushing brightly. “I didn’t even realize! And then I went upstairs and didn’t even know....” She shuddered. “Thank God you arrived at the house when you did!”

“And walked right smack dab into a wall of bubbles once I pushed open the door and stepped across the threshold!”

“It was definitely bad enough by the time you got there,” she snorted. “It seemed like almost the whole house was a freaking bubble wonderland!”

“They even began moving up to the second story! I remember pelting up the stairs, bellowing your name....”

“And you burst into my room and got my sleeping ass out of bed!” Elizabeth laughed. “Wasn’t it, like, midnight?”

“At least!” Red chuckled. “Never in my entire life was I so incredibly grateful for an entire house to have wood flooring instead of carpets.”

“Can you even imagine? All that standing water!” she groaned, undoubtedly picturing the hypothetical, sopping mess she would have had to ashamedly explain to her adoptive father.

“Sam would’ve had to rip everything out.”

“And I would’ve been grounded for life!”

“You still might have been if we hadn’t cleaned it all up before he got home,” he winked.

“That wasn’t the only time you pulled my butt out of the fire,” Elizabeth grinned, eyes sparkling impishly.

“Oh, don’t I know it!”

A brief, companionable silence fell between them as they continued to enjoy their dinners, each momentarily lost in their own nostalgic thoughts about years long past.

“Sometimes I wonder how I ever left it.”

Red glanced up at her in query.

“Home,” she clarified with a hesitant smile. “There are days when I miss it so much it’s like a sharp pain...here.” Her hand crept up to place itself over her heart.
“Do you miss your childhood, or is it the land itself that you miss?”

Elizabeth fingered the stem of her wineglass as she gave his question some thought. “Both. Of course....” she cleared her throat softly before continuing, “I miss Sam so much.”

They shared a small, understanding smile before she looked back down at her glass.

“My childhood memories are all wrapped around him. So maybe it’s not so much my childhood I miss, but him,” she quietly contemplated. “Being able to see him, talk to him.... You know.”

He did.

“But I do miss the house, too. The country lifestyle. The land.” Her eyes met his. “Terabithia.”

Red’s expression was gentle. “Do you think you’d ever want to go back?”

“You mean, to live there?”

“Mmm.”

“I’m not sure.” She bit her lower lip pensively. “I mean, if I were to ever move back to Nebraska one day when I’m older, I probably wouldn’t be able to live in the same house. In fact, I know I wouldn’t.”

She made an effort to hide her sadness, but Red had seen it flash in her eyes before she’d veiled them from his observant gaze.

“Because...I have to sell it.” She took a sip of wine, most likely to steady her voice. “Sell it, or at the very least rent it out in order to help pay for the years of school that’ll come after I get my bachelors degree, not to mention the career that’ll come after that....”

Red’s expression softened. He genuinely admired her ability to be practical, and knew just how difficult it was on her to even contemplate selling it.

To Elizabeth, the house, Terabithia, and all the surrounding land represented not only Sam, but her childhood as well. To sell the house would be like selling all the memories she held so dear. And to rent out the house? While it wouldn’t be as painful of a process as selling it would be, it wouldn’t quite be all hers any longer.

She’d have to share it with strangers.

He knew better than most what it was like not to want to share something so very personal...because it felt like an invasion of privacy.

“No one has offered to buy it yet, right?” she asked, nibbling nervously on her lower lip. “I mean, I know you told me you’d have some of your people maintain the house and property until I got an offer. Which was so great of you....”

He waved the comment humbly away. “I’ve told you it’s no trouble, Elizabeth.”

Luckily she knew him well enough to not push her gratitude too much more onto him, for she understandingly dropped that particular train of thought.

“I think you would’ve told me by now if an offer came in....” Her eyes lifted to his. “Right?”

He nodded slowly in confirmation. “No offers have come in for the house.”
Then with a gentle smile, he rose to his feet.

Elizabeth looked up at him, puzzled. Not that he could blame her for the sudden, confused expression crossing her features. They weren’t even close to finishing dinner yet!

“I need to get something. One moment....”

Almost as quickly as he’d left, he came back... but now he carried something.

Cradled in his large hands was an elegantly rustic glass jar sealed with what looked like an asymmetrical chunk of wood cut from a knotted bur oak branch.

“I was going to wait until later tonight to give this to you, but I think now would be better,” he confided as he seated himself.

Then he held out the container to her.

Her brow puckering in bewilderment, Lizzy accepted the heavy jar from him and stared down at it, obviously baffled by the different types of granite and quartz rocks, river pebbles, and other sediments like dirt and sand all layered in rows with precise care inside, but she was too damned sweet to demand what exactly he meant by giving it to her.

Chuckling softly, the man reached out and gripped the top, slowly turning the jar around in her hands.

On the front, etched and raised into the thick glass in flowing calligraphy, was one word: Terabithia.

Mystified, she met his smiling eyes.

The span of a heartbeat passed. Then two.

Then suddenly....

Red could see the longing and the desperate hope dawning in her wide gaze—but he also observed the instant disbelief.

“I...don’t understand,” she murmured hesitantly, her slim index finger tracing over the intricate ‘T’ as she fervently searched his face.

“Do you not?” he asked quietly.

“You can’t possibly mean....” her husky voice trailed off, and he could tell that she still hardly dared to believe what this jar signified.

Well, he would be straight with her and put all her uncertainties to rest.

“I’m buying your property from you,” the man stated gently. “And then I’m giving all of it back to you, Elizabeth.”

Tears of shocked and pure, heartfelt joy immediately filled her beautiful eyes as he continued to speak.

“The house, the stable, the creek, Terabithia, all the land you traipsed through when you were that young, wildling princess commanding your territory....”

He winked at her and a laugh breathlessly escaped her parted lips as she hugged the container tightly
to her chest.

“It’s all yours to do with as you please. You can sell it, rent it out, or keep it and have it maintained until you want it, or need it.”

Elizabeth dashed the glittering tears from her cheeks. “Red, I can’t possibly accept this—this gift,” she sniffed, her tone caught between stern admonishment and elated laughter. “It’s such a beautiful gesture and I’m almost—I’m almost beyond words,” she stammered emphatically. “But I can’t—I shouldn’t—"

The man shook his head vehemently and reached out, placing his warm palm over both of her hands that clutched the jar before giving them a squeeze. “You can accept it. You should.”

She gazed at him through the fresh tears welling in her eyes.

“I know how the thought of letting your beloved childhood home go was tearing you up inside. I know just how important that place still is to you.” He gave her a tender smile. “I want to do this for you, Elizabeth.” His tone was adamant as he fervently searched her eyes. “Please allow me this.”

Being the sharp and clever young woman she was, he had no doubt that she understood the other, more practical reason behind such a profoundly significant gesture.

By selling the house to him only to have it signed back over to her, the money she’d make from such a transaction would keep her on a financially secure footing for quite a few more years to come.

Sam had left her a handsome sum in his Will, but those funds wouldn’t last forever. And while Red would just openly give her the money if he could, he knew she wouldn’t accept it—at least, not in that way.

He understood her all too well. His darling girl possessed such stubborn pride.

Of course, once her accounts reached a certain figure—and this probably wouldn’t be for a few years yet—he would funnel capital into them anyway, and gladly, without even a second thought. But he’d have to do it in such a way where she wouldn’t suspect that he was behind her consistent good fortune in her investments and stocks.

Red would always find ways to get her what she needed. With the connections he’d cultivated over the years and with all the resources he had at his disposal, it certainly wouldn’t be difficult.

But for her own knowledge, and therefore her own peace of mind, she’d have a nice little nest egg tucked away in the bank that would be undeniably hers, obtained transparently and through completely legal means.

That is, if she accepted this gift.

“Please, Lizzy,” he entreated again, his gravelly baritone low with passionate feeling.

The young woman regarded him for another few moments before she rewarded his patience with a beaming smile. “I promise I won’t drive the price up just for the sake of gouging you,” she vowed playfully, though her voice still trembled with the profoundly deep emotions reeling within her.

“On the contrary!” he chided, chuckling warmly. “I absolutely expect you to price it high. That way we can loop this experience into a lesson in bargaining.”

As Elizabeth’s full lips curved into a grin, Red leaned forward and kissed her.
He hadn’t expected their passion to flare up so suddenly—or so swiftly. Her ardent and nearly unbridled response to his tender touch both surprised and delighted him, and it wasn’t long at all before the rest of their dinner was abandoned so they could turn all of their physical attentions sensually upon each other.

“This is the second time we’ve let half a gourmet meal go to waste,” she gasped once Red had finally sheathed himself inside of her with one long and controlled stroke of his hard cock.

“I doubt you have regrets?” he growled softly in her ear as he assertively rolled his hips, eyes lidding themselves when she pressed her hands tightly against his ass, driving him even deeper within.

Fuck, the sensation was exquisite!

“Oh—no,” she breathed, smiling serenely as her nails raked fervidly up his back when he began to surge against her. “No regrets about anything. None at all.”

The man wished he could have felt the same.

That particular sentiment lingered persistently in his thoughts as, much later that night, he at last leaned languidly back against the cushioned headboard, nursing a single-malt scotch while he watched her sleep.

The drapes were pulled back so the moonlight swept boldly into the bedroom, bathing her delicate face and sated, naked figure in a silvery glow.

The way the ethereal beams shone down on her made her seem younger than her years.

A rueful light gleamed in his eyes as he took a drink of the bitterly strong alcohol...as he allowed himself to indulge in emotions and thoughts he rarely acknowledged.

Christ, how he regretted the circumstances of her birth! With each passing year, it pained him more and more how he had to continue to conceal who she really was from her.

This deception he perpetuated was to keep her safe.

To preserve her life.

He was well aware of that.

And he would always do whatever needed to be done to ensure that she remained protected and alive.

But he wouldn’t be a man with conscience if a part of him didn’t wish that circumstances had been drastically different for her: that she’d grown up with a loving family and a multitude of siblings; that she’d never had to experience the horrific trauma of surviving a house fire that had nearly taken her life; that she’d been able to retain all her memories because she never would have gunned down her own father; that she would have always known her true origins, her birth name, and her actual birth date...not the one he had assigned to her as part of her cover identity as Elizabeth Scott.

Red reached out and stroked his fingers very lightly through her long hair, a sad yet gently tender smile touching his lips as she shifted toward him in her sleep, the sapphire bracelet she wore catching and holding the glittering, autumn moonlight.

“Happy twenty-second birthday, Masha,” he whispered.
A huge thank you goes out to my readers for being so patient while you were waiting for this update ❤ you guys are amazing!

I’d also like to thank my friend Katrina for giving me the inspiration for a few of Liz’s kitchen catastrophes :D

As always, an infinite thank you goes out to my betas, Daniel and Jami. I don’t always ask them to look over my chapters, but they are always a source of constant support, inspiration, and encouragement.

Can you believe I’ve been writing *Sine Qua Non* for over a year now? Sometimes it feels like I just started writing it yesterday! Time is a funny thing, isn’t it? :)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
“You’re going to put me to sleep doing that....” Elizabeth sighed deeply, smiling as she contentedly rubbed her cheek against the smooth satin of Red’s pants.

They were snuggled in their pajamas, drowsily lounging on the sofa in front of the glowing fire. Red was slouched comfortably back into plush suede and she was lying down on her side, her head cradled in his lap.

Even though her eyes were closed, she could sense the man look down at her as he continued to slowly run his fingers through her long hair, starting at her scalp and languidly moving down to the curled tips.

“I can stop....” he teased in a rumble that clearly told her he already knew what her response to that suggestion would be.

Her eyes flickered open, but she was feeling too damned lazy to feign playful irritation and look over her shoulder to make a face at him. “Don’t stop,” she murmured instead, cutting right to the heart of her desire. “It feels so good....”

“That is, perhaps, the third time I’ve heard that particular phrase pass your lips in the last hour or so.”

She could hear the rather smug pleasure in his low, purring tone—not that she held it against him. His count was correct, after all!

“Mmhm,” she smiled again, gazing sleepily at the tongues of orange and red flames that were rising high enough in the fireplace to now dance spiritedly with one another upon the crackling wood logs.

An hour or so ago, after she and Red had hung the very last of the ornaments on the Christmas tree and together had tucked its pearly velvet skirt all the way around the stout iron stand so it would be hidden from view, Red had then turned off all the lamps in the living room and had carefully stoked the fire before joining her in admiring how beautiful it was.

The Christmas tree positively shimmered with brilliancy. The vibrant, multi-colored lights twinkled merrily within its dark green needles. Those lovely specks of brightness had reflected cheerfully off of each and every glass ball they’d hung from the top of the tree to the very bottom, multiplying the luminosity tenfold.

All the various-sized, opalescent ornaments seemed to be floating amidst the lush branches. To make them appear that way, Red had shown her how to wrap their hooks as close to the wood as they could so that the wires would be invisible to the onlooker.

“Aisling taught me that,” he’d confided quietly with the smallest of smiles. “She loved crafting and had always been...innovative that way.”

Even though he had swiftly tried to hide it, Liz had seen the pained grief flickering there in his eyes.
before he had glanced away, turning his attention back to the creative task at hand.

It had been with the utmost respect that she had gingerly hung the rest of the glass ornaments using his late wife’s clever method.

Neither of them had been able to steadily reach the very top of the proud, six foot tall Noble fir to reverently place the finishing touch without using a step ladder. But when she had made to retrieve a nearby chair to use since there hadn’t been a ladder on hand, the man had surmised her intent and had swiftly scooped her up in his strong arms instead, chuckling at her squeak of surprise while he had easily lifted her up.

The shining star that she had set at the very top of the tree had sparkled gloriously with iridescent splendor.

As Elizabeth had gazed admiringly at it, she had suddenly been overcome with an almost indescribable feeling.

It had been stronger than contentment, but not as blissful as pure joy—an emotion that had been noticeably absent from her mournful heart because she had been missing Sam so desperately over the last couple weeks.

The new feeling suffusing her had been something in between...and it had been poignantly compelling.

The activity of decorating the tree had been one she and Sam had partaken in every Christmas Eve for as far back as she could remember. Sharing such an important tradition with Red had, in a way, eased the piercing grief within her. His loving and steady presence had been the soothing balm her aching heart had needed, for she hadn’t felt the absence of Sam nearly as keenly as she would have if she’d been all alone with only Bronn for company.

Liz had wondered if the man had felt similarly, for even though she hadn’t known how they’d died, she had known he had lost both Aisling and Lilah this very day over a decade ago. She had glanced over at him, taking in his pensive profile, noticing how the Christmas lights reflected in his eyes.

Even though the scintillating glimmering had rendered his expression near-unreadable, she’d felt the waves of heavy solemnity emanating from him.

She had nibbled in her lower lip uncertainly. Had she been more of an...for lack of a more apt word...intruder here tonight?

Then, as she’d considered his gracious and affectionate manner towards her while they’d decorated the tree, her own expression had begun to flicker with soft hope.

Maybe she hadn’t intruded. Maybe her presence had helped him emotionally...like his had buoyed her.

As if he had finally sensed her thoughtfully curious gaze lingering upon him, he had at last turned toward her.

Their eyes had met fleetingly, his grave ones gentling just before he had gathered her into his arms, folding her close to his heart.

As Red had pressed his cheek against the side of her head, broad chest expanding as he had breathed in quietly and deeply, Elizabeth had almost been able to sense him gathering his feelings of heavy melancholy with that long breath. Then as he had slowly sighed out, she could almost discern him
locking those feelings down deep within himself with the controlled finesse he possessed from many long, sad years of practice.

“I’m glad you’re here tonight,” he’d finally murmured, stroking a warm hand down her spine.

Was he truly?

“Me too,” she had whispered, tentatively rubbing her cheek against the fine wool of his waistcoat. “Holidays,” she’d ventured, “especially Christmas, shouldn’t be spent alone.”

Although due to the gently reproachful and concerned remarks she had overheard Sam make to Red throughout the years, she had been fairly certain that Red had been doing exactly that for almost as long as she had known him. And so she’d wondered what he’d done every Christmas Eve and Day, year after year, all by himself...for he certainly hadn’t spent that time with her and Sam.

Had he treated those days like any other and had made the concerted effort to work hard so he would be too occupied for his memories to prey on him?

Along that same thought, had he fervently busied himself into a weary exhaustion so he could eventually escape reality into sleep?

Perhaps he hadn’t been alone at all. It could have been that he had tried to find comfort, even solace, in the arms of women.

Or at least try to inundate himself in the distracting, physical pleasures of sex.

He’d probably had many, eager acquaintances he could have called on, and she had suspected that he’d still retained the contact information of a plethora of escort services he’d admitted to using before...so it was very possible.

But Elizabeth had also known firsthand how one could be surrounded by the company of others and still feel emotionally detached from them all. So even if he had sought out feminine companionship, he still might have felt terribly isolated and therefore susceptible to the plague of bitter grief.

It also could have been possible that he had he tried to drown his painful memories, and therefore lose himself, in hard alcohol. By his own admission to her, it had been an impulsion he had succumbed to before, and more than once.

Red could very well have capitulated willingly to any and all of those possibilities over the years in order to cope with the holiday that mercilessly unearthed the piercing soul-pain that he relentlessly strived to keep buried.

But she hadn’t asked him to divulge how he’d spent his past Christmases.

Nor had she wanted to.

Yet from the way he’d tightened his hold reassuringly on her body and had tenderly kissed the top of her head in response to her statement, she had known then—without a doubt—that her presence here really had helped him after all.

Just like his had helped her.

At the knowledge, contented relief had slowly suffused her and she had hugged him even more closely.
“Thank you again for buying the tree, Red,” she’d smiled, turning her face to rest her other cheek against his chest so she could gaze at the glittering beauty before them. “You know you didn’t have to....”

He’d snorted softly at that. “As if anyone would have been able to say ‘no’ to those huge, wistful eyes of yours,” he had teased, giving her an affectionate squeeze.

Lifting her face, she had wrinkled her nose in playful indignance at him.

Red had flashed a fond grin down at her. “But in all seriousness, sweetheart, I’m glad you pulled me through the Christmas tree lot after dinner. I’m glad we brought one home.” His eyes had flicked to the Noble fir. “It’s actually the first tree I’ve put up in any of my own residences since....” he had briefly hesitated before pressing on, “since their passing,” he’d confided quietly.

“I’d wondered,” she had admitted softly, thinking back to the sorrow that had shone in his eyes when he’d showed her Aisling’s trick for hanging ornaments.

Guilt had suddenly and unexpectedly struck her heart. Even though she’d been desperate for a Christmas tree to decorate tonight to aid in soothing her feelings of bereavement, purchasing one and then bringing it up to his suite to deck its branches might have had the complete opposite effect on Red.

Leaning back, she had slanted a concerned look up at him. “I’m sorry if it was—painful...to...to—“

He must have known where she’d been heading by speaking those soft words, for the man had shaken his head, effectively halting her heartfelt apology.

“It was good that we got a tree,” he had interrupted, though not unkindly. “Good for me.” He’d offered her a small but genuine smile. “And good for you.” His voice had deepened with compassion. “I know about the tradition you and Sam had. I understand just how important the Christmas tree is to you, Lizzy.”

She had quickly blinked back the hot tears that had suddenly blurred her vision.

Was there anything in this world that the man didn’t know about her? Or anything in her character that he couldn’t perceive? He knew her so well....

Nodding, she’d offered him a watery smile right before she had glanced away from his understanding eyes. The action had been her attempt to both regather her composure and to hide from him the depth of poignant emotion she’d felt.

Elizabeth had felt his thumbs rub over her lower spine in sympathetic circles, and she’d been grateful that he hadn’t expected a response.

At that point in time, she had been so certain her voice would have failed her!

And she hadn’t wanted to cry. She hadn’t wanted to give in to the fierce grief for Sam that had been tirelessly stalking the back of her thoughts during the last couple of weeks leading up to this night.

As if sensing her melancholy and her desperate determination to sidestep it, Red had tucked her more firmly against his robust chest and had brought a hand up to run it soothingly through her wavy hair.

She had returned his gentle caress by trailing one of her own hands tenderly down his spine to rest it against the small of his back while her other had cupped the back of his warm neck, fingers sliding just beneath his collar, nails lightly scratching through the prickle of small hairs there.
Liz hadn’t been able to say at what point their embrace had changed from one of empathetic compassion into one of sensual passion.

Perhaps it had been when Mannheim Steamroller’s instrumental, rather ethereal version of “Silent Night” that had been playing over the stereo had faded to be replaced only by the sound of the shy fluttering of the recently-stoked fire.

Perhaps it had been when he’d released a shuddering breath as he had bent closer to slowly brush his nose against hers while both his palms had slid around her sides to hold on to her narrow hips.

Perhaps it had been when she’d nuzzled him back, the affection causing such a feeling of sensuality to thread deliciously through her that she had curved her pelvis languidly into his, her mouth drifting lower of its own accord to press a loving kiss to the weathered skin exposed by the V of his shirt.

But its subtle yet beguiling metamorphosis had been complete by the time Red had dipped his head to seek her lips, kissing her deeply when he’d found them.

As his mouth had intimately melded with hers, her roused heart had begun to pound fervently. Her blood had sung in a swift and dazzling rush through her veins as she had reciprocated his growing ardor while their tongues had slid against one another and their hands had stroked each other with sweet gentleness...and yearning.

Elizabeth hadn’t been certain of how long they’d stood there, leaning into one another and kissing in front of the shining tree, but it hadn’t seemed like much time had passed at all before they’d each begun questing for more.

When his long fingers had finally trailed sensuous fire down her body to fervidly palm her ass, she had coyly grasped the front of his waistcoat to slowly slip the buttons one by one from their holes.

As he had pulled back slightly to glance down at her, a brow raising in query, she had dimpled enticingly up at him.

“Make love to me?” she had asked softly, answering his unspoken question with one of her own as her nimble fingers had begun to make swift work of his dress shirt.

“Here?” he’d returned just as softly, palms gently cupping her pale neck as she had finally untucked the designer shirt from his dark jeans, determinedly spreading both it and his waistcoat open so she could slide her slim hands under the tight muscle tank he wore beneath it all.

As his wool waistcoat and crisp white shirt had slipped carelessly from his arms to lay forgotten on the gleaming hardwood floor, she had stroked her fingertips further up his abdomen to his stomach, enjoying the sensation of how warm his flesh was and how the wiry hairs curling there felt as they had yielded to her touch.

“Yeah. Under the tree.” She had flashed another smile winningly at him as she had then caressingly undone the fastenings of his leather belt and slacks. “It’d be romantic, don’t you think?”

Red had leaned forward, one hand still wrapped loosely around the side of her neck while the fingers of the other had brushed down her milky décolletage to purposefully catch on the scooped neckline of her ruby-hued, lace blouse. Then they had gently danced along its scalloped edge, following it down and around to finally hover over the mounds of her breasts.

“Quite,” he’d breathed in agreement, lips dipping down to taste the cleft of soft skin there as those adept fingers of his had stroked over her right breast, artfully teasing the nipple into a tight little bud even through the thin layers of lace.
Elizabeth had closed her eyes and had let out a shivering sigh of pleasure, her head tipping back as he had generously begun paying the same amount of ardent attention to the other.

“That feels so good....” she had breathed, one hand hooking around the back of his neck to lightly squeeze him there.

Then she had felt what must have been a smile, for his lips had curved against the swell of her flesh, teeth briefly coming into contact with her collarbone.

“Mmhmm.”

As he had continued to drift kisses over her skin and had expertly kept her nipples at rigid attention at the same time, her desire for him had flared even higher. And he must have sensed it, for she had then felt the large hand that had been cupping the side of her neck drift through the flow of her dark hair to eagerly grasp the small of her back, pressing her hips more firmly against his.

A knowing smile had flickered over her lips as she’d purposefully rolled her pelvis against the straining bulge of his growing erection—for that’s what she had known he’d wanted...the friction of her mound and flat abdomen rubbing against his thick length.

And just as she had expected, a very low and pleased growl had reverberated deeply within his chest as she’d done it.

Even though she’d known it had been coming, the erotic sound had still made her catch her breath, her bare toes reflexively curling in on themselves in excited delight.

Then Red had shifted, purposefully rolling his strong hips into hers this time, undoubtedly to savor the stimulating sensuality of the movement once more.

Then he had done it again. And again.

Even through the thick layers of denim separating their naked flesh, she had felt how hot and hard he’d become for her.

When he had released another impassioned growl into the sloping curve of her bared neck and shoulder, it had made her own arousal pulse deliciously and a pant of longing had escaped her lips. Her eyes had fluttered open and she had lifted her head, her fingertips coyly slipping under the hem of his muscle tank.

Then Liz had given it an imperious tug upwards.

Red had curiously raised his head from her heaving chest to observe what she’d been doing.

“You don’t need this,” she’d murmured suggestively, yanking demandingly on it once more before she’d caught his lips with hers in a hard yet languorous kiss.

A throaty chuckle had rumbled through him like thunder as he had indulged her intimacy for a moment. Then he had briefly released her mouth and body to swiftly pull the offending material up and off of his torso.

With Red’s bulk no longer completely enfolding her, the cool air of the room had hit her jarringly and a shiver had run down her spine, causing goosebumps to chase it in a rush over her. But before she’d even been able to plaintively mourn the absence of his aroused heat, his muscular arms had almost instantly surrounded her again.
The titillating sensation of the heat of his naked chest and belly seeping through the intricate swirls of her lace blouse to mingle with her own warmth had made the ardent fire of her desire seethe in a dazzling flash within her.

“You don’t need yours either,” Red had purred huskily in her ear, hands eagerly sliding back up her curves to palm her breasts, though whether that fervent touch had been to excite her or himself, she hadn’t been able to say.

“No,” she had agreed breathlessly, her own fingers impatiently pawing at the front of his jeans until they had finally begun to slowly slide down his hips.

Liz had felt more than heard yet another, knowing laugh vibrate up from the depths of his chest. And it had made her dimple impishly at him in return.

As she had wrapped her thin arms wantonly around his neck, he had buried his hands between the smooth skin of her back and the scarlet whorls of delicate lace. Then with practiced finesse and thoughtful care, he had slowly dragged the blouse up her body.

After it had slipped over her head and had floated gently to the paneled floor to join the growing pile of discarded clothing, their lustful eyes had met fleetingly before each had glanced away to hungrily admire the other.

The glimmering lights of the Christmas tree had bathed half of Red’s body in a sheen of varied hues edged in gold while his other half remained in dusky shadow. The shimmering tableau it all had made had teased of an almost otherworldly beauty melding with his raw, earthy masculinity, creating quite a conflicting yet compelling vision before her.

Transfixed, she had reached out to caress her palms earnestly down the gleaming of iridescent shades that had flowed over half his chest, down half his belly, down half his abdomen. Those scintillating colors had glinted through the silver-and-blonde track of hair leading even further downwards, and she had followed it to the point where it had disappeared into the band of his burgundy boxer briefs.

She had felt him watching her intently, perhaps even expectantly, as he had smoothed his hands in a lingering caress down her naked sides, and so she had slanted a coquettish look up at him through the fringe of her inky lashes.

Then she had boldly curled her fingers around the thick satin and had decisively pushed them, and his pants, down his legs.

Red had carefully stepped out of them with obvious relief before gently kicking all that heavy material to the side with a bare foot. The purposeful movement had drawn her avid attention to his heavy cock, which had been bobbing with the motion of his pivoting hips.

The sight of his erect virility had beckoned her closer.

Following her instinct, Elizabeth had smoothly knelt before him, slim palms sliding slowly up his muscular thighs to grasp his hips so she had been able to steady herself.

Her lips had been directly on level with his thick shaft.

Then she had parted them slightly, her warm breath cascading over the large, mushroomed tip.

“Lizzy....”
A small, almost secretive smile had tugged at her mouth at the rough yearning in his low voice. She had shivered in anticipation as both of his hands had moved to bury themselves deeply in the silken fall of her hair, fingertips tenderly caressing the base of her skull.

“Hmm?” she’d asked lightly, teasingly, just before she’d taken him into her mouth, purposefully not giving him a chance to respond.

She already had known exactly what he had wanted.

Her heart had given an excited thump as he had loosed a long, quiet moan into the velvet stillness of the room.

“God, honey....”

His possessive hold on her long hair had tightened more and more with every coy pass her flattened tongue had made over the sensitive ridge of his glans before he had finally recalled himself and had abruptly—apologetically—eased his grip.

But she hadn’t minded his intensity. She had honestly enjoyed the earnest pulling she’d felt.

Besides, it hadn’t hurt.

Elizabeth had loved that her touch had actually provoked him enough that he’d momentarily lost himself in his own ardent sexuality. That knowledge had swiftly filled her to the brim with delighted confidence. And suddenly she’d wanted more than anything else to make him feel that way again.

Inching closer on her knees, she had wrapped her full lips more firmly around his rigidity and had slid her small mouth all the way down his length, lovingly working the wrinkled flesh before she’d swiftly tongued her way back up.

Then she’d explicitly focused her attentions on the enlarged head, licking and sucking and bobbing up and down with just the right amount of steady pressure she had known he’d preferred.

Red’s strong fingers had subconsciously found their way into her hair again, for she had suddenly been aware of them looping around the glossy handfuls he’d grasped so tightly...and then he had squeezed.

Hard.

A shudder of delight had trembled through her.

His rough touch hadn’t been urging her on. If anything had been doing that, it had been the very slight pumping of his hips against her mouth.

As she had massaged her lips up his hard member, she had idly wondered if he’d even been aware he’d been moving his pelvis like that.

She’d doubted it.

As for him winding his hands into her hair, perhaps he had needed something—anything—to grab on to and anchor himself to her as she had continued to pleasure him with sultry impishness.

Or perhaps, since she’d been the one willfully leading their foreplay, he had wanted to physically connect with her in some small way that he could control.

Red was an unshakably tenacious man in his prime, a born leader, and was accustomed to being in
unquestionable command of most any given situation. Liz had known that about him for years, so she certainly hadn’t been able to fault him for indulging his natural proclivity.

And even though his grip had been tense, his hands hadn’t been demandingly directing her efforts—a nuance that hadn’t been lost on her, and it was one that her lingering insecurities had appreciated.

Although by the fierce way he’d been squeezing her hair, she had known deep down that she really had no need to feel self-conscious about her skills as his lover.

Clearly what she’d been doing to him had been working.

It had seemed to her that his passionate clutching could very well have been his way of physically responding to both of those possibilities...in addition to it being an obvious expression of his genuine enjoyment of her seduction.

Emboldened by that and by the low groans emitting from his lips, Elizabeth had slid one hand down his thigh to daringly cup his taut sack. Then her index and middle fingers had extended further out to lightly stroke him just behind it.

Red had inhaled sharply, fingers reflexively digging even more into her inky locks as he’d released that sudden gasp in a hiss that had cut loudly through the living room.

She hadn’t been able to help the pleased grin from tugging at the corners of her mouth at his reaction. Continuing to lap insistently at the tip of his cock, she had repeated motion with her fingers.

"Christ, baby...." he had groaned hoarsely. "Ahhh—aah—yes...."

Goosebumps had flooded down her entire body as his rasping voice had washed over her, through her. As she had caressed him yet again, his thickness had pulsed once in her mouth and he had released her hair—but only to stimulate her in reciprocation for the way she’d been stimulating him.

Both of his practiced hands had curved around her breasts, hefting their soft weight while his fingertips had slipped beneath the fine ivory lace of her bralette’s cups, moving the flimsy material out of the way so he could once again gently pull on and tease the rosy buds of her nipples.

Elizabeth had moaned around his member, pushing herself wantonly into his fervid touch even as she continued her own ardent ministrations on him.

“Ohhh....ohh.... Yes, honey. Ah—God. That’s it....” That last had been uttered as something between a guttural moan and a quiet snarl.

She’d loved it when he had made that sound!

Then he’d bent closer toward her, his deft fingers teasing and pleasuring her with relentless adroitness.

Her breath had caught sharply in her throat as tantalizingly white-hot sparks had shot suddenly and swiftly through her body, beginning just at the tips of her breasts to center at the rippling place between her thighs.

The glorious sensations rushing through her body had momentarily distracted her to all else, even pleasuring him, and she’d completely lost her oral rhythm.

As her mouth had clumsily slipped away from his flesh, she’d sucked in a rasping breath and had blushed brightly in embarrassment. Gently she had cradled his slick shaft before it could fall out of
easy reach, her hazy eyes flickering hesitantly up to meet his.

He’d been staring down at her with lustful tenderness.

“I want you,” he had murmured fiercely before she could stammer out a flustered apology.

After giving her full breasts one more thumbing caress, his hands had then drifted down her bare arms to take hers.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he’d purred softly.

Releasing her hold on him, she had wordlessly allowed him to bring her to her feet.

The heat in his smiling eyes before he’d gently caught her lips with his, and the way he had amorously unbuttoned her jeans and slid the tight denim and lace panties over her ass and down her thighs, had made her heart skip a beat.

As his mouth had played languidly with hers while she had shimmied out of the indigo material, she’d realized that he had been behaving as if her gracelessly abrupt halt to the attentions she’d been giving him had been planned.

Of course he’d known otherwise. He had to have known.

But he also knew her well.

Very well.

He must have discerned she’d been feeling self-conscious about her obvious lapse.

Not that it could have been difficult for him to have picked up on her growing feelings of chagrin. Liz had never really had a very good poker face.

At least, not with him anyway.

It had been apparent to her that he had adeptly diverted her attention because he hadn’t wanted her to feel embarrassed. It had been his way of expressing to her that he hadn’t seen any reason for her to feel that way, and he’d done it without actually drawing attention to her discomfort.

And she’d loved him all the more for that.

Her initial, uncertain response to his sensual kisses had metamorphosed into a deeply passionate one as she had showed him with her mouth and her hands and her body just how much she was truly grateful for his sensitivity....and how much she really did love him.

“We’ll need a blanket,” she’d breathed against his warm lips, releasing him just long enough so she’d been able to pull the gossamer slip of pale lace over her head and discard it.

The flickering glow of the amber firelight and the glimmering colors shining out from the twinkling tree had fallen over half of her naked body just as all that light had washed over him earlier.

As her eyes had lifted to his, she’d observed the heady desire gleaming unabashedly there, and she had dimpled knowingly at him.

“My thought exactly,” he’d grinned rather roguishly back at her, reaching out behind him to snag the thickly quilted sherpa throw from the arm of the sofa.
“Hm. Actually....” she had vacillated, slanting an appraising look at it. “Maybe two blankets,” she’d amended as he had flourished it out over the polished hardwood floor beneath the lowest boughs of their Christmas tree.

“What two?”

“Well, the floor is pretty hard, Red,” she’d told him dryly, wrinkling her nose as she’d imagined all the bruises she could get from making passionate love on an unforgiving surface. “And I don’t think that,” she gestured to the honey-colored quilt, “is thick enough....”

“Aah.” Shaking his head in fond amusement, he had bent over at the waist to quickly tug the huge blanket in half. “There.” He had quirked a brow at her. “That’s better, isn’t it?”

“Let’s test it.” After they both had slowly dropped to their knees on top of it, Liz had sunk her hand down into its plushness. “It might just work,” she’d playfully hedged.

“Well,” he’d drawled in a low voice as he had wrapped an arm around her slender waist, “if you still think the floor is too hard to be comfortable, even when lying on a thick blanket folded in half....” He had pulled her even closer against him and had cajoled in her ear, “....you can just...ride me.”

A warm blush had suffused her cheeks. “You won’t mind being on your back?”

“Mind?” His eyes had glinted mischievously as he’d slowly shaken his head. “When that means you’ll be hovering above me? And I can stare as long as I want to at those lovely breasts of yours bobbing as you move?” Grinning, he had reached up to affectionately trace a ruddy cheek with the backs of his fingers. “I can’t imagine ever minding such a thing,” he had teased.

“Well!” she’d giggled, ducking her head in demure flirtation. “Problem solved then!”

Chuckling, he’d cupped her chin in his palm and had lifted her face back up, coaxing her mouth to open up to his lips.

It hadn’t taken long for their passion, which had been warmly simmering during their coy bantering, to froth hotly back to the fore.

As they had indulged in kissing, their breathing had steadily grown heavier. Red’s hands had moved from her waist to splay across her back under the curtain of her dark hair, holding her close while hers had drifted down to wrap around his body.

The fingers of one hand had purposely brushed against his heavy erection.

A quiet, groaning sigh of pleasure had escaped him as she had cradled his cock in her palm, gently and slowly pumping him. Then his lips had slipped off of hers to tenderly fasten on the side of her neck, softly sucking.

She’d moaned in delight, feeling herself turn to quicksilver beneath the rippling swell of his fervor—and her own.

“I’m very much looking forward to hearing you make that noise when I’m deep inside of you, Elizabeth.”

Her hand had stilled its caressing movement, her eyes flickering open as his honeyed, gravelly tone had lapped over her.

“There’s almost nothing better than seeing you there...arching over me,” he’d murmured, pressing
kiss after kiss up her throat. “Feeling your silky, glorious hair drifting around me as you thrust....”

His lips had just grazed one of her dimples. “And tonight, its luscious scent will mingle with the aroma of pine....” he had crooned in anticipation before plying her mouth with another, lingering kiss. Once he’d finally parted from her, his voice had deepened huskily, “....And when you sit up to roll your hips into mine, your naked body will be wreathed in a ring of light....”

A ring of light....

Smiling, Liz had brushed her nose against his, nuzzling him, savoring the profound intimacy this moment in time afforded them. “‘I saw Eternity the other night,’” she had intoned in a soft voice, curving her body sensually into his.

The man’s eyes had lit in pleased recognition of the words. “‘Like a great ring of pure and endless light,’” he had recited back to her, hands slipping off of her body as he had slowly eased backward on his elbows.

She had languidly followed him down, her smooth thighs parting to straddle his hips. “‘All calm,’” she’d whispered, leaning over him to gently rub herself against his stiff length, “‘as it was bright.’”

“Mmm....” he had hummed quietly, caressing his hands down her sides to gently hold her hips. “Very fitting, Lizzy,” he had complimented, favoring her with an admiring smile. “I wasn’t aware you knew of Henry Vaughan.”

Their eyes had met briefly before she’d bowed her head, her deep, almost rapturous sigh matching his as she had slowly taken him inside of herself.

“I didn’t know you knew about him either,” she’d breathed against his cheek, rolling her hips to set their rhythm. “But given how you know just about everything....” Her smiling lips has traced his. “I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised.”

And after he had given an appreciative rumble in response to that, they had lost themselves in the unhurried, languorous passion of their lovemaking....

“Elizabeth?” Red asked softly.

She started slightly, eyes snapping open at the sound of his voice breaking through her vivid reminiscing and pulling her back to the present.

“Hi,” she dimpled slowly and sweetly up at him.

“Hello there,” he rumbled back with a soft smile, caressing a few curling wisps of hair away from her brow. “I was wondering if you fell asleep.”

Almost,” she yawned again, lazily reaching for the closest throw blanket slung over the back of the sofa to pull it down the suede cushion and then up her body. It was pretty thin, but at least it provided a little more warmth on this crisp Christmas Eve night.

“I take it you want to sleep here tonight?” the man asked in an affectionate tone that implied he
already knew the answer to that question.

“Mmhmm. It’s so comfortable here.” She inched the velvety blanket up to her throat. “And with the tree right there and the fire glowing...it’s just so romantic.” She beamed up at him. “And you make such a great pillow....” she added candidly, wriggling happily as she nestled her cheek against his abdomen.

“Do I?” he chuckled quietly.

“Mmhmm,” she reaffirmed dreamily. But then, as if she had just realized what she’d really said, she quickly rubbed her eyes before giving him a searching look. “But—are you comfortable?”

He stroked his fingers through her inky locks that drifted over his lap to pool on the cushion they rested on. “I’m very comfortable.”

Liz sincerely doubted that. Surely he couldn’t be as comfortable as she was! “Are you sure?” she asked uncertainly, lifting her head as she made to sit up.

Red stilled her efforts by firmly placing a hand on her stomach and gently pushing her back down. “Quite sure,” came his serious assurance. “I’ve actually fallen asleep on this sofa sitting up many times in the past. Remember, it’s fairly deep.”

“But...you could lie down with me....”

“And risk getting shoved off in the middle of the night?” he teased, white teeth flashing down at her in the half-dark of the room.

Refusing to rise to his baiting, she pursed her lips at him, still unconvinced.

“No,” he smiled, conceding to her mood rather than attempting to divert her. “I like being here like this. I like you right where you are.” He smoothed his hand down her stomach to rest it below her navel, idly rubbing the elastic band of her pajama pants. “This is the most comfortable I’ve been in a long while, Lizzy.”

She gazed up at him thoughtfully.

Perhaps he was just as loathe to shatter the novel, holiday romance of the night as much as she was. But there was also gravity tinging his easy tone, and it was enough to make her wonder if his words held a deeper meaning.

She dared to hope they did.

The sincerity of his reassurances decided her, and she slowly relaxed back into the soft suede and cuddled closer to him. “Well, if you’re sure....” She grinned at him. “I won’t argue.”

“It’s a Christmas miracle!” instantly came the dry retort.

Wrinkling her nose, Elizabeth huffed a little snarl up at him.

He grinned wolfishly down into her face. “But seeing as how we are...” his fingertips slipped under her camisole to lightly stroke the skin around her belly button, “...happily indisposed tonight—“

She fluttered her lashes coquettishly at him.

“—we’ll just need to make sure to actually set our presents under the tree tomorrow morning before we unwrap them,” he laughed. “Tradition and all, you know.”
“Didn’t we already do some ‘unwrapping’ under the tree tonight?” she asked coyly, dimpling impishly at him.

“Mmm.” His eyes gleamed down into hers in appreciation of her wit. “We did more than that, sweet girl,” he winked.

Grinning, she turned her blushing face away to look back at the Christmas tree. Firelight danced and flickered over the ornaments, making them glint and sparkle with all the warmer hues of the rainbow.

Her eyes then traveled to the source of all that natural light, admiring how the tongues of flame frisked merrily over their bed of wood before darting playfully up into the blackness of the chimney. Their spirited cavorting cast quivering shadows onto the gleaming floor to intermingle with all the shimmering light.

She was aware of Red running his long fingers slowly through her hair again. Feeling his caressing touch in addition to watching the flames leap vigorously and then flutter sprightly over the crackling logs was all soothing enough to make her eyelids droop.

Liz gave a drowsily contented sigh, stroking her cheek against his thigh. “We should unwrap each other again tomorrow,” she murmured sleepily. “After presents.”

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. “Mmhmm.”

“Maybe before presents.”

“Mmhmm.”

“And we should do the ‘more’ you mentioned, too.”

“Mmm. Naturally.”

She could hear the loving smile in his dry voice, and even though Red couldn’t see it, her own expression mirrored his. Idly she wondered if he was staring into the fire too.

It really was mesmerizing the way all those blues, reds, oranges, and yellows of the fire scintillated, blurring into one another and drawing the eye and imaginative mind further and further into its hypnotic winking and flashing.

Small wonder that ancient cultures used to worship fire, that countless generations of poets and artists attempted to capture its physical and symbolic essence using their specific skill sets, and that it was used in significant and sacred ceremonies by most peoples across the world even to this day.

As Elizabeth stared deeply into the flames, completely entranced, they seemed to coruscate closer and closer until her entire vision was a volatile kaleidoscope of amber and gold edged with a swirling of blood-red rubies, dark blue sapphires, and shining diamonds.

It held her enthralled as all those glimmering hues flowed and shifted, intimately blending together like joined lovers before whirling apart as if they were in the smoldering heat of a lover’s quarrel...only to be drawn to one another again, like moths to irresistible flames.

And then suddenly the spellbinding, fluctuating rainbow exploded with painful vibrancy before her very eyes. All those captivating shards of jeweled light instantly melded together to form a slithering and writhing tongue of sentient flame.

Hissing viciously, it threw open its gleaming maw and violently lashed out from the fireplace at her.
Screaming, Liz jerked back from its malicious bite, hands and feet flailing wildly as she attempted with everything she had to escape certain death.

And then she was falling backwards over the couch to the floor. The wind was jarringly knocked out of her as she landed painfully on her back, her head cracking horribly on the harsh impact.

Silver stars burst and scattered outward like crystal shattering behind her watering eyes, but, God, she couldn’t even cry out!

She couldn’t breathe!

Liz tore her lips apart and arduously widened her mouth as much as she could, utterly desperate to catch her breath and terrified that she wouldn’t be able to.

Without oxygen, she would die a slow and horrible death of asphyxiation.

The very thought brought a rasping whimper to her throat and somehow, by the grace of God, she managed to laboriously work herself into gasping.

Hot tears of fierce relief mingled with those of severe distress as air finally filled her heaving and aching lungs.

But it was grossly tainted.

Smoke! her near-petrified mind shrilled in dismayed warning.

Unbridled fear seared through her as she unwillingly inhaled the thick, poisonous fumes.

She had to get out of here!

Scrabbling unsteadily to her feet, she swayed as her panicked eyes darted around in sheer horror.

The entire room was a raging inferno.

Flowing curtains of malevolent flames shrouded all the walls of the room, effectively blocking every single route of escape.

Wait! There were glass doors that lead out to the suite’s balcony!

Coughing and wheezing, Elizabeth lurched blindly forward toward where they should have been—but a torrent of fire spat and snarled there instead!

And then without any warning, one of those flaming ripples separated itself from the rest of the seething horde and snapped ferociously at her wrist, instantly piercing through her flesh and tendons right down near to the bone.

Howling in agony, she whipped her scalded hand out of the fire’s voracious worrying and chewing and stumbled away from those twisting ropes of savage, blistering flames.

“How! I’m hurt! It burns!” she screamed in fluent Russian, weeping and clutching her ravaged wrist to her breasts as she whirled around to frantically search for another exit.

But suddenly her adult mind didn’t recognize the room she was trapped in at all. The entire shape of it was different. There were fine dolls and handmade toys strewn all over the floor, smoking and oozing and bubbling as they melted. And there were wooden beams criss-crossing the ceiling that hadn’t been there a second ago, alight with the gluttonous fire and splintering apart to fall in
dangerous, fiery pieces to the floor below.

Where was she?

Billowing smoke as black as night whirled insidiously around her, seeping into her throat and nostrils to gag her even as it created a gritty and burning film over her eyes, obscuring her vision.

She was now completely and utterly disoriented!

“Help me!” she shrieked in despair around the dreadful, acrid fumes that were mercilessly invading her body.

Then her head immediately snapped up, ringing ears and stinging eyes desperately straining.

She had just heard a little, Russian girl cry out for help!

“Where are you?” she screamed hoarsely in alarm, sprinting forward to where she thought the child would be.

And then she realized—

That very young, shrill voice was hers!

Uncomprehending, she skidded gracelessly to a halt and stared in disbelief down at her woman’s body.

What was happening?!

Hearing a deafening snapping and thunderous crackling, Liz threw a fearful glance over her shoulder and saw that the fire had devoured all it could of the walls and ceiling and was now ingesting the wood flooring, creating a wide, writhing river of unstoppable flames toward her.

But she had nowhere to run to.

Terror consumed her mind and heart.

And she fled anyway.

“Red!” she wailed pitifully in that little girl’s voice as embers rained ruthlessly down from the high arches of the ceiling.

As she hastily twisted her lithe body to try and avoid them, she slipped on the hem of her little girl’s nightgown and fell roughly to her knees.

The woman huddled there, rocking back and forth and sobbing disconsolately as the fire roared triumphantly, surging eagerly toward her.

She was going to die here!

”Red!”

And suddenly the man she knew and loved materialized in front of her, stepping forth from the flames, his familiar green eyes blazing with concern as he reached for her. “Lizzy!”

“Red!” she gasped, blurred vision suddenly darkening from the feeling of intensely fierce relief that struck her dizzy.
Staggering woozily and almost blindly to her feet, she threw herself into his outstretched arms. Crying, she grasped him as a drowning person grasps the lifeline—and she stifled an agonized scream as he clasped her blistered and bleeding wrist against his chest.

Clinging to her tightly, he shielded her from the horrific scene surrounding around them as he half-dragged, half-carried her away from the sweltering heat and suffocating smoke.

“It burns, Red! I’m hurt!”

“No!” His tone was laden with deep perturbation—and wary fear?

His response didn’t make sense! Couldn’t he see it?

“But I am!” she wept.

“No, you’re safe, Elizabeth!” he called with soft vehemence in her ear, his voice becoming steadier and calmer as the savage hissing and furious bellowing of the fire began to fade into the background. “You’re safe.”

Was she? God, how she wanted to believe him!

She trembled violently in his embrace, for suddenly she found that she was cradled in his arms. The strong thumping of his heart thundered beneath her ear, causing even more tears of dizzying relief to course unchecked down her cheeks as together they dashed down the front steps and out into the field of deep, powdered snow...and escaped.

Bitingly cold air swept around her, freezing the sweat on her brow and the tears on her face, painfully curdling the blood dripping from the wound on her inflamed wrist.

After being trapped in that blazing room, suddenly being thrust into the harsh conditions of its polar opposite was, physically, extremely painful.

A second after her shocked breath caught sharply in her chest, Liz coughed hoarsely, teeth chattering as she blearily blinked, trying to focus her gaze—and suddenly she was floating on air, endlessly whirling in a dazzling white sea of bitterly frigid nothingness.

Alone.

Where was Red?

Her anxious heart felt like it was a lump of lead in her chest as the oppressive weight of anguish settled heavily over her, smothering her.

"Red!” she shrilled, frightened. “Where are you?”

Her scared words echoed emptily around the frozen wasteland.

“Red!” she screamed in despair, her brittle voice bouncing eerily back to tremble in her ears. “Don’t leave me alone!”

It was a desperate plea that came from the very depths of her soul.

Then she felt him touch her, one invisible palm cupping the side of her flushed face while the fingers of the other stroked away the salty sheen from below her eyes.

“I’m here, baby,” Red whispered fiercely in her ear. “I’m here!” And suddenly she could feel him
gathering her firmly in his arms to hold her close against his heart.

It was that fervent gentleness she knew so well that finally and completely snatched her from the perilous hellscape and pulled her consciousness back into the real world.

With a heaving sob, the young woman’s tearful eyes flew open to behold Red gazing down at her in grave concern, his face as white as a sheet.

“’I’m right here!’”

”Red!” she whimpered, fingers digging convulsively into his shirt as she embraced him tightly.

“Sssh... It’s all right, sweetheart,” he soothed quietly, squeezing his eyes shut against the onslaught of heavy emotions bombarding him as she buried her face into the curve between his neck and shoulder. “It’s all right.”

“There was a fire, Red. It—it—everything was burning!” she stammered breathlessly. “And then I was lost—I couldn’t get out!” she shuddered, burying herself as closely as she could into his body.

“Sssh...” he hushed her gently. “It was just a dream, baby,” he reassured in velvety soft tones, stroking her back. “You’re safe now. There’s no fire here. You’re safe.”

And luckily it all was true. He sent up a silent prayer of heartfelt thanks that the fire that had been leaping and flickering in the fireplace had long since guttered out.

If she had woken from her ghastly night terror to immediately see flames in the same room she was in, even though they would have been safely contained where they should be, he could have been dealing with a very different situation right now.

The very sight of a real fire could have sent her reeling back down into the merciless depths of her horrific dream.

It was extremely difficult to wake one from a night terror...as he knew all too well.

Thank God the only light shining in the room now radiated softly out from the Christmas tree.

As he continued to tenderly caress her while gently rocking her in a slight side-to-side motion until her breathing finally slowed and then quieted, the savagery he’d kept tightly leashed in his soul as he’d helplessly watched her writhe tensely in the throes of her nightmare, crying out in fluent Russian, snapped its tether.

Now freed from constraint, it wildly lunged forward, claws unsheathed as it reared up, howling in its raging need to protect her.

Red mentally braced himself and bristled defensively, hackles rising threateningly as he snarled furiously back at it, I am protecting her!

That was the most prominent reason for why he was in her life: to be her devout guardian against those who were sniffing for any trail that would lead to Katarina Rostova’s supposed daughter.

Red had done his very best to anonymously circulate two false stories: the first being that Katarina had never had a daughter, and, the second being that if a daughter had existed, she had perished eighteen years ago in the fire that had also destroyed her mother.

But a body of a little girl had never been found because there just hadn’t been time for him to procure
Not that the solution would have been entirely foolproof. The DNA of whatever body he would have used wouldn’t have matched to Katarina and the man who had been Masha’s biological father, but the gruesome visual of seeing a child’s charred, skeletal remains might have been enough to deter Katarina’s enemies from even going that far to check its legitimacy.

There hadn’t been much time to do anything during that incredibly short window of opportunity except escape that traumatic incident with their lives intact and then for him to numbly spirit little, grief-stricken Masha away to Nebraska while no one was even thinking to look in their direction.

Despite Red’s best efforts, there were still many of Katarina’s enemies out there—too many—that believed Masha really had existed and that she was alive and well. So they continued to hunt for her, cunningly stalking the globe for her whereabouts.

Some of them even used the fabled Cabal’s resources to aid them in their methodical searching.

_Fabled._

The man inwardly scoffed at himself.

Many wanted to bury their heads in the fucking sand about it, but he knew better than most that the Cabal did exist. The documented proof of its healthy existence had landed somewhere, and he would find it one day, for it held all the names of powerful individuals and corporations that needed to be suppressed or taken out entirely.

Once, he would have done it for his country.

Now, he was only doing it for himself—and for Masha Rostova...his Elizabeth.

All those who were involved in the organization were his enemies, and therefore hers.

There wouldn’t be any real and lasting peace for either of them unless that Blacklist was unearthed and he began his real work on it. But until he or his sources tracked it down, he and his people would continue on fighting as they had been steadily doing for over a decade now: follow the rumors that an entity was part of the Cabal, discover if they were undeniably true, and then quickly dispatch the entity without leaving a vacuum for another, similar one to replace it. That was always the most difficult aspect of this weighty cross he bore to accomplish successfully.

And he hadn’t always triumphed.

But he had manipulated enough wins in his favor to where the name Raymond Reddington still carried significant weight amongst the sects and mobs of the underground. The unflaggingly prestigious reputation he had carefully cultivated for years continued to be the key to his freedom and his ability to doggedly pursue what he did best.

Suddenly the young woman shifted in his arms, effectively pulling him from that particular grave train of thought.

It was just as well, for tonight he needed to turn his mind and energies to a more immediately pressing issue.

Much to Red’s dismay, Elizabeth’s memories from the night of the fire were resurfacing.

He gently squeezed her against him, letting her know through his touch that he was here for her
when she was ready to speak.

But would she even want to talk about her nightmare? And if she did, what would he be able to truthfully say in response?

He slowly ran a hand through her wavy hair, methodically considering the multitude of interwoven options that lay out before him like the gossamer strands of a spider’s web, each one becoming thicker and more substantial the more thought he devoted to it.

What she would tell him would push him to the edge of which main thread to choose and then follow. And when he came upon those intersections, he would either have to follow her lead or take the lead himself and pick which one to go down.

The man briefly considered the possibility that she hadn’t dreamt of that horribly traumatic night at all. But he wasn’t so much of a fool as to actually believe that, and so he had immediately dismissed the naive hope from his consciousness.

Truly, what else could that nightmare have possibly been about?

She’d dreamt of a terrible fire. She’d desperately cried out for help in her native tongue. She’d also moaned and whimpered in that same, pure and unaccented Russian about something hurting her. Burning her.

During the past few years when he had overheard her practicing her Russian out loud for her college courses, it had been heavily accented with her charming, midwestern, American lilt.

When she’d wailed out the foreign words tonight, she’d spoken them as she’d done so when she had been a little girl. No slight Nebraskan twang had colored her voice, and neither had the prominently overarching American accent.

Her enunciation and inflection had been perfect.

Too perfect.

And as for her dreaming of getting scalded, would she finally suspect that the scar on the inside of her wrist had been inflicted upon her by a tongue of flame?

His eyes opened and flicked down to the slender wrist that bore the long vines of thick, pink scar tissue.

*Sam knew this would happen,* his own, dark savagery growled at him. *He knew she’d start to remember. But you had the procedure done on her anyway. To protect her,* it sneered at him. *And look how far that got you. Perhaps eighteen years of protection? It bared its teeth in snide disgust. If she lives to be ninety years old, that isn’t even half of her life! Was stealing her memories worth only eighteen years of protection?*

Red’s hand tightened in her glossy locks as the doubts he’d been keeping at bay for longer than he cared to consciously admit began to slither past the armored barriers he had mentally erected long ago. They surrounded and fortified the rationalizations for the extremely weighty and difficult decisions he’d made over the years to ultimately keep her safe...even from herself.

*Eighteen years is nothing!* it continued to berate him contemptuously. *It’s a mere blip of time!*

*Eighteen years is fucking everything!* Red snarled explosively back at himself. *Those are the most trying years. And she was able to live them without having to bear the knowledge that she’d*
murdered her own father and was the cause of her idolized mother’s death, he vehemently defended his actions. Do you know how incredibly scarring that would have been to her soul if she had grown from child to woman harboring such oppressive knowledge? he demanded, enraged. It could have killed her!

Though the figures hadn’t been easily accessible to the general public, Red had known exactly what the suicide rate of children had been at that point in time. He had thoroughly researched what had driven many of those youths to commit the terrible act. And seeing as how agonizing guilt would have festered in Elizabeth’s soul—how could it not have?—she could have very well gone down that bleakly dark path if he hadn’t done what he’d done.

You couldn’t have known that for certain. You took a risk and gambled—but so poorly! it scorned his efforts. She’s strong. Very strong. Strong enough even to bear what you stole. But now it’s too late to undo the decision you made. Much too late. Eighteen years too late. And the memories are finally returning, just like Sam predicted they would, it hissed.

The man’s nostrils flared as he intently scrutinized that restless and angry part of himself.

It took advantage of his silence to slyly ask, Will she ever forgive you when she finds out you were the one behind the suppression? That you were the one withholding her own identity from her?

She is Elizabeth Scott.

She is also Masha Rostova. And you know this very well, it reproached him, exasperated. Why else would you have secretly celebrated her actual birthday for the last eighteen years? Your own actions have acknowledged the fact that she is more than your Elizabeth.

The man stubbornly set his jaw and mentally turned away from that furious part of himself and the counterarguments he rarely gave credence to.

Wallowing in skepticism of one’s committed actions was an unacceptable practice, and he certainly knew better than to succumb to the temptation to do so. Indulging doubt wasn’t a luxury he could afford in this volatile and dangerous life he lead. It could get him and those he cared about—and loved—killed.

“Red?”

“Yes, honey?” he replied softly, determinedly refocusing his attention on the composed woman wrapped in his arms.

“You were there,” she whispered, pulling back just enough to where she could glance up at him.

He stared at her, mind awhirl with the many implications of that statement, but he managed to keep his expression free of the sudden burst of anxiety he’d felt at her words.

“I was where, sweetheart?” he asked carefully, lifting a hand from the small of her back to gently tuck a lock of hair behind her ear.

“In my dream.”

Oh, Christ.

Had that been an apprehensive curse? Or a desperate prayer?

“Do you want to talk about it?” He kept his voice quietly steady as he readjusted his hold on her,
Elizabeth shuddered. “I really don’t remember much about it anymore.”

Something that was strung tightly within Red eased a little at that confession.

“There was a fire. And I was trapped. But—you know that already....”

She flushed, embarrassed, and he softened his patiently sympathetic expression even more so she would know that she needn’t feel that way.

“You were there,” she repeated slowly. “You came out of the flames and—you rescued me.”

And he would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

Their eyes met. ‘I would’ve died if you...hadn’t come for me.” Her voice wavered slightly and she cleared her throat swiftly, glancing away self-consciously.

How very true that statement was.

“I will always come for you, Lizzy,” he murmured into the silence that had fallen briefly between them while she regained control of her voice and regathered her composure.

Though he hadn’t just been talking about coming for her only in dreams.

And by the way she slowly lifted her glistening, adoring eyes to his face, she comprehended the true meaning behind his heartfelt promise.

Then the young woman took in a deep, steadying breath before continuing quietly, “Before you...got to me...I think I got hurt.” She frowned, shaking her head quickly. “No, I know I got hurt. The fire burned me before we got away.” Her eyes suddenly sparked fiercely as the memory came flooding back to her. “Right here.” Sticking out her wrist, she pointed to the scar that flowed down it to the heel of her palm.

Reaching around, Red soothingly traced his fingertips lightly over it. “That must have been so frightening, Lizzy....” he murmured compassionately.

“I wonder if that’s how I got that scar when I was little....” she mused in a murmur. “From getting burned, I mean.”

He continued to caress her skin, not daring to look up until he was certain he had his emotions completely under his unwavering control.

“Why would you think that, sweetheart?” he questioned slowly. “Because of this one dream?”

“Oh, no. I mean...yes,” she corrected softly. “But only because this isn’t the first time I’ve had a nightmare like this.”

Before Red could stop the knee-jerk reaction, he stiffened in shock. To cover his lapse, he purposefully kept his eyes fixed on her hand while he took it in his. “You’ve had a dream like this before?”

“About being trapped in a burning room? Yeah,” she confirmed softly, nodding. “I’ve had them ever since I was a little girl.”

He briefly closed his eyes, deeply disturbed by what she had just divulged. The procedure he’d
agonized over for years should have worked better than this!

Near-blinding fury rose with frightening speed within him. It was a brutally frigid maelstrom that he could barely contain. And it wasn’t directed at her, but rather, it was directed at those fucking psychologists, neurologists, and surgeons he had entrusted little Masha to.

If she’d been having the same sort of night terrors about that traumatic night for eighteen years, he highly doubted the true success of the procedure. The procedure was supposed to have completely wiped that night from her memory, as well as the previous years of her life leading up to it.

Even though Lizzy hadn’t been able to remember her earliest years while growing up, why the fuck hadn’t Sam told him the nightmares had persisted?

Red took in a slow and silent breath in an effort to control his coldly seething rage.

Perhaps he hadn’t known.

But before the man could think of a subtle way to ask her, Elizabeth began telling him exactly what he needed to know.

“When I was little, I used to tell Sam. But he would always get so weird about it. He made me feel like it was wrong to have reoccurring bad dreams.” She shrugged. “Or so that’s how it seemed then. So...I stopped telling him about them.”

Sighing in regret, she glanced up into his face, which he was keeping remarkably clear of his roiling emotions...save for the slight twitching beneath one of his eyes.

But she didn’t see that in the mostly-darkened room, for which he was vehemently grateful.

“But of course I know now that wasn’t how he really felt,” she continued pensively. “And now that I’m a lot older and have learned about dream symbology and reoccurring dreams in a couple of my psychology classes, I can’t help but wonder if maybe he knew something about my past that he didn’t think I should know.” Her voice was uncertain. “Maybe the reason why I’m having these nightmares about fires is because I was trapped in a burning room when I was little. You know, before he adopted me.” She pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Maybe...maybe he was afraid that if I remembered, it would bring back really bad memories he didn’t want me to know about.”

All of this was striking much too close to the truth of events for Red’s comfort. But unless she asked him a direct question, he thought it wisest to keep quiet...to let her speak.

Elizabeth worried her lower lip for a moment. “I wish I had asked him about it a long time ago.” Then she lifted fretful eyes to his guarded ones. “I wish I could remember how I got this scar.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that just now,” he murmured quietly, gently tightening his fingers around her hand. “You’ll only do yourself more harm than good. And it won’t do for you to brood over what Sam may or may not have known, either.”

“I know,” she sighed. Then she gave him a tiny, lopsided smile, trying bravely for a bit of levity as she lightened her tone. “And I know it’s all speculation anyway.”

He returned her small smile with one of his own, wishing that his lips didn’t feel quite so taut.

“He didn’t tell you anything, did he?” she asked hesitantly, a spark of hope glinting in her sapphire gaze. “About my adoption, I mean.”
It was only because of her exact phrasing that he was able to answer her honestly, “No.”

His heart gave a sharp twist as her face fell in disappointment.

“Again, I wouldn’t worry about any of this, sweetheart,” he encouraged gently, doing his damndest to ignore that pang of guilt. “When you think about it, the past really isn’t as important as the present.”

“Or the future?”

A more genuine smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth at that. “Or the future,” he agreed, slowly leaning into the back of the sofa and bringing her with him.

Curling her knees up to rest them on his thigh, she relaxed languidly into his side. After a moment of silence, she ventured, “We have a long future in front of us, don’t we, Red?”

He glanced down at the top of her head. “You mean, as in you and I?” At her quick nod, he gave her a tender squeeze. “Of course we do.”

And then her fierce plea of, “Don’t leave me alone!” that she’d cried out earlier in her fitful sleep echoed through his memory. And it was then that he realized that there could very well be a profound significance behind her question.

Stroking his hand down her side, he repeated in a softer voice, tone deepening with his love for her, “Of course we do.”

She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “Good.”

Her familiar, feisty tone brought another, genuine smile to his face. “Do you want to go to bed or...do you want to stay here a while?”

"Can we, umm.... Can we stay a bit longer?” she requested softly. “Looking at the tree is...well, it’s helping.”

"Of course we can,” he reassured her, dropping a gentle kiss to the top of her head. “We’ll stay as long as you want.”

Although it wasn’t very long before Elizabeth’s head finally began to drift slowly down his chest to rest above his heart, her pale hand going lax in his, uncurling in his lap to reveal the swirls of her scar. As she finally fell into a blessedly dreamless sleep, she was unaware of Red’s intent gaze lingering upon the top of her head, steady with both loving tenderness and pensive disquiet.
Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :)  

Thank you to my betas, who are always a source of encouragement and inspiration 💕
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
February 7, 2007

“They’re fifteen minutes late.”

“That certainly doesn’t bode well for us, does it?” came Red’s blithe reply. The glossy black leather of the town car’s seat squeaked as he shifted to cross one leg lazily over the other.

“Fifteen, boss,” the bodyguard stressed, quickly glancing over his shoulder at the older man and just making out the gleaming green eyes in the darkness surrounding them.

“Yes...I can also tell time, Evan,” Red drawled warningly, although his gaze flashed with amusement. “Been able to for years. Ever since I was in the second grade.”

He blinked, those eyes suddenly glinting thoughtfully. “Christ...second grade. Can you even imagine me ever being that young?” This abrupt, light-hearted question was directed at the tall African man in his late twenties who sat on the long seat beside him.

The black man’s nostrils flared in a soft laugh as he slightly inclined his head that could either be construed as a “yes” or “no”—it all depended upon his benefactor’s mood.

“How I loathed learning how to tell time!” Red reminisced jovially, going back to his original topic. “Although it didn’t help that my teacher, Ms. Phelps, a doughty old woman who hated children,” he confessed her deplorable sins, “went about teaching it completely the wrong way,” he scorned her ineffectual methods.

“Shrilling random hours and minutes while making us haphazardly draw the corresponding lines on a blank clock face over and over again?” He shook his head in woeful disappointment. “Old Lady Phelps thought repetition alone could drill the concept into our brains,” he scoffed, lifting his gaze in utter exasperation. “How pathetic!”

The young African’s lips twitched in mirth.

“How unimaginative!” Red continued to rail at the injustice faced all those decades ago. “How can children really understand time with it being taught like that? I certainly did not!”

A note of frustration now tinged his voice, which hinted at the fact that he’d thought long and hard about this issue before.

“Time is such an abstract concept,” he reflected pensively into the silence that weighed heavily in the car. “It needs to be made concrete for children’s young, impressionable minds. They need to get their hands on clocks and physically manipulate them with their own fingers to fully comprehend for themselves how time works.”

“Raymond,” quietly came the heavily-accented, patient voice of the young man beside him.

Red stilled and let out a regretful sigh for promising learning opportunities lost.

Then he turned his head to give his ward his full attention. “Dembé.”
“It has now been seventeen minutes.”

At the soft proclamation, the gloved hands of Joshua, another one of Red’s bodyguards and driver of the car, tightened in apprehension on the steering wheel.

“This is confirmation that you have been double-crossed.” Dembé’s quiet voice was calm and steady, which was an impressive feat considering the awful gravity of the subject.

His imperturbable composure in the face of uncertainty and danger was just one of the many admirable qualities he humbly possessed that had long ago earned him the respect of those much older than he.

In the front seat, Evan and Joshua nodded in emphatic agreement while their eyes continued to warily scan the still night beyond the windshield.

“Oh, it most certainly is.” Red’s teeth flashed in a nonchalant yet rather winning smile that was meant to put his guards and Dembé more at ease. “That’s why we have a fleet of armed men in the car behind us. We anticipated this, did we not?”

“They will consider you a fool for waiting,” Dembé murmured.

“There are more fools than wise men, and even in the wise man himself there is more folly than wisdom,” the older man intoned, clearly unfazed by their concern for his reputation—and his life.

“So the fact that we’re supposedly all ‘fools’ excuses this decision to just sit here and wait to get ambushed?” Evan demanded with quiet heat, eyes flicking to meet his employer’s in the rearview mirror.

“I need what they have,” Red replied, his smile hardening obdurately. “And I won’t get a second chance after tonight. We’ve been in Japan for too long as it is.”

Something in his casually wry tone alerted all the men in the car.

“So Sakamoto and his goons know we’re here?” Evan asked sharply while a deeply concerned expression briefly flashed across Dembé’s stoic features.

“Sakamoto is most likely why Endo is late,” came Red’s dry confirmation. “In fact, I’ll bet you five, no, ten thousand US dollars they’ll arrive together any moment now. Let’s say...within the next four minutes.”

“Fuck!” Evan muttered.

Red chortled, purposefully misunderstanding the reason for the guard’s foul mouth. “Too rich for your blood? I’d’ve thought that would be chump change for you!”

He extended his leg and tapped the back of the driver’s chair twice with a foot. “What about you, Joshua?”

“I don’t think any of us would ever bet against you, Red,” came the tense reply.

The man pursed his lips in sincere disappointment. “I really should take you all abroad more often. You’re much too wound up.” He clucked his tongue in admonishment. “It’s not as if we’re babes in the woods when it comes to treachery!”

“Handling Endo’s betrayal to one of the other mobs tonight would’ve been bad enough,” Evan
defended tersely.

“They’re called ‘yakuza’ in Japan, Evan,” Red cut in lightly.

The younger man let out a harsh puff of breath and then went on as if he hadn’t been interrupted, “But selling us out to fucking Sakamoto of all yakuza bosses... Jesus, Red, he’s a raving psychopath!”

“We all know he put a price on your head,” Joshua gritted. “Dead or alive. Sounds like something out a fuckin’ western,” he grumbled. “But there we are. And if we know about it, then everyone else knows about it too!”

The older man snorted, flicking his fingers dismissively.

“Raymond, it is rumored in some circles that he did say if you were not already dead, he would kill you himself if you ever came back to Japan’s shores,” Dembé reminded quietly.

Again, Red scoffed softly and waved an unconcerned hand. “Sakamoto is a psychotic son of a bitch, I grant you. But really, aren’t they all? Besides, if I heeded every violent threat made against my person, I’d never get to go anywhere!” he pouted.

“Don’t you want to live, Red?” Evan demanded.

The man gave a rough bark of laughter. “Is that a serious question?”

“Red, if Endo and Sakamoto arrive in full force together...it’ll be a fucking shit storm,” Joshua prophesied tightly.

“Who says they’ll arrive in full force?” Red calmly wanted to know, raising a curious brow. “They probably already know how many of you I have with me. Even if they came with a quarter of their most loyal sheep each, they’d still outnumber us. So why on Earth would they come with full strength?”

“Because—you’re fucking Raymond Reddington!” Evan bit out. “It wouldn’t matter if you only had young Dembé with you—they’d still come with most of their damned goons.”

“And here you were all concerned I’d appear daft,” the man grinned, draping an arm comfortably over the back of the seat. “Psychotics don’t ‘arrive in full force’ against a mere lackwit.”

Evan rolled his eyes and ground his teeth against an exasperated retort even as Joshua pressed his lips together into a thin, white line.

After a beat of tense silence, Dembé finally inquired of Red, “Are you certain this will be your only chance to get what you need from Endo?”

“Quite certain,” the man assured seriously. “It’s absolutely imperative we obtain what we came for tonight. Whatever it takes.”

His grave meaning was glaringly obvious to his men.

All of a sudden, six sets of white headlights carefully rolled around the corner ten car lengths in front of them and slowly approached them head on.

“Those aren’t all Endo’s men,” Joshua growled his anger.

“No,” Dembé agreed after a brief moment of observation. “At least half are Sakamoto’s.”
Recognizing the subtle insignia on four of the cars’ front bumpers himself, Evan cursed quietly but very succinctly before bringing the radio to his lips and muttering directions to the leader of the rest of their squad in the town car behind them.

“Glad you didn’t bet against me, aren’t you?” Red smiled, though now it was noticeably much fiercer than it had been before as he mentally began steeling himself for the inevitable altercation between groups.

Loose gravel crackled under their tires as the six long, sleek cars purposefully fanned out in front of Red and his men, their headlights flooding the small section of the abandoned construction site they had staked out with intensely bright light.

“The fuckers have their high beams on,” Evan hissed in vexation, blinking quickly against the vivid luminosity.

“Don’t let their piddling ploys rattle or rile you,” Red vehemently cautioned in a low voice. “I need you on your game.” He too squinted against the brightness as his avid eyes flicked to each one of his men. “All of you.”

Only once he received swift and respectful nods of assurance from each of them did Red’s eyes spark resolutely.

“Well then,” he murmured, baring his teeth in a savage smile. “It’s showtime.” Lifting the jet-black fedora from his lap, he decisively set it on his head. His fingertips ran in a sharp caress over the rim right before he opened the car door and fluidly swung out.

Joshua remained in the driver’s seat while Dembé and Evan protectively preceded their employer. Their hands hovered just over their weapons so they’d be able to draw and shoot at the first whiff of malicious intent from Endo, and—as Red had correctly assumed—Sakamoto.

The smile plastered on Red’s face was quite predatory indeed as he sauntered up between Evan and Dembé to pause just past the hood of his running car.

As he stood there, waiting expectantly, he could hear the doors of the other town cars in the area groaning open.

The stealthy guards of both sides poured out of the automobiles, their swift and purposeful steps crunching into the gravel. The sound echoed repeatedly off of the countless piles of massive, hollow steel tubing surrounding them.

The man inhaled deeply, training half his attention on his armed men as they took their places behind him, and the other half on his adversaries as they advanced toward him.

The intense lighting caused by the cars’ headlights cast eerie, elongated shadows of all men present. They stretched in abnormal exaggeration over the slippery chunks of asphalt, sand, and rocks beneath his feet. With the way those distracting shadows intersected one another over the unstable ground, it would be much more difficult to see the exact number of men the yakuza bosses brought with them—and if they had their weapons drawn.

Best to assume they did.

“Endo! You’re late!” Red called good-naturedly to the thirty-year-old Asian man who swaggered conceitedly toward him.

Before he could stop himself, the young gangster frowned, his dark eyes briefly flashing in
annoyance. It was obvious from his irritated expression that he had wanted to be the one to have the first word and therefore lead the dealings.

But the damned American had beaten him to it!

“I made a stop on the way here to pick up an—associate,” Endo sneered in heavily-accented English, vehemently hoping to strike the smug smile from Reddington’s face as he gestured to the older yakuza boss who slipped up beside him.

The purposeful distance the two Japanese men placed between each other implied that they were reluctant “associates” tonight, but they were also standing close enough to explicitly declare that they were staunch allies against the foreigner.

“Once Sakamoto heard you were in town and that I was meeting you tonight, he insisted on coming along.”

“Indeed?” Red asked lightly, expertly keeping his expression mildly curious as his eyes flicked to the older yakuza boss.

“Who was I to deny him?” Endo shrugged elegantly.

A wide, malicious smile meant to intimidate spread across Sakamoto’s lips as he met Red’s stoic gaze and crossed his hard arms over his slender chest. The movement pulled the expensive gray silk of his suit’s jacket away from his wrists, exposing parts of intricate tattoos swirling in dizzying patterns of scarlet, white, and black up his arms. It was rumored that they covered every single part of his entire body that was hidden by clothing.

“The more the merrier!” Red beamed at them both gaily, refusing to rise to the yakuza boss’s physical baiting.

“Though I’m sorry to say that this soirée won’t last very long, Sakamoto,” he flippantly addressed the Japanese mob boss. “It’s really such a shame you wasted all that time traveling across city boundaries to stay here for only a few minutes.”

Red’s smile sharpened as he observed the criminal’s eyes swiftly narrow in vexation that his posturing apparently didn’t produce any visible fear.

Without missing a beat, Red smoothly turned his attention back to Endo.

“You see, Endo here and I are trading a couple things, then we both will be on our merry way.” He arched an expectant brow at the younger gangster while keeping his pleasant, if fierce, smile firmly in place. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours, Endo.”

“You were warned, Reddington,” Sakamoto interrupted with a furious snarl. “You were warned that if you came to my country still breathing, it wouldn’t be for long.”

“And yet here I am,” Red grinned, spreading his palms outward. “Breathing. And quite well, might I add.” His grin widened. “You could’ve put a bullet in me just now. But you didn’t. And that tells me you must want in on this deal Endo and I have negotiated.”

At the mention of the deal, Endo reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and held aloft a small disc nestled in a clear plastic case between his middle and forefingers, showing Reddington that he did indeed have it.

Red spared a quick glance at it, unable to shroud the fervent hunger in his green eyes before he
turned his full attention back to the two men.

Sakamoto’s keen gaze didn’t miss the yearning on the American’s face. “We demand double,” he slyly asserted.

Red’s jaw tightened slightly. “That wasn’t the agreed upon price, Endo,” he addressed the younger mob boss.

Endo shrugged smoothly.

Switching tactics, Red needled, “Are you really going to allow Sakamoto to usurp your standing in this negotiation?”

The younger man’s eyes narrowed at the direct implication that he wasn’t as strong as the other crime lord. He lifted his chin defiantly. Even though it was true, he didn’t need his nose rubbed in that fact!

“Double, or you get nothing, Reddington,” Endo threatened, eyes flashing with fury.

A meditative expression fell over Red’s face, leaving it smooth and unreadable as he silently regarded both arrogant yakuza bosses.

As the seconds ticked by, the tension in the humid air mounted and became so thick someone could most certainly cut through it with a knife. No one spoke, cleared their throat, or even shifted on their feet. It seemed like all who were present were literally holding their breaths in anticipation of Raymond Reddington’s decision.

The man who was under such intent scrutiny suddenly sighed heavily, breaking the stifling silence. However, the tension swelling between the parties surged rather than eased as his broad shoulders slumped in the appearance of defeat.

Identical grins of smug triumph spread eagerly across Endo’s and Sakamoto’s lips.

Scenting victory, their men began to slowly edge closer to the American’s.

In response to them, Reddington’s guards lifted their chins and stood their ground, hands tightening on their weapons.

Red himself focused his attention on the younger Japanese criminal. The resigned disappointment that suddenly gleamed in his eyes accentuated the wan yet oddly resolute smile on his face.

“Oh,” he declared with slow deliberation, “I could take it all.” Immediately he reached under his jacket and pulled his weapon. Pointing it quickly, he unloaded one slug into Endo’s chest and the sound of fatal gunfire rang loud in the cavernous space.

Dembé rushed for his benefactor while Evan and the men under his command blanketed the area in heavy cover fire.

As Red was whisked deftly away from the front line, a stray bullet that ricocheted off of one of the giant, steel tubes tore through his sleeve and the flesh of his bicep, staining the fine, slate gray suit with dark red blood.

“Goddamn it!” Grunting in pain, the man stumbled backward.

He was instantly aware of Dembé roughly supporting half of his body with his free arm. The younger man bore his weight willingly, but Red knew it was an arduous strain since he was also
brandishing his firearm, murdering men left and right to shield and defend his own.

Grinding his jaw until his was sure his teeth would break, Red made considerable effort to shove that pulsating fire to the deep, dark place in the back of his consciousness so it wouldn’t distract him. Then he lurched away from his ward and stamped his feet into the gravel to grasp his bearings before lifting his gun to fire another round from his chamber into the mass of converging bodies.

“What the Hell were you thinking!” Evan snarled at Red as he spun toward him, shooting fearlessly at the enemy. “We’re outnumbered!”

“The calvary is here, Evan!” came the man’s haughty exclamation as he let fly yet another well-aimed bullet. “You didn’t notice all the shadows drifting about earlier to surround us?”

“You ordered a backup unit?” the guard squawked, both bewildered and downright furious for being kept out of the loop. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me—”

“You were heading up security tonight, so I expected you to see them!” Red took a brief moment to throw a smirk at the young man before whipping around to fire another shot into the horde of Japanese gangsters attempting to bring him down.

“This was a test?” Evan exploded incredulously. “Of all the fucking—“

“Hope you learned a lesson here tonight, Evan!” the older man interrupted, a burst of laughter escaping him a second later as his sharp ears picked up the guard’s choice of explicitly colorful epithets amidst his mutters of a grudging affirmative.

But Red’s dry amusement instantly died away as a shadowy wraith slipped through the defensive line of his men and charged directly for his position.

His green eyes narrowed in fierce challenge, nostrils flaring as he squared his shoulders, turning his sleek weapon to discharge a round at the oncoming attacker.

Two shots were fired simultaneously...but only one found its target.

Agonizing pain ignited in Red’s upper chest, tearing through him like a raging wildfire. Gasping in shock, he clutched at the gaping wound with his free hand as he fell limply backwards, his blood gushing warmly into his shaking palm.

Reacting on pure instinct, Evan spun toward his grievously injured employer, bravely trying to shield his bulk with his more youthful form.

Red’s eyes widened in horrified disbelief as the approaching figure aimed and fired on the guard.

Evan’s back arched in a completely unnatural way from the sickening intensity of the close shot before he fell heavily to the ground scant inches away from Red’s right side. Then he gave one last shudder before he went completely still, the bright life fading from his eyes.

“Evan....” Red wheezed hoarsely in dismay.

Blood bubbled up his throat and foamed at the corners of his mouth from the painful effort of speaking even as he trained a vehemently baleful glare at Sakamoto.

“Not breathing so well now, are you?” the Japanese man taunted with a vicious sneer.
With unrestrained defiance smoldering in his glazed, green eyes, Red watched the yakuza boss’s firearm drop to level steadily on his dying body. As his breathing began coming in short, shallow gasps, he was acutely aware of the malevolent smile just beyond the gun’s muzzle.

“You were warned, Reddington,” Sakamoto crooned, cocking his weapon.

Refusing to allow the enemy’s face and firearm be the very last things he ever saw, Red closed his eyes....

....and suddenly a beautiful, feminine countenance drifted through his thoughts. She flowed gracefully through him like liquid mercury, imperiously replacing the gloating expression of the criminal in his sluggish mind...in his aching heart.

Her youthful, clear eyes...so emotionally pure and impishly vivacious...were deep, sapphire pools his yearning soul willfully dove into.

A wistful smile touched his blood-stained lips as he sank further into their shining depths.

He would much rather drown in these luminous eyes than in his own blood.

“Elizabeth—“ he rasped regretfully, longingly.

A shot rang out.

The blinding flash of gunfire flooded the night just as an alarm sounded loudly throughout the universe. Its very vibrations set the stars above to trembling just before each exploded into shards of radiance too brilliant for the naked eye to behold for long.

Gasping, Elizabeth started awake and sat bolt upright in bed, her heart hammering wildly in her chest.

Those intense, fractured lights shone through the thick glass of her apartment’s large, bedroom window. But the more her hazy vision adjusted to wakefulness, the more those glittering fragments began to meld together, their lurid, otherworldly brilliance fading to a dull, flickering yellow.

Headlights.

Her ears then picked up the familiar humming of an engine.

It was a car.

Not the fiery blast from a gun or the blaze of thousands of galactic supernovas.

It was just her neighbor’s car.

*And the rest was a dream,* her calm, rational mind soothed her through the tumultuous storm of her waking. *It was all just a dream.*

Hot tears of intense relief streamed unchecked down her pale cheeks over those of her initial, anxious grief. A fierce shudder ran through her body as she scrambled clumsily for her iPhone to shut off the blaring alarm she’d set weeks ago.

-Red’s BiRtHdAy!!!- flashed the happy reminder across the screen.

A smile curved her lips through the sticky mess of tears as she stared down at the words. Her turbulent thoughts were becoming sharper and less perturbed the longer she gazed down at his name.
Red was alive!

Everything she had just witnessed wasn’t real. It all had just been a horrible dream and he was alive!

Her watery smile grew stronger.

Red was alive and well and they had a special phone date planned in a few minutes to celebrate his forty-seventh birthday.

Since he was out of the country and they obviously couldn’t be together to celebrate the way they both desired, the phone call would have to be enough until he came home.

She didn’t know where exactly the man was this time.

Before he’d left Washington a couple weeks ago, she’d asked him where he was jetting off to, but, surprisingly, he had been rather vague on the details. Normally he didn’t harbor any qualms about telling her where in the wide world he was traveling to. But since he hadn’t been very forthcoming this time around, she had figured he’d had his reasons for being tight-lipped...and so she hadn’t pushed him for more information.

But during their first long distance phone call while he’d been on his jet flying to his destination, he had given her a hint.

Since he was to be traveling on his birthday, Liz had been adamant about wanting to talk to him on the actual day and not wait until he came back. After a brief moment of thoughtful silence, Red had dropped the hint: he’d told her she could call him around six o’clock in the morning on February 7th, relaying it would be ten o’clock at night for him.

A quick google search had informed her that once he landed, he would most likely be traipsing around in Asia somewhere.

“I'll definitely be back in my hotel room by ten,” he had reassured her with a smile. “We’ll have all night to chat! Well,” he’d amended quickly at her giggle, “technically all morning, for you....”

“Are you sure your associates won’t insist on keeping you out late to celebrate?” she’d gently teased as she’d moved her phone to her other ear.

“Mmm.”

She had heard the tolerant smile in his tone and she’d known by his hedging that after all these years, he still wasn’t keen on celebrating his birthday the way most other people did.

Liz wasn’t one hundred percent sure why that was, though she had her suspicions.

For as long as she’d known him, he had always treated his own birthday as an afterthought—and an unimportant one, at that.

When she’d been an older teenager and much more aware of his mannerisms, she had thought his attitude strange, especially considering the way he had always doted on her every year for her own birthday, showering her with all kinds of expensive gifts and attention as she’d grown from child to young woman.

From observing the efforts he made in avoiding his birthday almost entirely, it was obvious that he was made uncomfortable by the attention shown to him.
In more recent years, after she had completed her first few Psychology courses, Liz had begun to suspect that he shied away from it because he harbored survivor’s guilt: his beloved family, Aisling and Lilah, had died...but *he* had lived on without them, and he felt desperately ashamed because of it.

That explanation wasn’t completely out of the realm of possibility, and so she tentatively believed that her theory about him was correct.

With that thought ever-present in the back of her mind, Elizabeth had tread cautiously and carefully around the topic of his birthday over the last couple years. She hadn’t outright ignored it like he had probably wished she would have. Instead, she had continued to make a point that he needn’t feel such horrible remorse by gently wishing him a happy birthday, her well-wishes always accompanied by a small gift.

In the past, when he had come into the city during the month of February, she’d given him small tokens of affection in the forms of handwritten notes and treats she’d thought he’d like from bakeries she liked to frequent.

This year, when he arrived home, she planned on giving him a small photo of her that he’d be able to fit inside of his wallet.

After all, it was what couples did.

And she figured giving him a tiny picture was honestly so much more practical for his lifestyle than if she were to give him a larger photo meant to sit on a desk in an elaborate frame.

Red was always traveling and she had a feeling he’d appreciate the practicality of the smaller photo so much more.

She couldn’t wait to give it to him!

“My...associates...might try to insist,” Red had sighed over the phone, bringing her back to him. His tone had been a mixture of exasperated amusement and resignation.

Liz had smiled encouragingly. “It wouldn’t be so bad, Red. I bet you’d have fun. I mean, I can just see you presiding over a circle of people...talking, drinking, laughing, and,” she’d wrinkled her nose teasingly, “smoking those cigars you like.”

He had chuckled at that.

“If you did that, you could treat your birthday like any other, normal day, couldn’t you?”

It had been the first time she had directly implied that she was well-aware he actively avoided his birthday. The moment the words had left her lips, she’d wondered if he would open up to her about it at least a little.

“Perhaps I would enjoy myself for a time,” he had conceded slowly. “But....” his voice had lowered considerably, “I would much rather be alone in my suite of rooms....stretched out on my bed....speaking with you, Elizabeth,” he’d purred in a husky tone so suggestive that it had made a hot blush instantly rise in her cheeks.

And in that moment, he had deftly taken the reins of the conversation and had maneuvered it away from his vulnerability to something he had been much more comfortable with.

Elizabeth rubbed her thumb across the smudged screen of her phone and wondered if he was lying down on his bed this very moment, waiting impatiently for her call. Her cheeks heated as she
imagined him sprawled on his back clothed in nothing but his boxers, half his body obscured by white sheets as fine as spider silk while the other half was exposed to the night air due to one, bare leg thrown carelessly over the top of the bed.

Her eyes glinted with fond amusement at the imagery.

The man tended to lounge and even sleep with one leg sticking out of the blankets, and she thought it was a rather cute quirk of his.

Dropping her now-silent phone to the ivory coverlet, Liz quickly rubbed her red eyes and wiped her cheeks dry.

It wouldn’t do to call Red for their date when she was still exhibiting physical indications that she’d been caught up in an awful nightmare.

She couldn’t remember much of it anymore, but she recalled enough to fervently pray that she would never have a dream like that about Red ever again.

Shaking her long hair away from her face, Liz inhaled deeply and then released all that air in a slow sigh. Then she repeated the action three more times, feeling more and more like herself each time the air was expelled from her lungs.

Once she cleared her throat and made sure the tone of her voice sounded normal, she snatched up her iPhone and hit Red’s number on the touchscreen.

It was still a little weird feeling the wide, glass screen of a smartphone pressing against her ear and cheek rather than the slender plastic of her old flip phone, but she was getting used to it.

Not that she was complaining. It was definitely a nice change to adjust to! She didn’t know many people who had the new and coveted iPhone.

A pleased smile touched her lips as the line on the other end began to ring.

This phone has been a spontaneous gift from Red last month.

When she had embarrassedly protested against such extravagance being lavished upon her when it wasn’t even her birthday, he’d awarded her stubborn pride with a severe scowl before dryly requesting that she consider it an early birthday present.

How he spoiled her!

Suddenly she heard a click.

Just when she thought Red finally picked up, and her lips parted to breathily say “Hi” to him, the call rolled over on her instead.

Odd....he never missed her calls.

Maybe his phone was on silent or something so he hadn’t heard it go off.

Shrugging to herself, Liz hit his number again with her thumb.

The line rang and rang...and then it hung up on her once more.

Pursing her lips in irritation, she stared down at her phone to double-check the time. It was 6:10, which meant it was definitely 10:10 wherever he was.
She was on time....

Perhaps he was running behind and was just getting settled. Red was one of the most punctual people she’d ever met, but she supposed anything was possible—even him losing track of time.

She impatiently waited ten more minutes before she called him again...then made a mental note to remind him to set up his voicemail as she frustratedly tapped End.

Though, honestly, the fact that he still had to set it up at all baffled her. Had he truly never done so before? For it certainly seemed that way....

Elizabeth shook her head, bewildered by his surprising lack of either technological knowledge or foresight—or both! Being able to leave a message for him sure would have been advantageous right about now....

Frowning and doing her damndest to ignore the slight niggle of anxiety creeping into her chest, she hit Red’s number with her fingertip yet again.

But the call just kept ringing and ringing and that apprehensive niggle metamorphosed into insidious tendrils of dread.

He still wasn’t picking up.

It had been too many times now that he’d missed her calls. He should have answered over twenty minutes ago. Surely he would have picked up even if he was running late just to let her know he was indeed running late? He wasn’t the type of man to leave her in a lurch, that was for sure!

Elizabeth stared down at her phone’s dark screen in growing concern.

....Had something happened?

Vividly graphic images from her terrifying nightmare flashed before her mind’s eye and she bared her teeth in a silent snarl of vehement denial, shaking her head fiercely.

No!

That was just her overactive imagination playing tricks on her!

Red was fine. He had to be fine.

*But he has bodyguards for a reason....*

That trepidatious feeling of foreboding swelled within her until it crashed painfully against her worried heart.

“Red....” she breathed uneasily as she hit her finger against his phone number yet again. “God, Red.... *Where are you?*”

Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :)}
Thank you to my betas, who are always a source of encouragement and inspiration ❤️
February 7, 2007  
*Seattle, Washington, 8:04am*

February 8, 2007  
*Japan, 12:04am*

The second her iPhone’s screen lit up and blared loudly to life, filling the silent room with chiming music that certainly didn’t fit her apprehensive mood, Liz whipped around and all but dove for where it lay on her comforter.

Adrenaline sparked roughly through her, making her heart pound as her shaking finger swept clumsily across the screen to immediately accept the call.

“Red?” His name popped out of her mouth much more harshly than she intended as she jammed the phone against her ear, desperate to hear his voice.

“Lizzy.”

*Thank God.* Her eyes briefly closed in silent prayer as she swayed on her feet, her mind registering the surprise coloring his low, tired voice even through the intense relief crashing over her.

“How did you know it was me calling?”

She slowly blinked, uncomprehending, as she sank unsteadily down to her bed. The fierce release of anxiety surging through her smashed against a sudden and completely unexpected rising tide of acute frustration.

Red had been MIA for over two hours and *that* was what he had to say to her?

“W-what?”

“I have a new phone,” the man explained patiently, apparently oblivious to her growing incredulity. “And with it, a new number. I just received it tonight.”

She heard him inhale rather sharply just before static suddenly scratched in her ear as he shifted the phone to his other shoulder.

“You obviously wouldn’t have known my new number, so—”

“Is *that* why you’re over two hours late for our date?” she demanded, rudely interrupting him as a flash of anger she didn’t quite understand roared through her, heating her cheeks and stealing her voice.

“Because you decided to go shopping for a new phone in the middle of the freaking night?” her voice raised an octave. “How late do the shops stay open where you’re at, anyway?”

Red exhaled loudly. “Lizzy—”
“Do you know just how—” scared “—worried I was about you?”

“You were worried about me?”

Elizabeth was too wrapped up in her own blazing indignation to consider the odd, almost wary note in his hoarse tone.

“Of course I was!” she exclaimed, incensed. “I was trying to get hold of you this whole time! I called. Multiple times. I even texted after a while! Not that you would know that...since you have a new phone,” she snarked.

The fear she’d barely been able to keep at bay for the last couple hours rearing free from her slippery hold and thundering madly through her, expressing itself through vehement outrage.

“You’re always on time to things, you know,” she related coldly. “It doesn’t matter what it is! You’re never late. But you were tonight. And the later it got, the more—” scared “—worried I got!” The clipped words poured from her in a deluge of fury. “You have bodyguards for a reason. I’m not stupid.”

“I never said—”

“And I’m not forgetful, either!” she hissed, swiftly cutting him off yet again.

Elizabeth could feel his irritation with her mounting and her own temper flared hotter because of it.

“I remember what you and Baz told me,” she remarked testily before he could sweep in and take over the conversation. “I remember why you keep all of them around. So when it got to be later and later, I thought—” her voice hitched unexpectedly and she immediately cleared her throat to try and hide the lapse. “...I thought something happened to you.”

She paused briefly in her tirade just long enough to take in a deep, controlling breath, somewhat surprised that Red wasn’t taking advantage of her momentary weakness to manipulate the threads of her rant and weave them into something else entirely.

“I actually dreamed that something happened to you,” she blurted hoarsely.

Liz hadn’t meant to share that, but now that the words had escaped her, her traitorous tongue wouldn’t withhold the rest.

“It was.... God, it was so awful.” Her voice lowered even more as the memory of that horrible nightmare overtook her. “You...got shot, Red.”

In the split second that she closed her eyes, images of blood gushing from the fatal wound in his chest to pool in the gravel beneath his body flashed mercilessly through her mind.

She watched those sticky, scarlet rivulets stream down his sides, clotting the grit he’d collapsed in, she heard the deafening blast of a gun firing....and was instantly blinded by a vivid burst of insanely bright light.

Forcibly shaking herself from that ghastly recollection, Liz opened her eyes.

“You died,” she informed him in a flat, toneless voice as she valiantly attempted to conceal her terror of such a crisis actually happening in real life.

“It was just a dream, honey,” he soothed roughly in her ear after a beat of weighty silence. “I’m right
“Don’t patronize me!” she snarled indignantly, desperately reaching for her fiery anger and tightly grasping it so it would burn away the growing lump in her throat. “Obviously you aren’t dead. We’re talking on your brand new phone, aren’t we?”

She heard him suck in a loud, furious breath through his nostrils at her biting, sarcastic flippancy.

“Stop this, Lizzy!” he demanded hotly.

“I have every right to be mad at you!” she defended, the stress and anxiety she’d harbored all morning finally seeping through her anger in the form of welling tears she absolutely refused to shed.

Her smarting pride wouldn’t allow it!

“Couldn’t you have given me a heads up that you were going to be late?” she admonished peevishly, blinking back the warm mist with obstinate determination. “I know you couldn’t call me before ten. But it’s not like you don’t know how to text!”

“I never said I was late because I was out buying a new phone,” Red snapped at her, a swell of raw exasperation surging with his unleashed temper. “It was given to me.”

She scowled. “But you said—”

“No,” he denied sharply. “You assumed.”

It was rare that he ever took that tone of voice with her. Very rare.

In fact, she couldn’t even immediately remember the last time they’d been so angry at each other like this.

She hated it.

Flushing, the young woman glared down at her crossed legs, making a concerted effort to rein in her temper.

“I’m tired, Elizabeth,” Red sighed heavily, instantly regretting releasing his impatient ire on her.

He wearily rubbed the side of his stiff neck, rolling it in an attempt to ease the tension brought about by the taxing events of the last few hours—and this unanticipated confrontation with her.

It didn’t work as well as he’d hoped.

“Now, will you hear me out?” he asked tightly. “Or should we have a chat later when we’ve both cooled off?”

“We can talk now.” Her affronted pride kept her from apologizing, so instead she swallowed thickly and stubbornly kept her voice as hard and unyielding as his. “Where the Hell were you?”

Red leaned his head back against the headboard of the bed, releasing a harsh sigh through his nose in weary exasperation of her imperious irascibility.

But at least she was willing to listen now.

He then glanced tiredly down at his sore, right bicep, deliberating on how to phrase his answer to her very direct question without lying outright.
As his mind worked swiftly and methodically through the problem, he pursed his lips in annoyance at the sight of a small amount of blood already seeping through the fresh bandage he had wound around his arm not even twelve minutes ago.

He’d have to change out the white gauze again at least one more time tonight. The last thing he needed was an infection prolonging immobility!

“Red?” Elizabeth ventured expectantly into the silence that was stretching longer than it should have.

“I’m here,” he murmured almost absently as he smoothed his fingers over the strip of medical tape holding the gauze in place. “I was late because I was at a business meeting.”

“A business meeting,” she slowly repeated in disbelief. “So late?”

The man shrugged, then immediately let loose a hiss of startled pain as the movement caused the tender seam of the wound to split a bit more, releasing a fresh spurt of blood.

Damn it!

“Red?” she queried in concern despite her lingering resentment and vexation.

Baring his teeth, he glowered down at his arm while silently and viciously berating himself for moving it when he should be keeping it immobile—and for his complete and utter lapse in judgement about tonight.

He should not have given in to his own intense desire to speak with her while he was here working an extremely important job in Japan.

In hindsight, he should have followed his gut and waited to talk to her in the private safety of his jet while he flew back home to the States. If he had shown some fucking intelligence, he would have insisted that their call be postponed until then.

But he had been arrogant. He’d thought he had those damned yakuza bosses all figured out, and, therefore, had believed he’d accurately predicted their every compelling motive and deviously conniving move.

Nothing like the X factor in addition to a fierce and bloody gunfight to remind one that he may be damned excellent at his work, but he wasn’t entirely infallible.

Red’s conceit had cost him one guard’s life and had wounded eight others.

All those men knew what they were signing up for when they entered into his employ. They were well aware of the risks they would have to take and the sacrifices they would have to make. But the rationale of that didn’t make the expected casualties any easier to bear.

And those decisions his ego had made had directly affected Elizabeth as well.

He hadn’t been available for her phone call when he’d promised he would be. He’d been hours late returning, and this abnormal behavior had alerted her keen intuition, warning her that something was terribly wrong.

Red’s jaw tightened in frustrated regret.

If he had held firm against her flirtatious wheedling and playful coaxing...but especially against himself and his own passion for her...then this entire situation wouldn’t even exist right now!
She wouldn’t be wallowing unhappily in the damned emotional state she was currently mired down in, and he wouldn’t have to be so damned vigilant in regards to what he could truthfully say to her.

His conscience twinged.

But the situation did exist.

Ultimately, he had created this fucking mess. And while she had been out of line, he understood why she had reacted the way she had.

Elizabeth had needed to release the whirl of built up apprehension and fear.

So those negative emotions had naturally expunged themselves in the volatile forms of aggravation and aggression...all directed at him because she had been so anxious and afraid for him.

As this understanding filtered through his consciousness to dawn at the very forefront of his thoughts, the lingering anger he felt toward her began to slowly bleed out of him.

Only once he was certain his tone was steady without any trace of his previous irritability did he open his mouth to reply to her.

“They can most certainly run very late.”

Treacherous assholes and flying bullets tended to drag out such “business meetings” more often than not!

“Tonight’s meeting was a prime example of this...unfortunate truth,” he admitted, his voice much more heavily sardonic than he intended it to be.

In addition to his unusually somber mood and his earlier sharp hiss of pain, his unchecked, grimly wry tone must have also alerted Elizabeth to the fact something was still amiss, for he instantly sensed a change in her over the phone.

But before Red could think of a way to subtly and gracefully divert her attention without appearing like that was what he was purposefully doing, she spoke.

“Are you all right?”

Her silvery voice was much softer now, a husky breath in his ear, and his body, even as exhausted as it was, immediately stirred in slight reaction to it.

Mindful of his injury, he slowly and gingerly moved his right palm down his naked abdomen to lightly—chidingly—cup the warm rigidity through the silky material of his boxers.

“Why not?”

“You didn’t answer my question....” she murmured.

“Yes, I did.”

“But it wasn’t a straight answer,” she huffed reproachfully.

A small smile twitched at the corner of his mouth at the familiarity of her tone. She was still serious, but a tinge of dry playfulness now edged her voice, smoothing its sharpness into something a little more...neutral. In hearing it, he knew they had tentatively crossed back over into equitable territory with one another.
“Red?”
“Mm?”

“Are you...” She paused uncertainly for a moment, as if rethinking what she was going to ask.

“What, sweetheart?” he gently encouraged.

“You’re hurt,” came her grave assertion.

His smile died at the words.

“Aren’t you?” she asked quietly.

The man’s eyes closed of their own volition, but whether it was a reactive wince or it was in silent prayer, he couldn’t say for certain.

Tension thrummed through him.

How could he possibly sidestep this blunt question that demanded a straightforward answer?

The fact was...he couldn’t.

He couldn’t even answer her ambiguously.

_It’s finally happening_, the leery part of him warned in a low whisper. _She’s beginning to question who you really are...directly to you._

He could always lie outright. The tempting option was open and available to him, especially since she couldn’t literally see him, and the wound was shallow enough to be mostly healed by the time he traveled back to America.

He could even stay away from Washington until the scab had fallen off completely and absolutely no trace of it existed any longer. He definitely had plenty to do abroad and could therefore make honest excuses to Lizzy.

Even though the sly thought beckoned enticingly to him, the very idea of purposefully weaving a tangled web of deceit especially for her was abhorrent to him.

He couldn’t do it.

Reluctantly—determinedly—he struck out onto the path of truth. It was the only avenue available to him, for spinning falsehoods to trap his Lizzy in ignorance was out of the question.

It always had been...and always would be.

If he lost her over admitting the truth, it would be bitterly painful, but at least he’d be able to live with himself...for God knew he wouldn’t be able to if he broke his long-standing vow to her.

His eyes flickered open, gleaming with the fierce light of unwavering resolve. “Yes.”

He heard her exhale shakily. “Is it...bad?”

A pregnant pause followed as he soberly considered her.

That certainly wasn’t the follow up question he’d been expecting.
“Not bad,” he finally confided, voice soft. Then he gambled and chanced a hesitant smile, guardedly steeling his heart further as he assured her, “It’s truly nothing to concern yourself over, Lizzy.”

The silence on the other end of the line was deafening.

He wondered if she was aware that the way she would react to his honest confession would ultimately determine their future.

“I was at the airport yesterday....” Elizabeth finally said, breaking the strained stillness between them.

His brow furrowed in confusion at her words.

“To interview for a job there,” she explained simply, halting the questions that were dancing on the top of his tongue. “While I was walking through one of the terminals, I saw a couple. They were arguing. It was pretty heated. And the man...” a hint of a growl colored her voice, “he hit the woman.”

As she spoke, Red could feel the waves of fury rolling off of her even with the thousands upon thousands of miles separating them.

“He hurt her so badly. And it all happened so fast. Like, I blinked once and it just...it happened. It was over.”

The man listened with somber patience, yet he couldn’t help but wonder what this had to do with his confession...with him...with them.

“There was nothing I could do for her.” Elizabeth’s voice shook slightly, and she cleared her throat to try and hide the obvious lump of empathetic emotion painfully growing there.

“He was bigger than me. Most men are, but he...he was really big. And.... I didn’t have any authority,” she relayed her frustration that was almost beyond mere words. “I couldn’t fight him. I couldn’t.... God, Red. I couldn’t help her,” she rasped, nearly on the verge of tears.

Christ. His eyes closed as he imagined just how helpless she must have felt. Observing such violence unfold before her very eyes had probably vividly reminded her of when she’d been assaulted by Forman. Perhaps she had even relived some of her own trauma.

“What I felt when I saw that happen....I felt it all again in my dream,” she whispered. “I was powerless to stop what was happening. I couldn’t help you. I couldn’t do anything. And even now—knowing that you’re...hurt....”

Her voice trailed off for a moment as she carefully considered her next words.

“You say I shouldn’t be concerned...but I am,” she divulged in a soft breath. “And how or why it happened...those things aren’t what concerns me.”

Relief swept powerfully through him.

Despite it all....she still accepted him.

“What does concern me,” she continued huskily, “is that I’m feeling it again. That—that helpless feeling. And I can’t stand it, Red!” she hissed with quiet vehemence. “I can’t stand not being able to help you—or anyone.”

The man’s hard and wary expression gentled considerably with every word she spoke, and he
wished to God he was with her now in the same room so he could put his arms around her—to Hell with his damned injury!—and hold her as tightly as he could against him.

How deeply he loved his fierce girl with her pure, empathetic heart.

“....Oh, honey—”

“I’m going to join the FBI.”

Elizabeth’s rushed yet determined proclamation rang clearly in his ear as he stared unseeing straight ahead in stunned disbelief.

A maelstrom of conflicting emotions surged wildly through him in the span of one, single heartbeat: dismayed fear, overwhelming shock...and genuine, intense admiration.

“I’m sorry.” This breathlessly came almost directly on the heels of her announcement. “I cut you off just now. But—but I had to get it out. I had to tell you before I...lost my nerve.”

Part of him heard her words, but another part himself, a much larger part, was pensively turned inward.

_The FBI...._

His Lizzy couldn’t have chosen a more dangerous career path for herself, and Red feared for her safety in every respect.

Despite his continuous efforts to throw them off the scent, rogue bounty hunters and powerful members of the Cabal were still looking for any trace of her.

She would be much more accessible to them if she took any position in the government, significant or otherwise.

The strategic and analytical part of his mind shifted gears and began swiftly filling with various ways to keep her safe.

He quite honestly couldn’t have been more shocked by Elizabeth’s decision. He hadn’t guessed at what kind of life she would want to lead after graduating with her degree, but he never would have imagined one like this.

As he thought back to all the time they’d spent together over the last few months, thoughtful comments she’d made that had caused him to study her intently finally fell into place...for they all pointed directly to this choice of hers.

He was at once both furious with and keenly disappointed in himself for failing to pinpoint her design much earlier.

And why hadn’t he? _He_, the man who prided himself on his acute ability to not only accurately read people, but predict their habits and behaviors?

Because, in a way, he’d become too complacent in their relationship.

They had built their own, beautiful little world high up in the sprawling penthouse of one of the finest hotels in Seattle. And he’d fooled a part of himself into thinking that they could actually remain there, undisturbed by reality.

He’d been selfish, and in his selfishness he had willingly ignored the signs that his Lizzy was
reaching a new stage of adulthood...one where she wouldn’t be as dependent upon him as she was now.

Her vehemently emotional reaction to seeing the attack on that poor woman at the airport yesterday made even more sense to him now than it had earlier.

Red knew she had deeply questioned herself after Forman had assaulted her. He could well remember when she would lose herself in introspective contemplation for hours, mulling over her weaknesses and insecurities.

He knew she wondered if she possessed the bravery and independence to face such a harrowing situation again...and if she did, would she come out of it unviolated and alive?

Was her decision to pursue a badge and a gun her way of fighting back against the Formans of the world? Of finding her firm footing once and for all? Of proving to the world—and, more importantly, to herself—that she was not only worthy of life, but that she was capable of defending it?

Whatever her reasons were, and he was certain they would become clearer to him in time, he had to admit that his admiration for her had intensified.

For one so young, she was bravely facing her fears directly and was discovering solutions to overcome all of them. In so doing, she was realizing her strengths and coming to understand that she possessed an ambitious drive to utilize them.

The glowing pride he felt for her suffused him to the very marrow of his bones—but with it came a flood of desolation so strong that his heart felt like it was ruthlessly twisting in place.

Wretchedly conflicted, Red carefully rubbed the fingers of his right hand over the stabbing pain in his chest.

With her rising aspirations came the inevitable downfall of their involvement.

Elizabeth would find out who he was, and she could not...would not...be inclined to continue a romantic relationship with him. How could she? He stood for everything she would be fighting against.

“Aren’t you going to say anything?” she asked quietly.

The man closed his eyes, hiding the sudden, stinging wetness gathering behind his lids, the tangible proof of his burgeoning distress. “I will support you in whatever you wish, sweetheart.”

“I wanted to tell you for the longest time,” she smiled tentatively. “But...I wasn’t quite sure how.”

Which meant she’d been very uncertain about how he would react to the shocking news.

“You could’ve told me,” he replied gruffly to cover his disquiet while lightly pinching the bridge of his nose, a motion that aided in keeping the threatening tears at bay. Only once he was certain he had himself under strict control did he open his dry eyes. “Surely I’m not unapproachable?”

“Oh! No. Not after...well, everything.” She nervously shifted her phone to her other ear. “But you’re...protective of me.”

“Shouldn’t I be?” he growled softly.
“Don’t get defensive, Red,” she chided. “I just meant that I know working for the FBI isn’t the...safest of careers I could’ve chosen for myself. I knew you’d have some doubts about me joining up.”

He wisely kept his mouth closed.

“Don’t you?” she prodded.

“You already know the answer to that,” he reproved gently.

“Yeah....” She sounded a little deflated, and that certainly would not do.

“But I want you to know, Elizabeth,” he continued steadily, “that even despite my reservations, I find this goal you have to be quite...admirable.”

“You think so?” she queried, the smile back in her voice.

“I do,” he confirmed seriously. “And if this is what you really want...if you’ve found your calling...I want you to pursue it with everything you have.”

“I’ve begun to,” she admitted.

He could just see her beaming proudly at him, and a pained smile touched his lips at the breathtaking vision.

“It’s why I was at the airport interviewing yesterday,” she went on. “I need to get some work experience as a translator. My advisor says it’ll count towards one of the many requirements for the application.”

“How did your interview go?” Red asked, keeping his tone conversational as he forced himself to relax back against the cushioned headboard.

He wouldn’t allow himself to think about any of the concerning effects and complications of her significant decision just now.

And he wouldn’t dare permit himself to focus on the limited time they had left.

What he would do tonight was whole-heartedly lose himself in conversation with her and would unashamedly enjoy her company for as long as he possibly could.

“I think it went pretty well,” Elizabeth answered, tone both humble and wistfully hopeful. “My letters of rec were really good. And when they tested my Russian, they seemed impressed....”

“And I’m sure you were your charming self....”

“Well, I don’t know,” she giggled. “I tried to be.”

“I’m sure you were,” he smiled back, using his left shoulder to prop his phone up comfortably against his ear.

“Hey, Red....” she drew the man’s attention, “I should’ve said this a while ago but....” her voice softened, “happy birthday.”

Red chuckled long and low, wishing he could see her face but knowing it had to be turning pink with a rueful blush.
“And here I thought you had completely forgotten!” he teased her, hoping to make the delightfully bright color bloom even more.

“Well, it is the whole point of us even talking today....” came her haughty reply.

“Mmm. But we’ve discussed...so much more, Lizzy,” he grinned, purposefully baiting her.

“Since you can’t see me, I’ll just tell you: I’m wrinkling my nose at you,” she grumbled sheepishly.

“Of course you are!” he snorted fondly. “And if I were there with you now, I’d tweak it.”

“You like doing that to me,” Elizabeth sighed, resigned. The grin coloring her words informed him she certainly didn’t mind.

“I like doing a lot of things to you....” the man uttered suggestively. “I got you a gift.” He brightened suddenly, his tone light and breezy.

“A gift?” She was surprised by the change in topic. “For me?”

“Yes, for you....” he smiled. “The minute I saw it, it said, take me home to Lizzy.”

His eyes fell on the box which lay open on the chair across the way. Nestled elegantly inside was a sultry, scarlet Cheongsam silk dress with an inlay of swirling black roses.

She would look absolutely stunning in it.

“And you listened?” she laughed under her breath.

“Of course I did.” He seemed rather taken aback by the question.

“Well, thank you....” Elizabeth smiled happily, genuinely excited for her surprise present.

“And...speaking of gifts....” she murmured, tone lowering rather impishly, “is there anything you want, birthday boy?”

“I can think of,” Red’s mind kicked into overdrive, “....a thing or two.”

Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤
February 7, 2007  
*Seattle, Washington, 8:37am*

February 8, 2007  
*Japan, 12:37am*

Elizabeth’s eyes fluttered closed as the mischievous lilt coloring his deep, honeyed voice smoothly rippled over her. Her fingers tightened around her phone, her dark brows drawing together in wistful longing.

“God, Red.... I miss you so much.”

A slow, loving smile curved the man’s lips at that. “I wish we were in the same bed tonight.”

“Me too,” she whispered.

Red shut his eyes, imagining her curling up next to him, her silky skin whispering against the cool sheets as she made herself comfortable against his side.

“I wish I could kiss you,” he murmured, envisioning himself embracing her slender body and pulling her close.

Liz’s chin unconsciously lifted as she imagined his head dipping towards hers, slowly and unhurriedly placing his warm, hard mouth against her own.

“Part those full lips of yours with mine,” he rasped quietly, “and kiss you until you make that little mewling sound I love so much.”

“I make a noise?” she asked shyly.

“You most certainly do,” Red confirmed in a low voice. “The most titillating sound,” he continued, “that turns me on every time I hear it.”

She captured her bottom lip lightly with her teeth, barely suppressing that very sound as she listened to the man’s deep, gravelly voice.

“Just thinking of you lying naked beneath me,” he kept his eyes closed, savoring the intimate picture presented, “dark hair spread out on the pillow, kissing me back,” he breathed, “making that noise...” he hummed his approval, “is turning me on right now,” he admitted.

She gave a flustered giggle. “Really?”

“You don’t believe me?” he glanced down at the obvious evidence of his growing arousal.

His question, evenly presented, stilled her demure laughter.
“Well....” Liz hesitated slightly.

“You should,” he rumbled chidingly, his fingers brushing his stiffening length through the satin fabric of his boxers.

“I wish....” she sighed her longing, “I wish we could make love,” she confided, her tone a compelling blend of sweet wistfulness and sultry longing.

“Why don’t we?” he asked simply.

“We—uh, we can’t.” The woman was bewildered. “We aren’t together.”

Red smiled. “We’re on the phone, aren’t we?”

Uncertain silence met his ears.

He could imagine that she was chewing lightly on her lower lip, self-consciously averting her eyes downwards to study the suede lining of her sofa, or the plush coverlet of her bed...wherever she happened to be sitting at the moment...to stall.

“I recall an earlier exchange,” Red reminded her of the intimacy they shared before, “that was enjoyed by us both in very similar circumstances.”

He vividly remembered a time of furious tempers shared, of each releasing their frustration...their lustful yearning...on the other.

The underlying fury beneath their words and sexual actions that night had perhaps tainted the idea for her. Red could not be certain.

But if Elizabeth would willingly follow his lead, this evening would certainly end on a better note than her abruptly ending the call like she’d done all those months before.

As Red mused, he was unaware that the young woman actually felt her stomach coil with tentative yet trembling excitement rather than displeasure as she also began to visualize that intensely passionate moment.

They were different now from the people they’d been over half a year ago, he reasoned. Which might work to his advantage? For their relationship was stronger. Deeper.

*It will be so fucking painful to let her go.*

He briefly closed his eyes, his palm cupping the hard bulge straining against his boxers as the dark part of his soul unsheathed its claws and savagely swiped that jabbing thought away before it could take root and fester.

His eyes flicked back open. He defiantly shut out everything except his heightened awareness of the heat of his own body, the warm plastic of the burner phone pressed between his left ear and shoulder. The young woman’s quiet breathing on the other end of the line centered him.

Christ, he wanted her. Wanted to share this intimacy with her. Wanted to show her that anger would *not* be the emotion driving either of them tonight.
But was she willing to give in to her own desire and allow herself to be seduced?

“Lizzy.”

“I’m here,” she murmured.

“Anything sexual we indulge in, honey...even phone sex...can be considered lovemaking,” he explained, voice gentle. “You get out of it what you put into it. But if you’re uncomfortable with the idea, of course I won’t push—”

“I want to,” she interrupted quickly. “I want to make love with you.”

At Elizabeth’s declaration, his heart beat wildly with an eager frisson of anticipation, his eyes deepening with desire.

He wasted no time in beginning his seduction.

“Good,” he smiled. “Because I want to make love with you, too.”

She released a soft breath at that.

His smile widened. “You like hearing that, don’t you?”

“That you want me?” Elizabeth asked huskily. “Yes.”

“You’ll be hearing a lot more of that tonight,” Red chuckled, imagining that the blush staining her cheeks was quite dark indeed. “I want you to do something for me.” His tone dropped seductively, “….Pull the blinds.”

He doubted she’d want anyone seeing her writhing about in the throes of passion...which was exactly where he planned to have her shortly.

The phone went silent for a beat.

The man heard some frantic shifting about, a comically frenzied attempt to close herself off from the outside world.

He grinned for the fact.

The woman was a little breathless when she picked up the phone, situating herself against her headboard. “Okay, all done.”

Red’s teeth flashed in loving amusement for the enthusiastic reply, “I want you to lie down, get comfortable....”

“Oh my bed?” she was momentarily confused, glancing about the room for other, suitable places that might work.

“Preferably,” he drawled silkily. “Although I have often pictured you draped across that chair with the blue throw placed strategically under your sweet bottom.”

Elizabeth darted a considering glance over at the plush chair and blanket he mentioned. It was an
intriguing idea, but perhaps she’d save using that location for another time.

Having made up her mind, she decisively squirmed downward, her mattress squeaking slightly as she followed his directions.

“Are you lying down too?” Liz asked curiously, her avid mind trying to picture the man’s position.

An affectionate smile twitched at his lips. She was obviously a little nervous, which was why she was stalling. But if chatting would help her relax, then he would answer any question she posed.

“Would you like me to be?” he played his part expertly.

Liz pursed her lips, a sudden thought occurring. “....You’re hurt. Are you sure you’re up for thi—”

Then she closed her eyes suddenly, dread filling her mind for her obvious faux pas.

Of course he was up for this!

“Don’t worry about me, sweet girl,” the man smiled reassuringly. Using his right hand to gingerly push the soft material of his boxers down his hips as carefully as he could manage, he grunted, “I’ll be just fine.”

He lifted his heavy cock until it rested along his abdomen, his fingers loosely encircling its hard girth, thumb idly caressing the head.

“And,” he added determinedly, “I want you climbing the fucking walls, honey.” He wanted this to be good for her, so good that she would want to do it again with him.

Red could almost feel the heat of her receptive blush radiating warmly through the phone.

Grinning confidently, he began to slowly weave the threads of his seduction.

“I see you in that black lace bra...the one that only just covers your nipples,” he sighed happily, “and those matching panties that barely hide the sweet swell of the delectable derrière.”

Flushing hotly, Elizabeth glanced down at herself. The plaid pajama shorts and a white raglan shirt she wore mortified her.

“I chose them just for you,” she lied through her teeth, making a mental note to wear the exquisite lingerie next time she and Red spoke on the phone. “I know how much you enjoy seeing me wear them.”

He chuckled sensually, knowing a lie when he heard one. “I am so glad you did...because I’m already so much harder for the fact.”

She closed her eyes, envisioning Red hovering over her, his hungry gaze devouring her alive.

“I can almost see those perfect breasts of yours pushing through the delicate lace, the heavy swell straining as you breathe.”

Her fingers lightly traced the swell of her breasts through the near-translucent material of the raglan. She hissed quietly as the soft material pulled against her sensitive nipples.
“I need you to pull that lace down.... Bare yourself for me.” His eyes closed for the vision. “I want to see those lovely mounds in their entirety.”

She did as he bade, hastily ridding herself of the lightweight shirt. Her blood heated as her hands slid along bared skin.

“Touch yourself for me, honey,” he urged in a low tone, listening to her breath catch.

Liz moaned, cupping the warm weight, the morning air breezing against her exposed flesh.

“That’s it....” he encouraged softly. “I love watching you rub your thumbs over your nipples...getting them tight...ready to suckle....” he hummed.

In his mind’s eye, he could just see her slender fingers drifting over her pale flesh, gently plucking those rosy buds, rolling them, pinching them....

Red’s cock pulsed in response to his growing excitement. “Does it feel good, baby?”

“Yeah,” she breathed, head rolling on her pillow, her caresses becoming bolder. “They’re.... God, they’re so sensitive....”

Pressing the phone tighter against his ear, he focused on her little breathy mewls, “I want to take them in my mouth,” his voice, rough with need, deepened, “and feel them tighten against my tongue.”

The erotic image he painted in her mind was so vivid that she felt a tingling warmth rush in a smoothly sensual wave down her body, erasing any lingering remnants of reticence.

“I could hold you here against me all day,” she purred, caught up in the fantasy they were building. “Watching you...feeling your lips on me. Your tongue sucking me....”

“I love doing that. I love making you writhe and whimper.” Red’s breathing hitched at the very thought. “That arouses me. Makes me so damned hard for you.”

Gooseflesh swept over the woman’s entire body as she imagined what he looked like just then.

“Touch me, Red,” she pleaded softly, narrow hips lifting slightly up off the bed.

“Your breasts are so soft,” he pulled her into his fantasy, “they fill my palms perfectly.”

Cradling her warm flesh in her hands, Liz gently squeezed her nipples, the provocative touch sending a searing jolt of heat to the place right between her thighs.

A low moan escaped her before she could stifle it.

“I love the curve of your neck,” he inhaled deeply, “you smell so good.”

The woman’s movements mimicked his narrative. She arched her neck gracefully, feeling the ghost of an impression shiver over her flushed skin.

She could not prevent a whimper of delight from escaping her parted mouth.
“Yes, honey....” Red hissed, palm sliding up and down his hot length. “Be as loud as you want. I love hearing you.”

“I want to excite you,” she flirted breathlessly, eyes slitting open to stare up at the ceiling, a knowing grin flitting across her lips.

“I’m as hard as fucking granite listening to you,” the man growled his confirmation, grasping the large bulb to ease the ache he was experiencing.

The heat in Elizabeth’s cheeks flared at that, and she bit her lower lip as she began to imagine giving Red the same titillating pleasure he was giving her.

She ran her hands down her flat belly under the elastic of her cotton shorts. Just one brief touch to the tiny nub of pleasure sent a jarring jolt through her extremities. She hastily withdrew from the temptation.

“Oh Red....” she breathed heavily, “I’m so wet for you.”

“Let me see,” he murmured his encouragement, “move those little panties aside and touch yourself for me.”

Liz found herself performing the act. Her skin felt electrified as she imagined herself lightly running her fingertips over the lace whorls of the panties Red loved so much. She gasped, sharply arching her hips into the teasing touch of her hand.

“Yes....” he whispered hoarsely. “Does that feel good....”

“Yeah....”

“You know what I like best....” he queried, settling into the moment, “is when I take that slip of lace slowly down over the swell of your ass. The sight of that alabaster flesh makes my hands itch to touch it.”

Flushing with desire, she slowly ran her hands over the curvy shape he described as she shimmied out of the comfortable shorts. As she sank into the down comforter, the billowy softness enveloped her nakedness.

Then she almost playfully stretched out her legs, languidly arching her lower her back as she gave herself over to the feeling of being youthfully feminine and very much desired.

“I can just see you lying there,” he continued, “your dark hair fanned out...the faint tinge of a flush separating your flesh from the bed....”

Closing her eyes, the young woman traced a hand smoothly down the line between her sensitive breasts. It fluttered past her abdomen to finally linger over the neatly trimmed curls of her sex.

“Open your legs wide for me, Lizzy,” Red coaxed, baring his teeth in a pleased smile. He heard the small shaky breath escape her parted mouth. “The air’s a little cold against all that heat, isn’t it?”

A soft little whimper confirmed the fact for him.

“But I’ll warm you right up....” he promised.
“Touch me...please....” Elizabeth sighed wantonly.

“What do you need, honey? Tell me.”

She bit her lip again, straining to say the words, another hot flush reddening her skin, “You make my tummy flip with you kiss me...down there.”

Red’s lips pulled at the corner. “I love to kiss you...down there.”

The mental image of her sensually palming herself, head thrown to the side, her hips shifting with her fluid movements, was a fucking arousing one.

“And I will,” he growled heatedly, “I can promise you that.”

She felt herself throb under her fingers, a heavy weight settling in her pelvis in response to the man’s promise.

“You’re damned beautiful, sweetheart,” he grated, gradually increasing the grasp on his shaft. “With your cheeks flushed like that. Those full breasts lightly bouncing so enticingly....” He closed his eyes to the images. “Your lips glistening in the low light....”

Red flashed back to an early Sunday morning he had recently enjoyed with Lizzy. He closed his eyes, savoring the memory of her sprawled nude on the white sheets, the dawn’s rays glittering over the fine sheen of sweat dampening her slender frame.

Her beard burned breasts moved heavily with her panted breaths. She had turned, showing him a passing glimpse of her recently sated sex. Though he had just partaken of and had savored the beauty laid before him, the sight of her reddened skin and full lips had made his heart quicken and groin stir. Just as they did now.

“They’re so full and pouty....” he growled, “begging for more....” he murmured deeply, “begging for my attention.”

“Red,” she breathed. “You’re torturing me....”

“There is a fine line between pleasure and pain, baby,” he rasped gruffly.

The man’s low tone filled her with an unquenchable need. “Please, God....more....” she pleaded, her voice the barest breath above a whisper.

“Let me see you....” he coaxed, “open for me, sweetheart. Let me in.”

Red’s fantasy opened her legs wide, presenting herself to his eager imagination, “....Yes,” he urged, “spread your legs.”

Grasping her knee, Liz pulled, opening herself. She hissed as her hot, overstimulated flesh tingled sharply in the cool air only to be replaced by a rush of warmth.

“....Red,” the breathy moan was almost his undoing.
“You’re so hot....” he murmured, “so wet. So ready for me.”

The woman moaned sensuously for him.

“Makes it easy to reach that hidden treasure buried deep inside you,” his voice was a husky rasp that sent tiny shivers up and down her spine. “Do you enjoy that, sweetheart? The sensation of my long, thick fingers touching you?”

“Don’t stop....” she whimpered.

“I love watching my fingers opening your pink flesh...slipping inside you,” he hummed, “feeling that tight resistance....”

Panting with her movements, she pushed against her fingers, sucking in a shuddering breath as they slid past her tight, fluttering walls.

Red closed his eyes, imagining his fingers slipping between the slick folds. “....Brushing my thumb against your clit.”

Following his direction, she gasped sharply.

“....Yes,” he responded shakily, running a gentle thumb against his crown. “Let me take you in my mouth,” he whispered seductively, “and part those swollen pink lips of yours with my tongue,” he grunted, jerking his cock.

Her fingers danced lightly over her throbbing arousal as she imagined his mouth descending to the triangle of her sex, his warm breath washing over her, inflaming her even more.

The man sighed his contentment, nuzzling his nose into the warm air surrounding him. The ghost of her sweet scent enveloped him. Faint traces of lavender and vanilla from her favorite soap mingling with her light, coyly feminine musk flooded his memory.

His tongue flicked against his lips, wetting the parched surface. The light trace of salt combining with the savory sweetness made his crown throb painfully.

“Curling my fingers into your hips....” his fingers tightened on his thigh, his short nails biting into the flesh, “....pulling you closer.”

Liz’s mouth fell open, gasping for air. Her hips rolled against the teasing touch.

”God....” his voice shook with his desire for her, “I want to drown myself in your scent...there is nothing more intoxicating.”

Inhaling deeply, she mewled desperately, finding that her scent permeated the air.

“There is only one thing that is comparable,” he purred his delight. “How you tremble when I suckle that sweet little clit.” The tip of his tongue moved languidly over his lips. “When I find that special pressure, it just...blossoms for me.”

“Red....” she groaned brokenly, her arousal throbbing painfully with delicious need, “....ohh.”

The man could feel her smooth, taut skin of her thighs lightly brush his cheeks. The soft scent of her
arousal erotically filled his senses.

A savage smile curved the man’s lips. He listened intently to the gentle whines and soft, whispering
gasps as she pleasured herself. Her breathing was very shallow now, more pronounced, and those
gasps were sounding closer and closer together.

He had worked meticulously for this stage and he fully planned to reap the rewards of his efforts.

His cock jerked in his grasp as a sharp cry filtered over the line.

“Good girl....” he urged. He wanted nothing more in this very moment than to have her between his
lips. “Fill my mouth with all that sweet cream I love, honey.”

Her center flooded with heat, the slick easing from her body in a rushing wave. She stiffened, her
breath taken from her lungs. A shocking jolt beat heavily within, leaving her shuddering in its wake.

“Come....” he murmured darkly, “....yes....” he hissed.

Tightening her thighs about her hand, she startled as the contractions in her core fluctuated, pulling at
the muscles in her sex, her arousal cresting anew.

“More....” she gasped softly, her brow furrowing in concentration, her body’s demands coloring her
normal tendency toward reserve. “I need...more.” It was all she knew for certain.

“What more do you need?” he crammed the phone against his ear, silently willing the woman to tell
him what he also needed.


“You have me, honey.”

Red’s husky declaration moved her emotionally. The thrumming confidence and fierce love issued in
that simple statement completely enthralled the woman.

She panted longingly, brushing strands of hair away from her flushed face, her lashes fluttering
dreamily as she imagined his head dipping down, lips tracing her skin as he murmured in her ear.

“I want you, too,” he told her huskily. “I’m desperate to feel my cock inside you.” He wanted that
more than anything he could ever remember wanting. “Because...that’s how you make me feel....” he
confided in a low voice. “Desperate.” The word was grated, and as he uttered it, his hand gripped his
errection tightly, swiftly pumping.

But—Christ, it was too much too soon.

He released the pressure, grunting deeply.

“You make the best sounds, Red,” Liz murmured. “God, you say the...best things.”

“You make me feel the best things.” He had never shared that with her...with any woman. His hand
felt so inadequate on his flesh. “My cock is so hard,” he gently cradled his shaft, no longer teasing
the turgid flesh, “so heavy.”

She sucked in a loud breath through her nose, rubbing herself harder as she pictured the impressive
erection. “It...fills me so much....” she told the truth.

The man’s fingers tightened around the thick width at her honest words. His cock strained outward as if searching for her and he pet it soothingly, promising it relief soon.

“When I first enter you....” he could almost feel her hot flesh opening to him. His eyes closed as he began sinking deeper and deeper into the scenario he created. “You are so slick and heated...you’re so tight...pulling me into your body.”

“Jesus,” Liz breathed out her astonishment, her involuntarily reaction to a dream world of her own as his masculine essence drew her down into the passionate depths of desire threatening to utterly engulf her.

“The sensation of sliding deep into your body....” he shook slightly as the vision overwhelmed his mind, “connecting myself to you in the most intimate way a man can with the woman he loves....”

“Oh, God....” she moaned breathlessly, “Red...please,” she rasped. “God—I love you.”

His eyes filled at the heartfelt words, his conflicting yet passionate emotions overpowering him.

“Loving you....” came his husky murmur, “how you deserve to be loved.”

Slipping her fingers deep inside her core, she lifted her hips into the spread hand offered, her other fingers rubbing her arousal with a swift pressure.

“I never want it to end....” he confessed, “but I need to fill you with my love.” His voice caught at the thought of filling her with his warm essence. “Giving you what only I can.”

“I’m so close....” she begged.

“You want to feel me lose control with you....” He knew what he wanted to hear and a part of him even dared to hope that one day it would come true.

“Yes!” she hissed, her hands working tirelessly for the climax she so desperately needed.

“You know how to do it, don’t you?” he encouraged softly. “Take me with you, honey. I want to be there for the ride.”

Compelled by his strong, gravelly voice coaxing her, urging her on, the last of the young woman’s inhibitions melted into oblivion.

She rocked fervently against her hand’s activities, her fingers working furiously as she soared, body and mind lifting higher and higher to the pinnacle of release.

“Come on....” His eyes drifted closed as he focused completely on his Lizzy’s sharp, breathy cries. “I want to be there in that damned room watching you come. You are so beautiful when you do. What an ethereal, lovely thing you are....”

His husky baritone tempted Elizabeth even closer to a climax. Her toes curled tightly into the comforter, the down crinkling as her small bottom lifted repeatedly into her fervid touch.

“Yes,” the man’s breathy approval washed over her, “....yes.”
And suddenly, she was there...hovering...quivering, totally enraptured at the very precipice of release.

She inhaled sharply, vivid lights exploding like shining stars behind her eyelids just as her surging desire sang loudly in a fierce rush that traveled at lighting speed throughout her entire body.

Willingly she gave her whole self over to the wondrous surge of adrenaline.

Red listened, utterly captivated, as she crested the peak of her arousal. The woman had thrown herself into her climax with complete abandon and there was nothing more beautiful.

He lay his head back against the headboard, trying to assert control over his own emotional state, his own swift breathing.

“Goddamn....” he muttered hoarsely. “I wish vehemently,” he made her believe him, “I was there with you, physically, right now.”

“....You...are.” Liz’s breathing was still shallow, for she was still affected by what she had experienced. The freedom he had allowed her.... “Y—You were.”

He had made it so real.

“You’re fucking right I was,” he vowed, his thumb rubbing over the slickness of his head.

A breathless, sultry chuckle escaped her at his curse. She cupped a shaking hand over herself, reality hitting her for a beat.

They’d engaged in phone sex, it was true. But just like Red had promised her it could be, it had been...more.

He had made love to her.

“How did it feel, honey?” he asked, his rough voice heavily laden with his own lust. “God...tell me.”

“Incredible,” she responded honestly, her low, sweet voice slowly flowing over him like warm honey.

“Yeah....” Red could imagine. “Good,” he crooned approvingly, “good girl.”

“I want you to....” she hesitated, but it had to be said. “You have to...do it too.”

A smile touched his mouth. “Do I?”

If her voice stayed in that sensually ambiguous state of both husky arousal and silky satiation, it wouldn’t take long at all for him to oblige her wish...and his own.

“Well,” he purred, “you’re going to have to help me get there.... Think you’re up for it?”

“I think....” she steeled her convictions, her tone a tiny bit coquettish, “you are up to it. I’ll just sit here quietly and...watch.”

“You like to watch?” His tone had changed slightly.
She reacted to the challenge instinctively. “I like your hands,” she playfully shared her secret with him, “when you take your....”

“Cock,” he breathed heavily, “say it for me, baby.”

“....Cock....” her cheeks heated, but she forged on quickly, “in your hands, when you put it inside me.” She had watched him do it many times before. “You are so intent when you do that. Your brow is so....furrowed.”

“Because I’m thinking of how it feels...sinking into that molten heat.” He squirmed about restlessly. “Damn,” he gritted.

“I like how your eyes close when I straddle your hips.”

He imagined those velvet thighs clasping around him, his thick erection cradled between their bodies.

“How your...cock lifts towards me like....” Elizabeth wet her lips, “it wants me closer.”

“ Fucking right it wants you closer,” came his encouragement as his large hand moved of its own volition on the heated dryness of his erection. “It wants you in every conceivable way.”

“Just like now?”

“Oh, Hell yes,” the man grimaced at the rising pressure in his groin.

“The taste of you, Red,” she boldly shared, “you taste so clean...warm,” she licked her lips, imagining his taste so vividly. “I love it...I crave it,” she whispered.

The crown of his shaft wept with clear liquid, as though wanting to give her the taste she loved.

“Your head is so large. It fills my whole mouth.”

He grunted viciously at that, his hand covering that giving head protectively.

“I can barely trace the shape with my tongue.”

“Fuck,” Red husked, “don’t go there yet, baby...let me just....”

But Liz didn’t heed him. She felt empowered, encouraged by his unrestrained, verbal response, and so she followed her intuition.

“I love how you stiffen and groan when I suckle you hard....”

“Ahh, damn....” His hand increased the strength and speed of his strokes on his shaft. “I fucking love that, honey.”

“It feels so large and heavy against my tongue,” she stated dreamily. “I...love that feeling.”

The man growled quietly. The raw passion in that primal sound made her own arousal spike.

“Do you think it would be okay if I...touched myself right now...again?”
“Fuck, yes....” he gasped shakily. “Please...touch yourself, baby.”

He fervently cupped his palm over his thickness, his body quivering spasmodically.

“I’m hot and hard for you, honey,” he rasped silkily, “tell me what you need. I want to give it to you,” he vowed emphatically, “any damned thing you want.”

“I’m never quite sure how to please you,” she acted on instinct, her fingers slowly massing her sensitive sex. “Do you like when I pump your cock slow and steady?” she wondered quietly. “I know I love the feeling of your hand over mine. When you guide me to the rhythm you like.”

“Yes....” He vividly imagined it was her small, slender hand, not his own, rubbing up and down his stiff shaft. “Tighter, honey....” his fingers tightened their hold only to loosen, waiting for her, “harder....”

“I can’t reach around it,” she pouted impishly, “my hand is just too small, Red.”

“Do it!” he rasped shakily.

Liz thrilled to the masterful tone. “If you say ‘sweetheart,’” she teased, relaxing into the fantasy, “I will do anything to please you.”

“G-God....” he inhaled sharply at the graphically stirring illusion she augmented for him, “you do please me, sweetheart...to the depths of my soul.”

Her eyes shone. “I like to kneel between your legs.”

He could visualize her naked form, that river of dark, silken hair falling about her face, her sapphire eyes lifting slowly to meet his inflamed gaze.

“How does my mouth feel?” she murmured, “When I cover the head? Is it hot, Red? Do you like it?”

He grunted long and hard. “Suck me,” he grated weakly, rasping a whisper of request.

“Oh, I enjoy doing that.” She spread her legs wider, moving languidly on the plush coverlet. “I love when your hand grips my hair. I know I’m doing something right.”

The man’s head fell back, his mouth parting, his breath coming in short, shallow pants.

“I’m doing something right, aren’t I, Red?” she was losing momentum, self-doubt suddenly rearing its ugly head. “You do like my mouth and hand on you, don’t you?”

“Shit....” he cursed brusquely, “shit....” He shifted, anxiously attempting to ease the building pressure in his ballsack. The sensation was tightly winding its way about his member. “I need that!” he gasped. “I need you to...suck hard, honey.”

Red wasn’t above pleading at this point. He needed to be with her, to feel the exquisite warmth of her mouth on his pulsing cock.

And in his mind, it was suddenly Lizzy’s pink lips sliding up and down his erection, bringing him closer and closer to his release.
“I can feel you swell deep in my throat....” his constant groans and fierce hisses kept her going strong, “when I stroke that spot just behind your crown....”

Red was a very vocal lover. The almost primitive, carnal passions now escaping his throat were arousing, and she could tell he was affected by hearing them as well.

The woman moaned lovingly, echoing his most recent, low growl...which sent the man over the edge.

“That sound you make....” she whispered.

He hissed sharply as his fingers grazed his oversensitive crown, his toes curling in the warm air.

“That moment when you explode in my mouth....” a jolt of electricity traversed her body, culminating within, “when I can taste the salt on my tongue....”

His hand shook on his cockhead, the slight vibration against the wet flesh sent hot jolts of pleasure through his groin. Her panted sighs drew him closer to the release he desperately needed.

“Honey....” he groaned pleadingly.

“Do you want me to swallow, Red?” Her cheeks flushed crimson. Was she really this bold? It felt wonderful...absolutely exhilarating. “Would you like that?”

“God....” His hand was a blur of activity. “Oh, fuck!”

“Come for me, Red,” she breathed seductively in his ear. “I want to taste you.”

Cupping his sack, he drew it up against his body, tightening his hold on the straining shaft in his hand as a waving crest rushed fervently through his body.

“Oh, God, Red....” she gasped, her body languorously peaking once again, “I’m coming.”

With a hoarse, drawn-out groan, the man smoothly tugged his heavy cock twice more before he succumbed completely to his passion.

It roared erotically through him like a seething wildfire, igniting his blood and setting his shaking body ablaze.

He could feel the heat of his essence coating the golden hairs on his belly, allowing the lashing flames to lift him higher and higher.

And then he was slowly falling through the embers....

Both man and woman panted heavily, their breathing filling the line for minutes on end.

And with every breath he took, he found himself drifting closer and closer to the earth until he was floating lazily on a river of molten coals. Slowly they began to metamorphose into shimmering quicksilver as Elizabeth’s languid voice washed over him.

“Are you still with me?” she whispered.
A serene smile touched the man’s lips. “I never left you.” All the previous stress and strain brought about from the events of the night were completely absent from the silky reply, “Not for one glorious moment, sweetheart.”

She sighed, stretching languidly on the bed, a smile touching her lips. “...Happy birthday.”

Her smile widened when she heard his deep, throty chuckle.

“I have to say,” he inhaled shakily, “this was the best birthday...the best gift I’ve ever received.”

“It was amazing,” Liz agreed with another happy sigh, her fingers drawing away from her body. “Do you...when you...I mean....”

“You’re always there,” he quipped as he began to carefully clean himself up, fairly certain he knew where she was heading with her question.

“You’re always there,” he quipped as he began to carefully clean himself up, fairly certain he knew where she was heading with her question.

“Do you think of...” she hesitated, “of me doing that?”

“I think about you doing a lot of things,” he confessed.

“I’m sure...” she sighed shakily. “I mean! Not that I think...you want that specifically,” she corrected. “Do you?”

“I want so many things with you, Lizzy,” he replied after a moment.

So many things.

“You were amazing, honey,” he smiled, smoothly changing the subject before she could ask him for specifics. “Thank you for being so open and...accepting. Some women don’t like such things.”

“Well, I do!” she was adamant.

He chuckled sensually. “I could tell. Thank you for that as well.”

She quieted. “Well, I mean, I like doing it with you,” she slammed her eyes shut, wincing at her unplanned pun. “It’s part of a normal relationship, isn’t it?”

“It should be,” he concurred, smiling briefly for her unintentional play on words. “To me, it’s the essence of what a relationship can be...the more intimacy shared, the closer you become.”

“I feel the same,” she confided softly.

“Good. I’m glad.”

Elizabeth smiled.

“So tell me, darling girl,” he grinned suddenly. “What were you really wearing?”

A hot blush flooded her cheeks as she bit her lower lip. How the Hell had he known? “What do you mean?” she feigned ignorance.

“You know exactly what I mean,” he drawled mischievously.

She could just see him raising a teasing brow at her.
Wrinkling her nose, she defiantly lifted her chin. “I was wearing your favorite lingerie. The black, lacy set you...imagined I was wearing.”

“Mmhmm.”

It was obvious from the amused lilt in his deep voice that he didn’t believe her blatant lie for one second.

“But I’m not wearing anything right now,” she told him coyly, hoping to divert his attention.

It worked.

“I love it when you’re lying beside me, naked, with that long hair of yours drifting down your breasts. You’re a vision, sweetheart.”

The young woman blushed at his sensual compliment. “I thought you liked me in that black, lacy lingerie set....”

“I do,” Red confirmed without hesitation.

“But you just said—”

“Can’t I like both?” he teased her.

A pleased grin curved Liz’s lips and she huffed a laugh of acquiescence.

“I love when your lithe body is sans clothing. All those delectable curves bared to my viewing pleasure....” He cleared his throat. “But there is also something...entrancing about lace lingerie.” His tone became more thoughtful. “Perhaps it’s the way it shows glimpses of your figure...it’s the tease of revealing more than hiding....”

“Is that what you got me?” she curiously wanted to know. “Is that my surprise gift?”

He laughed gaily. “I know when a man says he bought a lady a gift, she naturally assumes he purchased lingerie for her. But, no,” he denied with a kind smile. “Not this time.”

“Can you give me a hint?” she wheedled.

“Hmm....” He pretended to think it over.

“Please? You know how impatient I can get....”

“Do I ever!” he sallied.

“Red....” she pouted.

“All right, all right.” Grinning, the man relented, “It’s an article of clothing.”

“And it’s not lingerie?”

“That’s right.”

“Hmm....” She pondered for a moment, then brightened. “Is it a kimono?”

His attention sharpened. “How did you know I was in Asia?”

“Google,” came her smug reply.
She was a crafty one, was his Lizzy. “No, it’s not a kimono.”

The woman pursed her lips, thinking. Then she tittered, “Geta shoes?”

“Geta shoes?” he chuckled merrily. “No...but now I should get you some!”

She giggled, imagining herself parading around the penthouse in nothing but that black, lacy lingerie set...and Geta shoes.

If he really did bring some home for her, she’d have to bring her vision to life, just to see what he’d do.

Knowing Red, he’d probably love it!

....And he would probably show her physically just how much he loved it.

An excited flush bloomed in her cheeks.

“So it’s not lingerie and it’s not Geta shoes....” She chewed lightly on her nail for a brief moment before she hedged, “Is it...a dress?”

“Mmm...could be....” Red smiled.

Which, to Liz, was a definite yes. “Oh, Red!” Her eyes glistened with enthusiastic pleasure. “Will you tell me what it looks like?”

“Don’t you want to be a little surprised when you open the box?” he asked amusedly, feigning exasperation.

“I almost can’t bear waiting!”

“One would think you’re more excited about having a new dress than seeing me again,” the man grumbled petulantly.

“Well, I am in desperate need of some new clothes,” she baited.

“You have plenty of clothes!”

“A woman can never have too many clothes,” she informed him sagely.

“So it is the dress you’re more excited about....”

“Oh, stop it!” she snorted, grinning. “You know I’d take you over a thousand dresses.”

“You’d take me, hmm?” Even though she couldn’t see his face, he waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“In every way possible,” she flirted back. “I’d be careful of your injury, of course....”

The man warily tensed very slightly at the mention of his wound, and he glanced down at it, having literally forgotten about it until this very moment.

More blood had seeped through the gauze...undoubtedly due to the rather vigorous motions he’d put his right arm and hand through earlier. And now that he was looking at it, he was aware of a dull pang beginning at the middle of the scarlet splotch and radiating outwards.
“...Very careful,” she was saying. “In fact, before either of us would do any...taking...I’d make sure you weren’t in any pain. I’d take care of you.”

Red felt himself begin to relax again as her loving words flowed lightly over him...through him.

“You would, hmm?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, voice lowering. “I’d pamper you and coddle you....”

He couldn’t deny he liked the sound of that.

“Kiss it better....” she added in a breathy murmur.

“Kiss it better?” he repeated, a large part of him still admittedly shocked that she was so accepting of his current state.

“Yes....” she confirmed silkily. “After I give you a sponge bath. To help you relax, of course.”

“Of course,” he murmured, glancing down at his penis twitching in reaction to the sultry tone in her voice. “Though, to be perfectly honest with you, honey, I highly doubt that the sponge bath will...relax me...if you take my meaning.”

“You mean, me taking a wet sponge to your naked body, gently wiping and pressing my way all down your back...all down your front...wouldn’t be a soothing experience?” came her too-innocent query.

“On the contrary,” he rumbled, “it would have the opposite effect, I think.”

“It would make you...ache?”

“In one place in particular.” Ignoring the twinging in his arm, he cupped a large palm over his stiffening flesh, but whether he did it chidingly or encouragingly, he couldn’t say.

“Well,” she purred, “we couldn’t have that. I’d make sure you wouldn’t ache there for long, Red.”

“Keep talking to me like that, and I may have to alleviate a similar ache very soon here.”

“I could help you with that.”

He could hear the confidently wistful smile in her voice.

“Would you?” he asked softly.

“I would. It’s still your birthday, after all. Wait,” she paused, as if she were counting. “Well, here on the west coast of America, anyway,” she amended. “Besides,” she smiled with genuine sweetness, “you deserve to have an unforgettable one.”

Unforgettable. That was an excellent word to describe this night.

“Eager minx,” he teased with easy affection to hide the swelling of emotions too poignant to dwell on, smoothly rubbing his hand up and down his hard erection as he heard her rustling around, no doubt getting comfortable again on her bed.

“Insatiable man,” she laughingly teased back.

Yes.... When it came to his feelings for vivacious Elizabeth Scott, he most certainly was.
To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤
February 17, 2007

The heavy soles of Red’s Brunello Cucinelli sable leather shoes quickly slapped the asphalt, the sound almost lost amidst the roaring hum of his private jet’s engines winding down as he strode up to the sleek, black Mercedes-Benz in purposeful haste.

“I hear I am to congratulate you on a...productive trip, Mr. Reddington,” George greeted his employer over the mechanical whine, opening the town car’s door when the stocky, well-dressed man drew near enough.

A wry smile twitched at Red’s lips at his chauffeur’s word choice as he met the other man’s eyes through the amber haze of his sunglasses.

On top of knowing Red quite well after chauffeuring him around America for years, George was usually apprised of the outcome of the business trip by someone of Red’s detail before he picked him up, so he was never one for inane welcomes.

“I’d say ‘productive’ is an accurate descriptor,” Red replied wryly, reaching out and gripping the Englishman’s arm briefly in warm greeting, which George returned just as warmly.

Certainly it was better word choice than ‘successful’ or even ‘good,’ both of which could be used only if well-laid plans didn’t go awry and events played out exactly as he predicted.

Neither of which had happened in Japan.

At least he’d acquired the vital information he’d braved the yakuza bosses’ vengeful wrath for.

At least in that he’d been victorious.

“It’s really good to see you, George.”

“I’m sure it’s a grand feeling to be back on American soil,” the chauffeur smiled down at his employer once he smoothly settled himself onto the long, matte leather seat

“After the...productive trip I had?” came Red’s dry response, putting the same amount of distinctive emphasis on the word as George had done. “Most definitely!”

He heard the Englishman’s knowing chuckle just before the passenger door was carefully shut. Then George slid in behind the wheel, fingers flicking over the multitude of buttons and dials to dim the cabin’s lights and adjust the temperature to Red’s exact preference.

“So, where are we heading to on this extraordinarily sunny afternoon?”

“It is a rather beautiful day here, isn’t it?” Red remarked, looking admiringly up at the crystal clear blue sky. Usually it was raining! “I’m not sure yet,” he answered honestly after another beat of appreciative silence for the crisp, gorgeous weather. “But if you start driving in the direction of the city, I’m sure I’ll figure it out.”

“As you wish, sir.”
Once his luggage and gifts for Elizabeth were secured in the trunk and the car finally began to move away from the private jet’s hanger, the man allowed himself to relax and shift into a more comfortable position on the cushy seat. But as he habitually put his full weight on his right hand to push himself further away from the sun-drenched window, a grimace immediately creased his brow at the irritating pull of the sore muscles and tender flesh of his right bicep.

“Damn,” Red muttered under his breath, scowling in annoyance down at the bandaged wound concealed by his silk jacket.

He was very much looking forward to having the full use of his Goddamned arm again. Especially now that he was in Seattle...and heading to wherever Lizzy happened to be.

Which reminded him....

He reached across his chest, fingers slipping into the inner pocket of the jacket to pull out his new burner phone.

The other he’d been using for months had been smashed to literal bits during the violent altercation over a week ago. Luckily one of his men had had the presence of mind to prepare for such an inconvenience by bringing an extra...the one he now held in his hand.

As his thumb flew over the keypad, dialing the number he knew by heart, all other thoughts, schemes, and plans that didn’t center around Lizzy faded to the back of his mind. They were not entirely gone, but they were definitely forgotten for the time being.

It was time to give his overwrought mind a much needed rest from business...and he would find it with her.

Just as he always did.

A genuine smile passed over his lips as he held the ringing phone up to his ear.

The young woman had just finished carefully tugging a delicate lavender camisole over her head and down her figure when she heard her phone ringing from the spot she’d carelessly flung it to not even two minutes ago.

Tucking her long hair behind her ears, she hurried over to the huge bed, the hope sparkling in her eyes swiftly changing to sincere joy as she snatched up the iPhone from the plush bedding and accepted the call.

“Hi....” she purred her delight.

“Hullo, sweetheart,” Red rumbled back, the husky, downright sensual timbre of his deep voice rippling over her, making her freshly painted nails scrape the luxurious carpet as her toes reflexively curled in on themselves.

Ever since his birthday ten days ago, they both had adopted new tones of voice whenever they answered one another’s phone calls. His casual yet intently drawled “hullos” were now tinged with the unspoken, provocative statement of, I remember what we did last week, to which her tone of voice coyly replied, I remember, too.

“I had a feeling it was you calling,” she smiled happily, turning around to walk out of the bedroom.

“Your ‘spidey sense’ was tingling, hmm?”
“Wow, a pop culture reference! I’m so proud of you, Red!” she teased with a breathy laugh.

“Contrary to your insistence that I don’t know what’s ‘cool,’ I’m not completely out of the loop!” he chuckled deeply in response.

As his amusement echoed in her ear, she became aware that her gait was suddenly much smoother than normal...that her hips were practically sashaying side to side as she glided down the hall to the living room.

Jesus, she was moving as if he were actually in the same room, looking at her!

As the realization dawned on her, an embarrassed yet pleased blush heated her cheeks as she gave into instinct and ran a hand sensually down the curves of her side.

God, the effect just his voice could have on her was freaking unreal sometimes!

“I guess not!” she agreed with a giggle.

“Though, I suppose it has been a few days since we last spoke, hasn’t it?” he smiled, voice warm with affection.

“Yeah.... Sadly,” she impishly pouted.

On the other end of the line, Red closed his eyes, imagining her cute dimples winking at him as she pushed her lower lip out. He’d seen her make that particular face countless times, but the vision in his mind’s eye layered upon the fierce yearning sparked to burning just by hearing her voice made his desire for her suddenly flare hotter.

“But it’s okay. I know you’ve been busy, Red.”

“Where are you?” Unfortunately, he couldn’t quite keep the sexual throb from his low voice, and he ignored the quickly stifled wave of amusement he picked up from George.

“The penthouse,” she promptly answered. “I remembered that I left an outfit over here that I wanted to wear next week, so I came over to grab it and a couple other things.... Why?”

“The penthouse?” he repeated, his shaded eyes directly connecting with the chauffeur’s in the rearview mirror, silently indicating his desired location.

“Yeah.”

George turned the car in the needed direction, pushing rather hard on the gas without his employer having to hint that he do so.

For that, Red immediately forgave the Englishman’s earlier impudence.

“Red?” Elizabeth impatiently questioned the lengthy silence.

“My apologies, honey,” he soothed. “Momentarily distracted. Talk to me. Tell me, how has your day been?”

“Oh!” she sighed dreamily. “It’s been the best day today!”

“Oh?” he smiled, thoroughly enjoying hearing the genuine happiness brightly coloring her youthful voice.
“Uh huh. Katie and I went to that really expensive spa you sent us to that one time last year. Remember?”

“La Porte d’ Argent?”

“Yeah. That’s it.” Then she wrinkled her nose. “You do the French accent thing much better than I can, Red!”

“Envious, are we?” he grinned teasingly.

“A little,” she grumbled.

“You’re the one who decided to take Russian,” the man pointedly reminded her.

Liz pursed her lips at that. ”Anyway—“

Red chuckled.

“—we spent the whole morning and afternoon there. We got massages, which were seriously wonderful. We got our nails done....”

As she spoke, vivid images swiftly flashed through Red’s mind: Elizabeth lying facedown and naked on a massage table, her rosy nails gleaming in the soft light, the tantalizing swell of her creamy bosom showing as she raised her slender arms above her head, a tiny white towel barely covering that perfect, pert little ass....

Christ. He was too fucking sexually mature to start to get aroused from a rather chaste, mental picture like that.

And yet, here he was....

“Hair too?” he managed to ask in a normal voice, shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

“Francesca just touched up the layers and the color. She didn’t hack any of the length off, Red. Don’t worry,” Elizabeth giggled.

“Who said I was worried?” the man demanded with mock-indignance.

“I know you like long hair better than short,” she snorted.

“I’ve never said such a thing.”

Sure, Red had his preferences, but he never wanted Elizabeth to alter or refuse to experiment with her physical beauty just to satisfy and please him.

She did that just by fucking breathing.

“Not in so many words,” she disagreed with an impish grin. “But you’ve mentioned my long hair a lot lately....” she teased playfully. “How you like it when it fans out on the bed....” her voice lowered huskily, “or when it drapes over my bare breasts....”

”Lizzy....” he warned in a strangled tone.

“What?” she inquired innocently. “I’m alone!”

His eyes flicked to the back of George’s head. “I’m not.”
A beat of silence followed that remark. Then, “...Oh.”

“Did you dye it a new color?” came the smoothly quick question to aid in deflecting away from the awkward silence that probably would have ensued.

“Oh, no.” She gratefully followed his lead. “I still have the burgundy lowlights. They’re just not as faded anymore from all the washing and blow drying.”

As he continued to listen to Elizabeth tell him about her day of luxury and pampering, George steadily drove him closer and closer to his destination. The anticipation of seeing her grew exponentially the further they drew into the heart of the city. And before he knew it, they were finally pulling into the hotel’s roundabout to roll just under the large, ivory-colored awning. The car barely came to a stop before Red opened the door and slipped out, vanishing as quickly as he could into the expansive and elegant lobby.

He’d deal with his luggage and Lizzy’s presents later. Or his men would...probably much to their snickering amusement.

Well, fuck it. And fuck the predictable sniggering that would be done behind hands and closed doors because he, the illustriously patient Red Reddington, couldn’t even keep it in his damned pants long enough to grab a couple suitcases and carry them upstairs.

Their probable taunting be damned!

After almost an entire month away from her, all he wanted now was to be physically in her presence again.

No.

He wanted more than that.

He wanted to wrap her tightly in his arms and kiss her until she was breathless. He wanted to feel her heart pounding in time with his as he crushed her against him, as he felt all those soft, delectable curves mold into the hard planes of his body. He wanted to ground his hips against hers and then bend her backward so he could bury his nose in her ample cleavage and inhale her clean and unique scent....

But even all that just wasn’t enough.

He wanted so much more.

“Come on....” he muttered tightly, jabbing the button on the wall repeatedly with his thumb.

“Is something wrong?” Elizabeth paused in her storytelling to question his surly tone.

“I miss you,” he breathed, finally stepping into the elevator and allowing the shiny, golden doors to close behind him before he inserted the penthouse key into the slot.

“I miss you too....” she flushed her delight.

“Sweetheart, I’m going in an elevator,” he murmured roughly, reaching down with his free hand to push in against his growing bulge to ease the ache. “I may lose—“

The line cut, leaving only silence.
Liz huffed a soft laugh as she looked down at her iPhone’s black screen. But she kept it in hand, knowing the man would call the moment he reached his intended floor.

After she just got comfortable on the living room’s suede couch, the chime of the elevator suddenly echoed outside in the hall, cheerfully announcing its arrival.

“What the Hell?” she scowled in irritation, leaving her phone on the cushion as she grudgingly pushed herself up from the sumptuous nest of throw blankets and decorative pillows to investigate the intruder. One had to have a special key to—

Her blue eyes widened in delighted shock as Red stepped into the foyer, his intent gaze falling instantly on her through the bronze film of his sunglasses.

“Red!” she exclaimed excitedly as he strode up to her. “Why didn’t you tell me you were—” she was abruptly silenced by the man’s hard lips pressing tightly to hers.

“I missed you so damned much,” he breathed harshly once he finally released her mouth, long fingers unfastening the clasp on her tiny denim cutoffs before pushing them down over her hips and bottom. He then cupped all that sweet flesh in his palms, pulling her unresisting body tightly against his.

Her heart thrilled wildly within her for the fact that he obviously wanted to waste no time in reconnecting with her...as her lover.

And that was more than fine with her!

“I missed you too,” Liz whispered emphatically in his ear, her fingers clutching his jacket lapels almost desperately. As her pelvis rolled into his, she could immediately feel the proof of his rampant arousal digging into her abdomen.

Wanton desire seared deliciously through her at the provocative sensation.

“Show me, honey,” his gruff tone fell somewhere between a request and a demand, his lips and teeth scraping seductively against the shell of her ear. “Show me how much you missed me, and I’ll show you how much I missed you.”

Gooseflesh flooded her body, fiery lust and fierce longing suffusing her until she thought she would literally burst as she tilted her face to his, boldly capturing his lips with her own as she impatiently shoved her lace panties down her ass.

Feeling the differing textures of the cool, hard metal of his shades and the warm, soft skin of his face brushing against hers as their lips moved together was startingly erotic.

She loved the fact that he wanted her so much he hadn’t even bothered removing his expensive Oliver Peoples!

As Red’s tongue deftly slipped between her teeth with practiced finesse to heatedly caress her own, she was dimly aware of hearing the metallic whir of his zipper and the rustle of cloth as he pulled his heavy erection free from his dress slacks.

Her hands fell from his back to hastily pluck the closed button at his waist. “Don’t you want to take these—“
“No,” he swiftly and impatiently interrupted her right before scooping her up in his arms. Shedding clothes would take up too much Goddamned time. With the way his body was insistently clamoring for hers...he couldn’t wait too much longer.

A breathless squeak of surprise escaped her as she was lifted effortlessly off of the floor. Grasping his broad shoulders, she wrapped her lean thighs tightly around his hips, steadying herself on top of his strong forearms so she wouldn’t fall backwards.

As she hooked her heels together at the small of his back, the movement shoving her body closer into him, he grunted his pleasure at feeling the underside of his thick shaft being cradled firmly between the folds of her moist sex. The erotic sensation wiped everything from his mind and inflamed his already desperately intense need to take her body with his.

He quickly scanned the richly furnished surroundings in their immediate vicinity, searching for the first place he considered suitable for a swift yet passionate bout of fucking. Or loving.

....Or something that was a hybrid of both.

Elizabeth squirmed sensually in his embrace as he strode hastily to the plush, molasses-hued leather chair, her languid movement causing her mound to rub provocatively up and down his engorged flesh more than just once.

Elastic fire seethed through his body, starting at the very tip of his erection to rush down that heavy curve, stretching throughout his rest of his veins in an untamed blaze. The intense sensation made him feel as if he were at once both grounded in reality and yet suspended in a surreal plane where he was that fire.

"Fuck, honey," he hissed, now utterly and painfully aroused.

“Feel good?” she inquired coyly, slanting a kittenish look up at him from beneath the inky fringe of her lashes.

“Yeah,” he growled his lust, leaning in closer to brush the side of his nose tenderly against hers. “But you know that....”

“I know something that’ll feel even better....”

“So do I,” the man purred dryly as he carefully planted her down on the oversized chair’s wide, pillowy arm.

The burnished leather crinkled when he resolutely pulled her toned thighs apart, hands sliding appreciatively up her naked flesh as he purposefully stepped into the gap just created.

“So soft....” he muttered, lasciviously eyeing all that pale, taut skin his palms greedily caressed.

“So...hard,” she dimpled, slim fingers of one hand trailing up the seam of his pants where his heavy sack hung concealed to encircle his impressive erection, slowly pumping him from root to tip once...twice...and then yet again...and again....

Red closed his eyes, enjoying every nuance of her touch as she stroked the reddened flesh.

It was fucking glorious.

His cock pulsed stiffly under her deliberately sensuous caresses.
“Ahh...shit....” he groaned his pleasure, regretfully forcing one of his hands away from her hips to curl reluctantly over hers, stilling the wonderfully brazen movements.

Thin brows drawing together, she glanced up questioningly into his face.

“Not too much, baby,” he breathed, eyes flicking open to look down at her. “As you know, it’s been a while....” he bluntly reminded in a strained voice, “and I want to be inside you....” he tenderly traced her cheek, “for as long as possible.”

The delighted grin curving Elizabeth’s lips reflected back at her as she gazed at him, trying to meet his eyes past the tinted glasses. “You really are all hot and bothered, aren’t you?” she flirted impishly, winding her arms wantonly about his neck to pull him even closer.

It was a rhetorical question, but the man answered her anyway, “Let me show you just how much....”

With a coquettish glint in her eyes, she spread her creamy thighs wider in invitation.

A strangled noise escaped the man’s throat as he stared fervently down at the crisp, trimmed curls beckoning there, pink lips just visible from his vantage point and glistening enticingly.

It was all too fucking much. The titillating sight of her ready sex, the feel of her pliant body beneath his hands, the sweet-and-salty scent of her arousal permeating the air around him to mingle with his own heady musk...it was all so Goddamned stimulating to his senses that they were instantly kicked into overdrive.

Powerful yearning swept through him and his lustful desire for her eagerly threw back its jaws and howled wildly within.

Unwilling to hold himself back any longer, he took his aching cock expertly in hand and then surged ardently against her.

Elizabeth released a shuddering gasp against the crook of his thick neck as their bodies swiftly joined together.

“God, Red....” she breathed rapturously in his ear as his cock spread her...filled her...as her heat completely enveloped him, fervidly welcoming his rigid girth.

She’d waited for this moment for so long....

“Yes, honey,” he rasped, avidly watching as her head slowly fell back to expose the delicate line of her throat, her long, beautiful hair sweeping the plush leather she sat on. “Jesus, you’re a vision,” he whispered, lowering his mouth to taste her neck as he began to thrust into her with long, purposeful strokes. “You feel so fucking good....”

Better than anything his imagination had conjured up over the last four and a half lonely weeks.

Rocking fervently against him, she found his unflagging rhythm and enthusiastically complemented it with fluid movements of her own.

“So do you....” she purred, lifting her head a little higher so she could offer her lips to his.

As he passionately took her pouty mouth with his own, he kept one hand on the small of her back to support her upright while the desirous fingers of the other slid under the stretchy hem of her camisole and began to ruck it up her lithe figure.
He wanted to look at those perfect breasts of hers...he wanted to caress them, palm them, suckle them...to tease himself, to tease her...to make her writhe and jerk helplessly around while filling the entire suite with those loud and unabashed gasping mewls and husky moans he absolutely adored.

But as his fingertips worked the tight material just past her belly button, he suddenly paused in his single-minded efforts, for he had unexpectedly felt the unfamiliar ridges of a piece of...metal?

Briefly slowing the momentum of his thrusts, he kept himself sheathed tightly inside of her, almost imperceptibly rolling his hips to preserve the heady simmering of their exquisite passion. Then he lifted his head from hers to glance curiously down at what he’d briefly come into contact with.

And there, winking up at him in the bright light of day streaming into the room through the huge glass windows, sparkled a lovely little silver and crystal navel ring.

“Well!” Surprise mingling with candid delight swelled within him as he reached down to run a careful finger lightly over the dangling jewel. “This is new!”

Elizabeth grinned at his shocked yet pleased reaction, sensually arching her lower back into his touch. “Do you like it?” she asked breathlessly.

“I do indeed,” the man husked as he thrust roughly into her again, eyes fixating on that sparkly little gem. He especially liked it swinging and glittering in that very entrancing way with each and every steady push and shove of their hips.

“I got it the week you left,” she rasped, fingers gripping the lapels of his jacket as he bent closer to her, once more increasing their pace. “I wanted—ohhh...” she moaned, eyes fluttering closed, momentarily distracted by the way he hooked her leg tighter around his hip so he could augment their physical connection even more.

“Hmm?” he hummed teasingly, knowing very well what had abruptly halted her train of thought.

The tip of her pink tongue darted out to wet her kiss-roughened lips as her sapphire eyes flickered hazily open to gaze up into his, just barely making them out behind the dark, amber hue of his shades. “I wanted to surprise you,” she breathed, voice shuddering with her overwhelming desire.

“It’s a stunning little piece of jewelry, Lizzy,” he murmured, leaning closer to trail kiss after kiss up her jawline as he finished slipping her camisole up her chest just enough so those luscious breasts would be free to accept his attentions.

His lips tugged at the corner as he observed a rush of goosebumps traverse down her bared skin when the crisp air touched it all. He allowed the fingers of one hand to follow them down in a very gentle, teasing caress.

“I’m very much looking forward to thoroughly admiring it...later....” he specified, now more than somewhat distracted by the sublime sight the rosy buds of her tightening nipples afforded him, “....when I can devote the whole of my attention to it....”

Her breathy snort of amusement turned into a whimpering mewl as his practiced thumbs brushed expertly over those already swollen peaks.

Unable to help himself, Red swiftly lowered his mouth to one, gently taking it between his lips, suckling softly.

“H-harder,” she breathed her command, one of her hands hooking around the base of his neck, long nails scratching through the short hairs there.
He immediately obliged her, for her wish echoed his own desire. Placing one hand against the base of her spine, he kept her pressed tightly forward while his mouth, tongue, even his teeth, worked her until he finally heard her snarl viciously at him.

A savage smile curved his lips as he released her breast with a loud, sucking *pop,* fleetingly and heatedly meeting her gleaming eyes before he descended his whole-hearted attentions to the other.

This time Elizabeth bucked against him, her whole body trembling as he fiercely laved and suckled her flesh, as he escalated their hips’ rhythm to a relentlessly breathtaking pace.

By inundating her physical senses all at once like this, he was well aware that he was driving her up the fucking walls—and he was loving every Goddamned second of it.

When he finally allowed her hardened nipple to slip delicately from his mouth, she bared her teeth at him and growled her disappointment and rebuke even as she writhed wantonly in the circle of his arms.

Chuckling hoarsely, he rose once more over her, his palms moving from her back to tightly grasp her slender waist. “As much as I’d love to suck on your gorgeous breasts all damned day....” he confided in a ragged voice, “there’s something I want even more.”

“What?” she rasped imperiously as he flexed his hips, pushing himself even deeper into her tight little body.

“I want to watch you come for me,” the man purred.

He didn’t think he could ever get tired of watching her succumb with selfish abandon to the whirling, demanding throes of her body’s sexual release. When she did, she became an uninhibited, sultry creature acting on pure instinct. The almost feral sounds she would make as her body sensually undulated both excited and provoked the dark, primal side of him, triggering his throbbing, possessive feelings for her.

In addition to his words, his hard, vehement expression must have given a hint of his thoughts away, for Elizabeth blushed crimson.

But gone were the days when she would shift restively and glance self-consciously away from his wanting stare.

Instead, she flashed a quick, vivacious grin up at him, both lust and love glittering vibrantly in her eyes just before her dark lashes veiled them from his intent regard with desirous relish.

“Come for me, my beautiful girl,” he encouraged huskily, one of his hands caressingly thumbing her breasts as she grasped him closer.

“Red....” she whimpered longingly, her pale legs wrapping even tighter around him, her toes curling reflexively into the expensive fabric of his slacks.

“Come on, sweet girl.... *Ahh,* that’s it....” he murmured, feeling her hands clamp tightly down on his shoulders as he hunched over her. “Do you need me to move faster? Yes? Mmm.... *Damn,*” he moaned appreciatively in her neck as she bobbed and arched into his adeptly swift movements. “That’s it.... *Yes,* sweetie.... *yes....* Don’t hold anything back....”

The sounds of the stiff leather crinkling beneath their frantic movements and her shivering, whining pants erotically filled his ears and echoed throughout the room. All that in addition to the magnificent sight of her pale skin flushing, her full breasts bouncing, and her body jewelry glinting as he vocally
urged her on while dragging his thick cock unrelentingly in and out of her over and over again heightened his own arousal until he could barely form a coherent thought.

But he managed to hold his searing ardor fiercely in check, determinedly delaying his own gratification for her climax.

Luckily he didn’t have to withhold his own release for much longer, for she had been ascending that marvelous peak since he’d strode across the threshold of the penthouse and had planted that first, passionate kiss on her lips.

When she came, she came suddenly—and hard.

Her loud, breathless cry rang throughout the suite, heating his blood to frothing and stirring his cock to pulsating deep inside of her. And just moments after she crested that glorious wave...when she opened those huge eyes of hers to gaze elatedly up at him, both dimples flickering at the corners of her trembling mouth...he came undone.

His smoldering desire swelled and flared brightly, thrillingly, and then completely overtook him. With a hoarse, rasping groan, he swiftly pulled out of her body, his palm quickly stroking warm, spurting streams of milky essence from his turgid shaft onto her thigh.

Even amidst the fiercely intense pleasures ricocheting throughout his body and mind, he was dimly aware of feeling surprised when her slender hand came into his hazy line of sight, shaking palm covering the top of his as he continued to rub his weeping cock in long, smooth motions from base to mushroomed tip. But his initial shock quickly faded as he became emotionally moved by her gesture.

It was undeniably significant, for it was the first time she had ever wanted to connect with him in this intimate way.

Together they slowly caressed his member dry, and Red’s expression behind his sunglasses was quite soft indeed when he finally lifted his eyes to hers.

Elizabeth’s fingers of both hands were still quivering slightly when she raised them to gently pluck the Oliver Peoples from his face.

“There you are,” she whispered, smiling lovingly. “Hi.”

The man blinked, focusing in on her glowing face as she playfully set the sunglasses atop her own head. Now that the world wasn’t tinged with the rich hues of amber and bronze, the sensational colors surrounding him, especially those that made up his lovely girl, intensified in beauty.

*Perfection*, he thought, gazing tenderly down into her striking, deep blue eyes.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he husked, cupping a soft cheek in his palm.

She leaned into his caress, expression radiant with both joy and the afterglow of lovemaking. “I’m glad you’re home....”

“Me too,” he murmured, moving his fingers from her cheek into her hair, gently brushing out the damp, tangled locks drifting near her neck. “Your hair looks lovely,” he complimented, admiring the way the burgundy strands glinted and twined with her natural brunette color as he tucked them behind her shoulder.

“Thank you,” she beamed prettily.
With warm affection in his eyes, he reluctantly drew his hands away from her, one reaching down to cup himself. “I’m going to go get a towel to clean up. Don’t move,” he teased as he turned around to make for the kitchen.

“I won’t, I promise!” she laughingly called after him.

After Red quickly cleaned and then zipped himself back up into his pants once more, he wet a soft terry cloth with warm water from the kitchen sink and went back to where she was waiting patiently on the arm of the oversized leather chair.

With precise and gentle care, he wiped her smooth thigh clean, even going so far as to fold the material over on itself and then soothingly run it over her taut abdomen and down her other thigh.

“Shouldn’t I be the one giving you a sponge bath?” Elizabeth kidded as she pulled her camisole back down over her breasts.

“Is that still on the docket for this week?” he inquired hopefully.

“It is on mine!” she flashed a grin.

“Good,” he grinned back. “Because I’ve been looking forward to it since you promised me last week!”

“How is your wound, Red?” she questioned, brow puckering in sudden concern as her eyes swept over his clothed body, undoubtedly looking for it.

Lifting his left hand, he lightly tapped a finger to his right bicep to show her where it was. “It still twinges from time to time, but it’s mending quite nicely.”

He stiffened warily as she intently studied the spot, but when her eyes flickered to his, they weren’t cold with suspicion, but rather gentle with concern.

“It didn’t hurt when you picked me up, did it?” she asked worriedly. “Or when we were....” she flushed and gestured wordlessly to the space between their hips.

Amusement glinted in the man’s eyes as he slowly relaxed, an easy smile finally curving his mouth. “Minding my injury was quite literally the very last thing I was thinking about the moment I walked through the front door, Lizzy,” he reproached teasingly.

She wrinkled her nose at his deflection. “That’s not an answer,” she haughtily accused.

Grinning, Red lifted her into his arms, spun agilely around, and then dropped them both nimbly onto the plush leather chair.

“I can tell you in all honesty that that did not hurt one bit,” he rumbled in her ear, settling her comfortably in his lap.

Giving a soft huff of exasperated laughter, Elizabeth twisted around in his embrace and then twined her slender arms about his neck just before leaning in close to kiss him soundly on the lips.
Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
February 17, 2007

Red smiled against her mouth, thoroughly enjoying the way her warm lips felt as they moved with languid passion over his. They were silky smooth, even a little glossy...just like fine satin.

And the alluring taste of them.... God, they were delightful. He hadn’t noticed earlier, so caught up in his own lust and intent had he been on other, beautifully sublime parts of her anatomy, but they tasted faintly of salted almonds and milk chocolate.

As the tip of his tongue fleetingly traced the inside of her upper lip, he idly wondered if he caught the faded remnants of her lipstick (for sometimes he could swear the balm smelled and tasted like chocolate), or if she had been nibbling on a sweet snack earlier at the spa.

He felt her sigh lightly then, her cool hands slipping from around his neck to rest on his chest as she relaxed even more against his body, losing herself in the tantalizingly pleasant sensations their kissing roused.

Carefully the man shifted, deftly moving her into a position that would be much more comfortable for her, but he accomplished the maneuver so adroitly that her succulent mouth hadn’t even drifted away from his.

If anything, their kiss had lusciously deepened.

As his lips smoothed over and melded into hers, he could feel that sultry little tongue flicking slowly against his every so often, the sweet sensuality of it enticing his senses, stirring his blood...reawakening his body.

Rumbling softly, Red ran a warm palm heavily up one of her bare legs, soothingly caressing the soft skin until he reached her upper thigh. Right before he came directly to the dark triangle of her sex, he paused, his long fingers splaying across her taut flesh. Then he possessively squeezed her there while his teeth gently teased her plump lower lip.

Elizabeth loosed a breathy mewl against his mouth in response to his provocative touches, her hands tightening wantonly in the thick silk of his waistcoat as her lips grew a little more imperiously demanding.

Christ, he loved the sensual confidence exuding from her.

Encouraged by her eager assertiveness, his fingers inched their way higher up her leg, slipping slowly around to her inner thigh. He wondered if she was entirely conscious of the suggestive way she was lightly rubbing her ass against his stiffening groin, or if she was aware of the fact that she was spreading her legs a little wider for his questing fingers with each languorously heated kiss taken, given...and then shared.

With the way she was completely immersing herself in the passion scintillating between them, he highly doubted it. If she were being coyly artful, she’d signal him with impish giggles and kittenish glances as she teased his cock with her hips or hands...none of which she was doing now.
Her carnal reactions to him were deeply instinctive, seeming to come as naturally to her as breathing.

Really, it was one of the highest compliments a man could receive from his lover...that even despite her glowing satiation, she still desired more and invited his advances.

With the quietest of rasping growls, Red slowly deepened their kiss again, shifting his hips so that his hard length, even though it was swathed behind his slacks, would press flush against her naked ass cheek.

The friction was fucking incredible.

“Red...” she breathed once their lips parted. The expression in her hazy eyes was one of wistful yearning when they lifted to his.

A slow, tender smile curved his mouth as he gazed down at her. “Ready for round two?” he husked, bold fingertips grazing even further up her inner thigh to just brush against her silky heat....

When suddenly his cell phone screeched loudly to life, jolting them painfully out of the moment.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Elizabeth exclaimed in a burst of frustrated, breathless laughter at the same time Red jerked his hand away from her to snatch the Goddamned thing out of his jacket’s inner pocket.

Clutching it in his first, he snarled fiercely at it.

Snorting at his vehemently affronted reaction, she regretfully closed her eyes and rubbed a shaking hand across her forehead. “You can answer it, Red....”

“It’s not important,” he scowled down at the number flashing across the screen.

“Are you sure?”

“Damn sure.”

Both pairs of eyes remained fixed on the flip phone until it finally fell silent.

“What if they call back?” she asked warily into the tense stillness.

“They won’t,” came the man’s staunch pronouncement.

Elizabeth whooped a giggle when it began shrilling again just seconds later.

“‘They won’t,’ huh?” she grinned.

“Good thing we didn’t bet on it!” he grumbled.

“Good for you, maybe! I would’ve won,” she beamed smugly. “If it’s important, they’ll just leave a voicemail, right? Since you don’t really like texting all that much....”

“I don’t have it set up,” he sighed, the annoyed glare fading from his eyes when they ruefully met hers.

“Oh my God—you’re hopeless!” she declared in exasperation, imperiously extending her hand. “Give it to me."

The man’s teeth flashed in a sly grin. “Give what to you, baby?”
Her dimples winked at him as she rolled her eyes, wiggling her fingers demandingly. “Give me your phone, Red. I’m setting up your voicemail for you.”

“You don’t have to do that...” he told her even as he complied to her adamant insistence, handing over the now quiet piece of technology. Since she would be the only one calling him on it after today, he didn’t mind her tinkering around with it.

“When else will you get this done?” she griped, wrinkling her nose down at it. “And why you won’t just get an iPhone, or at least a smartphone, I have no idea....” she briefly digressed, flipping the plastic top open. “You certainly have the funds to do so!”

“I happen to like my choice in phones.”

“Flip phones are becoming a thing of the past, you know,” she teased, pressing on a couple of the buttons experimentally.

"For your generation maybe,” he chuckled, dropping an affectionate kiss to her eyebrow, genuinely thankful for her help.

“Definitely for all generations,” came her dry retort. Then she grinned widely. “Ah-ha!” she crowed, having found the way into his voicemail setup.

As she lifted his phone to her ear, she gently shook her hair back to get it out of her way, mindful that she was wearing Red’s seven hundred dollar Oliver Peoples sunglasses on the top of her glossy head. The very last thing she wanted was for them to slip off and clatter to the hardwood floor.

Seeing what she was trying to do, he considerately reached out and helped her brush the rest of the ornery strands away so she could press the face of his phone flush to her ear.

“Thanks,” she smiled before a faraway look glazed over her eyes as she mentally focused in on what the robotic voice was telling her to do. “Okay, I need to know if you want a passcode to get into your voicemail.”

The man did not hesitate. “Yes.”

“All right....” She pressed a button and paused for a moment, listening to the instructions. Then, “Give me six numbers.”

“Six?”

“Yeah,” she nodded her confirmation. “A lot of people just use their birthdays....”

“Mmm.” He had a different date in mind. “Ready?”

“Shoot.”

“One, one, one...six, eight, four.”

“Eleven, sixteen, eighty-four?” she frowned as she dutifully punched them in, glancing up at him questioningly. “That’s not your birthday.”

“I didn’t say I was using my birthday, did I?” came his rhetorical question, eyes glinting with reticence...though his ghost of a smile was not unkind.

Elizabeth wrinkled her nose at him. “It must be...fairly important if you’re using it for your passcode,” she hedged pointedly.
“It is.”

Her eyes narrowed expectantly.

His lips twitched as he gazed steadily back at her.

Complete silence fell as they stared at one another.

Christ, her searching eyes were so Goddamned striking...so blue...so luminous, especially with them glittering sharply with unyielding stubbornness the way they were.

His lovely, volatile girl.

“If you want to have a staring contest with me,” Red finally murmured as his smile slowly, knowingly, widened, “you will lose.”

Elizabeth’s pretty little nostrils flared once in defiance before she relented with a resigned sigh, glancing away. “Fine, fine—don’t tell me,” she huffed her sulky disappointment.

Red squeezed her lightly against him, hoping she’d sense the apology behind it. “Is that all we have to do?” he inquired, wanting to divert her attention.

“We aren’t quite done....” she answered, the muscles in her back relaxing one by one as she let her resentment go...as she warmed back up to him. After all, he was under no obligation to tell her every little detail about his life, and it wasn’t right of her to expect him to.

Some things were better left unknown, anyway....

Shying away from that train of thought, Elizabeth cleared her throat. “Now you need to decide what you want your greeting to be.”

“My greeting?” The man was nonplussed.

“Yeah,” came her patient reply as she leaned comfortably into the bend of his right arm, throwing her lean legs carelessly over the other side of the chair.

At his look of frank bewilderment, a tiny, good-natured smirk flickered at the corners of her lips. It wasn’t often she knew more than he did about the topic under discussion!

“You know....” she continued helpfully, “the recording where you’re like: You’ve reached Red’s line,” she playfully deepened her voice to try and mimic his, and he chuckled at her attempt. “I’m away from my phone right now but leave your name and number and I’ll get back to you.... You know,” she repeated, tone lightening back to her normal lilt as she hitched a casual shoulder. “That kind of greeting.”

Red shifted, fingers of his left hand smoothing down her slender thigh to drape over her knee. “Isn’t there just a generic one I can use that’s already programmed?” he wanted to know.

“Where’s the fun in that?” she demanded impishly. “It’s not very personalized....” Then her eyes flicked curiously to his. “Don’t tell me you’re shy!” she teased, nudging his shoulder with hers.

“Not shy,” he gruffly defended himself. “I would rather my voice not be on the recording.”

“You are shy!” she exclaimed, both amused and quite honestly surprised. “Who knew that you of all people would be shy about recording your voice!”
“Is there a generic one, or not?” he growled.

“Forget the generic one.” She flicked her slim fingers dismissively. “Since you won’t record one for yourself, I’m just going to do it you!”

Grinning, she quickly punched her finger into the button prompted and then jammed the phone against her ear before he could stop her.

“Now, Elizabeth—”

“Sshhh!” she playfully hushed him. “I have to start talking—hi!” Her voice slid to a slightly higher range as she began recording the greeting. “You’ve reached Red’s phone,” she smiled, eyes sliding to his amused ones. “He obviously isn’t able to pick up right now. So please leave your name,” his hand mischievously slid up her leg to grasp her hip, “number,” the fingers of his other hand inched slyly around her waist, “and a brief message,” then those fingertips teasingly slipped to just beneath her ribs, “and if he likes it,” she impishly stressed, “he will return your call as soon as—Red!” she squealed loudly, erupting into a fit of giggling as he began to tickle her.

Chortling deep down in his throat, the man continued to attack her sides without even a smidgen of mercy.

Heaving bursts of shivering laughter swiftly escaped Elizabeth as she dropped the now-completely forgotten phone down the yawning abyss between the chair’s side and cushion, her hands instantly clamping down on his strong wrists as she writhed around in his lap, trying at once to both escape and stop his provoking touches.

“You—you cut that out!” she gasped breathlessly, arching her back even as she jerked into an upright position.

“Ah—but I love it when you laugh!” he guffawed against her neck, palms clasping her sides as she straddled him, her body trembling sinuously with over-stimulated convulsions.

Christ, the way she was shrieking her silvery giggles while undulating against his semi-erect penis was quite...titillating.

Then she abruptly threw her head back away from him and keened shakily, her face utterly, yet attractively, flushed from all her laughing and thrashing and squirming about.

At some point in the last, jostling half-minute, his sunglasses had slipped from the top of her head and by some inexplicable miracle, had become tangled in the wealth of her dark hair rather than plummeting to the floor.

There was a small part of him that wanted to rescue them from those glossy locks, for God only knew how long they’d stay conveniently caught there. But he was loathe to stop tickling her, for her hips were beginning to gyrate in the most beguiling way and the sensation was fucking marvelous.

As the mound of her sex ground deliciously against his hard length, his delighted laughter metamorphosed into a much lower, sensual rumbling as he curled his arms around her body, trapping her tightly against his chest.

“....I love it when you laugh,” he repeated hoarsely, “....and when you’re at the complete mercy of my hands.” His lips latched onto hollow behind her collarbone, palms dipping down her naked ass to cup all that smooth, firm flesh before fervently pushing her into his erection.

Whining breathily, she lifted her head to fiercely capture his lips with hers, hands eagerly fumbling
with the fastenings of his slacks—

When suddenly the front door burst open.

Gasping in shock, Elizabeth tore her mouth from Red’s as they both jerked their heads to the side to stare wordlessly at Baz striding into the suite, sporting one black leather duffel bag on his shoulder while lugging another, much larger and heavier one behind him.

Upon seeing his employer in such an uncharacteristically disheveled state and a brightly flushing, half-naked Elizabeth twined sensually around him, the guard came to an abrupt halt, the rolling suitcase banging painfully against his heels.

But he didn’t give a shit about that.

A wide grin immediately curved his mouth, his eyes glinting with mirth as he hastily averted them from the couple before dropping the duffle from his shoulder to the floor.

“Don’t you know how to fucking *knock*?” Red drawled mildly, his tone purposefully indolent to attempt to cover his seething vexation.

When Elizabeth quickly concealed her burning face against the side of his neck, he snatched the tips of his jacket up in his hands to swiftly curl the material around her waist and bare bottom even as she gracelessly wedged herself along his side to face away from Baz.

“I called twice, Red, but you didn’t pick up,” Liz heard the other man explain calmly as she ducked her head even further, keeping it buried in humiliation against Red’s shoulder.

“Which should’ve been a Goddamned *clue*—“

“I swear on the holiest of Bibles, Red, since you didn’t answer, I thought you both were...in the bedroom.”

To Liz, the teasing smirk was apparent in his steady voice and she felt the embarrassed blush flare even hotter in her cheeks.

“I was going to be in and out,” Baz continued quickly at his employer’s low, warning snarl. “A ghost. You wouldn’t even know I’d been here.”

“You couldn’t have waited?” Red growled softly, dangerously.

“Well, you *did* say you wanted these ‘as soon as possible....’” The guard’s sly tone was just shy of impudent.

“Next time, I’ll be sure to specify an exact time so we can avoid another carfuffle like this one,” Red snapped.

“*Carfuffle*?” Liz breathed in a strangled tone, her mortification releasing itself in snorting laughter at his dated word choice, which unexpectedly served to break the rising tension between the two men.

Red released Baz’s eyes to glance down at the top of her dark head. The hard lines around his mouth eased as gentle affection lit his gaze.

“Do you have an issue with my choice in descriptors, Lizzy?” the man inquired, tone softly teasing.

Keeping one arm wrapped tightly around her so the folds of his jacket covering her nakedness would stay in place, he reached out with his free hand to gingerly pluck the sunglasses from the tangle of
her hair and tuck them into his front pocket.

As she slanted him an amused look through the silky strands that had fallen over her face, he was aware of Baz silently—and swiftly—taking his leave while her attention was diverted.

Despite his lingering irritation directed towards the guard, Red appreciated that...for Elizabeth’s sake.

“Well?” he prompted, giving her a playful squeeze.

As she stiffened uncertainly against him, glancing out of the corner of her eye behind her, he immediately alleviated her concern.

“He’s gone, honey.”

The woman closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, bringing her hands up to her red face. “That was so freaking embarrassing,” she moaned into her palms.

“I don’t know if ‘embarrassing’ is the correct term....”

She splayed her slim fingers, peeking at him in disbelief. “You can’t be serious!”

“But I am,” he responded gravely.

Affronted, she pursed her lips, hands falling into her lap. “You weren’t naked!”

“No,” the man conceded gently. “But you weren’t exactly flashing all your delectable assets either, darling.”

“He saw enough,” she mumbled, cheeks heating again as she stared down at her knees. “And he definitely knew that we had...or that we were going to....” her frustrated voice trailed off.

“Have sex?” he supplied simply.

Wincing at his blunt phrasing, Elizabeth bit her lower lip and nodded miserably.

“So?”

“So?” she demanded heatedly, narrowed eyes briefly flicking to his smiling face, unable to comprehend his blithe attitude. “What do you mean, ‘so’?”

“Surely you must know he is well aware of the fact that we don’t just sit on the sofa holding hands all night,” Red chuckled as she glanced shyly away. Then he reached out and began gathering all her hair in his hand so he could see her face more clearly. “Our sex life is nothing to be ashamed of, sweetheart. Hmm?” He dipped his head, trying to catch her restive gaze.

Her brow crinkled as her eyes finally lifted back to his. “I never said I was ashamed.”

“You being so mortified that he walked in on us about to have sex indicates that perhaps you feel that way,” he explained, though not unkindly. “And you shouldn’t be embarrassed, or angry.”

“You seemed angry.”

A brow rose in question.

“At Baz,” she clarified. “For walking in on us.”
“Ah, but that wasn’t because he saw us together. No.” He slowly shook his head. “What was much more vexing to me was that we were...interrupted.”

Elizabeth blushed at the lingering, suggestive look he bestowed on her. “I still don’t like that he got an eyeful of my ass,” she huffed.

To be quite frank, Red didn’t like it all that much either, but he wasn’t going to say it out loud and draw her attention back to her feelings of embarrassment.

“He didn’t stand there and gawk at you, honey,” the man soothed, rubbing his thumb tenderly along her hip. “He genuinely cares for you and respects you too much to ever do that. And, knowing him, he will put this...incident...out of his mind. He won’t ever bring it up to you—unless you do.”

“You mean, he’ll carry on as if it never happened?” she asked hopefully.

“That’s exactly what I mean,” came his solemn reassurance.

“You better!” she muttered, baring her teeth menacingly to drive her point home. “Otherwise working out with him is going to be extremely awkward!”

It was time to get her mind off of this. Red knew she’d feel better about it all once more time elapsed. She’d probably be able to even laugh the situation away. But helping her bring forth her feelings of confidence now would definitely be beneficial.

And there was nothing more boosting to feminine confidence than being reminded of just how beautiful she was to her significant other.

“I was wondering if you could do something for me, Lizzy?”

The woman blinked, refocusing her attention on him as the topic of discussion abruptly changed. But in knowing him for as long as she had, she was used to it and smoothly transitioned with him. “What?”

Red smiled affectionately at her. “Would you mind hopping up? There’s something I need to get....”

“Oh.” Her brow puckered in curiosity. “Sure.” Carefully she slid off of him and the chair, meeting his eyes as he rose to his feet beside her.

“Why don’t you sit down over there on the sofa,” he gestured to the huge suede sectional, “and I’ll be right with you.”

After snatching her denim cutoffs up from the floor and pulling them on, she flopped fluidly onto the middle cushion to watch Red as he squatted down to open one of the pieces of luggage Baz had left in the middle of the foyer.

When she saw him gingerly pull out a long, charcoal-gray box, then a smaller, rectangular black one, and finally a tiny, slender one, her eyes lit with genuine pleasure.

“Are those all for me?” she dimpled in anticipation as he carried them all over, nestling them into the plush leather as he settled himself down beside her.

“They certainly are,” he smiled back, sliding the charcoal-gray box onto her lap and into her earnestly waiting hands.

“So that’s why he barged in here. He knew you wanted to give these to me today....” she mused,
fingered the edge of the heavy lid, her lingering embarrassment fading to the back of her mind as her excitement grew. Then she slanted him a glance of wistful longing.

Red inclined his head indulgently. “Go ahead, Lizzy.”

Within seconds, the lid of the box was set aside and the shiny, gold tissue paper was pulled back to reveal the scarlet Cheongsam silk dress with a swirling inlay of black roses.

“Oh, Red!” Elizabeth breathed, lifting the beautiful frock from its nest of gilt wrappings. “It’s absolutely gorgeous! Even more so than I imagined!” Her eyes shone as they traveled admiringly over all the intricate detail. “Thank you!”

He smiled tenderly at her, loving that his gift brought her so much joy. “You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

Clutching it adoringly to her bosom, she shifted her sparkling, elated gaze to his. “Can I go try it on right now?”

Chuckling, he opened the smaller box and presented it to her. “Don’t forget to try it with these!”

“Geta shoes?” she laughed in disbelief, reaching out to brush her fingertips along the straps. “Part of me honestly thought you were kidding when you said you’d get me some!”

“The saleswoman swore to me they are much more comfortable than they look,” the man promised. “Indulge me?”

Giggling, Elizabeth draped the dress gently over her arm and then took the proffered box in her other hand. “I’ll be right back!”

True to her word, she wasn’t gone long. Red heard the clicking of her Geta shoes on the gleaming hardwood floor long before she came into his peripheral vision. But he kept his eyes focused on the polished mahogany coffee table in front of him, waiting to look at her until she came to a halt in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows.

When he finally did lift his eager gaze to her, he was stunned speechless for several, drawn out seconds.

The silk Cheongsam embraced her slender figure, curving most intimately around her natural waist to emphasize the swell of her ample breasts, sleek hips, and wonderfully round bottom.

Not only was the classic yet sultry cut of the dress extremely flattering, but the dusky black roses swirling whimsically upon the vibrant scarlet backdrop made her porcelain skin and sapphire eyes positively glow.

Yes....just as he had thought it would be when he’d seen it on the petite mannequin in the shop all those weeks ago, the frock was absolutely enchanting on her.

“Well?” Elizabeth asked into the weighty silence, fluffing her hair and shifting a little nervously to left.

As she restlessly moved, one pale leg slipped through the slit cut high along her thigh. His eyes followed the milky line of her skin from her naked thigh all the way down to her little foot encased in the straps of the exotic Geta shoe, and he felt what little moisture that remained in his mouth dissipate entirely. He rolled his dry tongue over the backs of his molars as he continued to visually feast on the luscious sight before him, outlined picturesquely by the fiery sunset blazing behind her.
“What do you think, Red?”

As her husky voice coyly washed over him, he curled his fingers around two glossy black hair sticks he’d brought out of the third box. “I think,” he purred, slowly rising to his feet, “that this look suits you, Elizabeth.”

“It suits me?” The young woman gazed at him as he sauntered closer, the desirous, hungry expression darkening his green eyes making her toes curl tightly in her Geta shoes.

“Mmm. Very much so,” he husked, lifting his fingertips to lightly caress her cheek, following that soft curve down the bare skin beneath her ear to trace the high collar of the Cheongsam and the blurred outline of one of the black roses whirling above her breast. “You’re positively alluring. Truly radiant.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, blushing happily as her self-confidence soared dizzyingly higher. Then her eyes lowered to watch his adventurous fingertips drift over her bosom and stroke through the fall of dark tresses cascading over her shoulder.

Then he held up the two sticks. “May I?”

She nodded wordlessly, for her tongue was suddenly quite heavy in her mouth. As he stepped closer, his burly chest just grazing against the tips of her breasts, she closed her eyes. As she inhaled his clean, masculine scent, tinged with the faint musk of the love they’d made earlier, she unabashedly reveled in it...and in the way his touch felt as he gathered all her hair in his hands.

With an elegant finesse she hadn’t expected, he gently twisted the lustrous mass into a loose bun at the back of her head and then slid the two sticks into it with careful precision.

To her shocked delight, the roll stayed in place when he released her.

“Where on Earth did you learn how to do that?” came her curious inquiry as she reached around to gingerly touch his handiwork.

“Surprised you, didn’t I?” he rumbled softly in her ear, warm palms sliding down her waist to hold her hips.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” Elizabeth demanded impishly, grinning up into his face as she wound her arms around his neck.

“Well,” he murmured, pulling her closer, “I couldn’t set up my own phone’s voicemail....”

“That’s true,” she conceded somewhat distractedly, for his hands were beginning to explore her body, and they had just discovered the slits at her thighs beginning right below the curve of her ass.

“You’re not wearing anything underneath,” he breathed in her ear as his palms continued their sensually fervent venture. “How convenient.”

“Red,” she chided with a shivery laugh. “If we’re going to do...anything...I should probably take this off first....”

“I’ll be careful....” he muttered, lips and teeth gently teasing the sweet, sensitive place just below her earlobe.

“Will you?” she sighed, tilting her head to the side to allow him more access.
“Mmm.”

“I’d really hate for it to rip....”

Red lifted his head to gaze ardently down into her eyes. “Trust me,” he urged, reaching up to brush away the wayward strands of hair that were escaping the loose bun to tangle with her long lashes. “I’ll be very careful.”

And, true to his word, he was.
To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. These gorgeous pieces of artwork are by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
April 29, 2007

Elizabeth was supposed to have been waiting for him in the foyer by the time he arrived at the penthouse so they could promptly dash off to The Lounge and enjoy what precious few recreational hours remained to them in this late evening.

Red hadn’t planned on having to work today, but a man such as he always had to be ready to deviate from his planned schedule at the drop of a hat. So when he had received the initial, disruptive call at four-thirty in the morning on the second burner phone he had bought two months ago to use for business only, his pre-made schedule had had to be immediately discarded...at least for the time being.

A shipment of exotic goods easily worth an impressively large fortune on the underground market had been late coming into Washington...and suspiciously so, which had been extremely unfortunate for all parties involved. It had needed to be tracked and then found...and that had required Red to be involved in every step of the hunting process.

The sun hadn’t even peeked through the gaps between the city’s skyscrapers before he had finished silently dressing himself and had then reluctantly kissed Elizabeth awake, quietly apologizing for having to delay some of their exciting day plans because he had been called unexpectedly to work.

Within the span of seconds, her burgeoning dismay had been quickly replaced by smoldering irritation, which had then been superseded by glum resignation. The knowledge that he’d been the cause of those negative emotions surging in her eyes hadn’t been easy for him to bear, especially on this day.

But it couldn’t be helped.

“I’m so sorry, Lizzy,” the man sincerely apologized again. “You know I wouldn’t abandon our plans if it weren’t absolutely necessary that I do so.”

“I know,” she had sighed, swiftly trying to hide her bitter disappointment behind a wan smile...but her valiant effort had been in vain. “I understand,” she’d murmured after an awkward pause, attempting to sound like she had meant it.

Red had tenderly dropped another contrite kiss to the side of her head. “We’ll need to work on your poker face,” he had teased her gently once he’d pulled back.

“My poker face?” she’d asked, bemused.

“Mmm.” He had reached out then, tucking her hair behind her ear so he could clearly see her face again. He’d mentally breathed a sigh of relief when she hadn’t stiffened indignantly to pull away in resentment. “You are joining the FBI, after all. We can’t have you always wearing your heart on your sleeve.”

She’d made a face at him, deliberately jumping at the chance to hide her dispirited feelings behind the turn of conversation. “How will ‘we’ work on it? By actually playing poker together?” she’d half-heartedly joked, propping herself up on her elbows as he had reluctantly risen from the bed.
“Actually, yes.”

Her mouth had fallen open in surprise. “Wait, really?”

Red’s eyes had glinted with fond amusement as he’d nodded seriously. “I know Sam taught you how to play—”

“Drilled me, more like,” Elizabeth interrupted dryly, pained love flashing briefly in her eyes as those good childhood memories drifted through her thoughts.

His expression flickered with gentle understanding. “—but I will help you hone your skills.”

She’d given him an appraising look. “You sound awfully sure of yourself.”

“That’s because I am sure of myself.” He had quirked an eyebrow at her as a lazy, arrogant smile had then curled his mouth, his white teeth gleaming in the dim light as he had expertly finished tying the knot on his tie. “I’ll teach you how to play to win. And you win by playing your opponents, not the cards.”

“How will that help me with my poker face, Red?” she had asked, pursing her lips skeptically at him.

The man had laughed gaily. “Learning to play off of people’s emotions is an absolutely fabulous way to learn how to school your own thoughts and feelings, and thus your face...and those lovely eyes of yours.”

He had been pleased to see her cheeks color a little at the low purr that had crept into his voice.

“Sam never told me that!”

“Sam didn’t want you knowing just how devious he could really be.”

“Unlike you?” she had challenged haughtily.

“Mmm.” Holding her eyes, he had given her a quick wink, amusement rumbling deep in his throat as she had dimpled cheekily—genuinely—back at him.

And that was how he’d known he had been forgiven for cancelling their day plans.

“I might kidnap Katie and head to the mall for most of the day.... You’ll let me know when you’ll be home, right?” she’d implored wistfully, sitting up. The soft white sheets had slipped down her body, baring her ample breasts to his admiring, hungry gaze.

“Of course, sweetheart,” he’d reassured her gruffly, bending down to caress one of those pert, silken mounds while stealing one more kiss. “I still intend to take you out tonight.” At least that part of their schedule he was still fairly certain they could keep. “This shouldn’t take all day.”

And it hadn’t, but it had taken long enough.

Red and his men had spent their hours gathering intel and exploiting it so the answers he most desired were given up to him...without any true, lasting harm being done to anyone. By six-twenty-two in the evening, the shipment had been tracked down and those disloyal, third-party patsies who had tried to abscond with it had been dealt with.

Though not by him. Baz and a few other trusted men in his employ had alleviated him of that grim responsibility.
The moment Red had entered the suite at seven-forty-five, he had felt the strain caused by the events of the anxiety-riddled day ease little by little as his eyes had flicked around, looking for Elizabeth.

He was honestly surprised she wasn’t waiting for him like he’d envisioned she would be...with her arms crossed over her chest and her eyes lit with excitement and her foot impatiently tapping on the wooden floor.

By the time he surmised she was most likely in the master bedroom and quickly strode down the long hallway to find her, he’d at last tempered the lingering strain to where he could master it, skillfully locking it away down deep inside of himself.

The man was expertly proficient at compartmentalizing his life. His businesses and anything pertaining to them were to be purposefully ignored—at least, to the best of his ability—while he was in her company.

When Red reached the doorway’s threshold, he immediately paused before crossing it and leaned against the casing, a slow smile spreading across his lips at the endearing sight he’d stumbled upon.

The young woman was obviously ready for their romantic night out on the town, for she wore an elegant, deep scarlet lace gown that just grazed the floor, and the heavy fall of her lovely hair was swept up and away from her face to drift down one breast in an elaborate braid that loosely twisted in about itself, leaving her narrow shoulder blades and pale neck bare to the balmy air.

Since she was facing away from him, she wasn’t aware that she had a keenly interested audience of one when she raised her white arms at differing angles as if she were holding someone close...when her hips swayed and her small, bare feet began stepping in what appeared to be a waltz.

Red watched her hesitantly glide to the right for a few seconds before she suddenly halted clumsily, cursing under her breath as she realized she had just preformed the wrong move.

His smile affectionately grew.

Clearly Elizabeth was practicing for this evening.

While she wasn’t completely unfamiliar with ballroom dancing, she had freely admitted to him before that it wasn’t her strongest suit. But when he had spontaneously broached the subject of perhaps taking her out to one of his swanky dance clubs he’d frequented in the past, she’d gushed over the romantic notion and had enthusiastically accepted his invitation.

The posh nightclub he was taking her to tonight had a famously grand reputation throughout the city for catering to couples who enjoyed the intricate art of traditional dancing. He should have known that for her, being comfortable with just the foxtrot wouldn’t be enough...that she’d want to be acquainted with more.

He observed her set her shoulders and stubbornly raise her chin before she picked up where she had left off. But her determination to perfect the steps made her move stiffly, and that honestly surprised him. After all, he was well aware that she was no stranger to dance and she knew just how important it was to remain fluidly limber.

And then he realized...she was so intent on accomplishing flawlessness that she wasn’t enjoying the challenge.

Joy was what made her move with languid confidence, and when she did, it was clear she vivaciously reveled in the varying ways she could twirl and spin her body.
Red had seen her dance joyously many times. He had been fortunate enough to observe a few spirited displays in the past handful of months. But he hadn’t just seen them recently. There had been moments during her earliest months of living with Sam when he’d happened upon her while she’d been expressing herself with carefree elation.

As the man gazed at her, he could almost see the winsome little girl she’d been all those years ago.

Lizzy must have been no older than five at the time, a child who had been both highly sensitive and fiercely capricious. Those painfully long twelve months of transition from her old life as Masha Rostova to her new one as Elizabeth Scott had been extremely difficult on her psychologically, and her unhappiness had been apparent. But despite bearing the invisible scars of emotional trauma, she had reaffirmed to both he and Sam through her sweet tempestuousness woven with her fiery stubbornness that she possessed a resilient spirit.

Even amidst those dark days of sorrow, anger, and depression, she’d had her good days, and those good days had eventually metamorphosed into even better, brighter days as the seasons had turned.

The particular moment in time Red beheld in his mind’s eye had been during one those better, brighter days. He could still remember how the brilliant light of that warm, summer afternoon had cascaded into the sunroom through the huge bay windows, setting the polished wooden floor to gleaming.

The pure joy emanating from Lizzy as she had sprightly danced around, bathed in all that glorious light, had been nearly palpable. He remembered leaning against the door jamb, silent and unseen, empathetic heart swelling for her...because after all she’d been through, she had deserved to feel such jubilance...to celebrate the thrill of being young and vibrantly alive.

As the classical music emitting from the stereo in the back corner had ebbed and then flowed, swelling to an ethereal flourish, the little girl had suddenly paused in her fleet cavorting to face the sun-drenched window. With slow deliberation, she had closed her eyes and had lifted her slim white arms above her head, fingertips stretching to the ceiling.

Then she had begun to twirl.

Her flouncy, blush pink tutu had rippled about her legs as she had spun steadily around and around, her dark, tangled hair swinging with the controlled movement. And though it had to have been a trick played on his eyes, it had seemed to him that her splayed hands had almost appeared to catch the rays of sunlight, weaving them above her head until they spilled down her body in a torrent of sparkling gold.

The expression he observed on her face as she whirled was one of untainted delight. Red remembered fiercely praying as he’d watched her that nothing in this world would ever douse that dazzling vivacity burning within her soul.

As the exquisite song had come to a beautifully elegant end, Elizabeth had ceased her exhilarated spinning just as she’d pirouetted to face where he stood in the doorway.

As her eyes had flickered open, a luminous smile had broken out across her face when they instantly met his.

“Red!”

Flushed and breathless with joy—and still young enough to not be embarrassed that he’d caught her dancing by herself—she had nimbly darted across the sunroom to him, arms outstretched.
Red had bent down, deftly scooping her up in a hard hug. “Looks like you’re having fun,” he had grinned into her beaming face by way of greeting as he’d spun her around once, her dangling legs swinging from the momentum of his pivoting before he had placed her carefully back down onto the floor.

“I am!” she had beamed, grabbing the fingers of his large hands with her tiny ones before he could draw away. “Dance with me!” She had given them a cheekily imperious tug as she had begun to walk backwards.

“Dance with you?” He had smiled fondly down at her as he’d indulged her playful whim by following her further into the room, placing his feet with care so he wouldn’t accidentally clip her little bare toes with his heavy leather shoes.

“You know how, right?”

“Yes....” he had drawled, a dryly teasing lilt deepening his tone. “I know how. But I don’t want to step on your feet.” Then the idea had come to him. “Instead of me dancing with you, why don’t we dance together? Here.” He had taken her hands more firmly in his grip, guiding her closer. “Step up onto the tops my feet.”

She had pursed her lips uncertainly, glancing down at his glossy black shoes. “You want me to stand on you?”

“Mmhmm.”

The girl had slanted a considering look up at him while lifting one small foot and placing the toes of it experimentally on the thick leather.

He had felt the very slight pressure, and he’d squeezed her fingers encouragingly. “It’s okay, Lizzy. Hop up.”

“It won’t hurt, right?”

“Not at all,” he had smiled reassuringly down into her upturned face. “You’re as light as a feather, you know.”

Giggling, she had complied to his request and had sprung up, but as gently as she could.

Red had considerately tightened his hold on her dainty hands so she wouldn’t fall backward as she had shifted and wriggled her feet until she’d finally found a way to perfectly balance herself.

“That feels pretty good,” he had commented after a moment, carefully moving one leg forward to test the fluidity and equilibrium of their movement. “What do you think, honey?”

“Yeah!” Dimpling happily, Lizzy had turned her small face up to his, a charming blush of adoration suffusing her cheeks as their eyes had met.

“Hang on to me tightly now,” he had warned affectionately, listening to the subtle rhythm of the music for a moment before beginning to slowly dance the easy, languid steps of a simple foxtrot. “I would hate for you to fall.”

“I won’t fall!” she had assured him with impish stoutness, leaning closer as he had skillfully waltzed her across the shining floor.

“Red!”
The man gave a start and blinked, gaze focusing on the flushing, abashed young woman looking at him reproachfully, her adult face and figure instantly replacing his vision of the blushing, unabashed girl-child she’d been.

“How long have you been lurking there?” she demanded before he could say a word, her tone haughty in an attempt to cover her embarrassment at having been caught dancing alone.

“Long enough to know you’re nervous about tonight when you don’t need to be,” he smiled soothingly, coming into the room.

She met him halfway and threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly in greeting. “I just don’t want to make a fool of myself...especially on my birthday!”

“You’ve ballroom danced before,” he murmured in her ear before pulling back slightly to look down into her face. “And relatively recently, too.”

“I know,” she huffed, wrinkling her nose. “But that was outside in the dark with only a handful of other couples around....not in a huge club!”

“The Lounge isn’t huge, Lizzy.”

“But it’s bigger than Altura’s courtyard though, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes....”

“And it’s brightly lit, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Red patiently conceded again. “But this isn’t a dancing competition, sweetheart,” he cajoled reassuringly. “Most people there will be paired up already. They’re going to be focused on themselves, and their dates. They’re not going to be watching you...judging you.”

Elizabeth slanted a disbelieving look at him. “There will always be people watching...judging. It’s human nature, Red.” Then she sighed, eyes flicking downward as she frowned disapprovingly. “And it’s not the prettiest side of our nature, either!”

He could most certainly agree with that.

As he watched her take her lower lip nervously between her teeth, he wondered what was really going through that sharp mind of hers.

Why was she concerning herself with how others would perceive her?

There was a reason for why she was uncharacteristically giving in to her insecurities tonight rather than fighting them...there had to be.

But he couldn’t ask her why outright. Well, he could, but he shouldn’t at this very moment. Knowing her as well as he did, if he inquired directly, she could become defensive, maybe even close herself off to his questions...until he could persuade her to confide in him. That could take time, and he didn’t want their romantic night to start out on a difficult note.

Perhaps he would be able to coax the reason out of her later....

After another beat of thoughtful silence, he asked, “Would you feel more confident if I went over the waltz with you before we go?”

Her nostrils flared once before she glanced up at him. The expression in her eyes was grateful as she
gave a hesitant nod.

“Well,” he smiled reassuringly, “hop up, then.”

Baffled, she tilted her head to the side questioningly as her hands slid around to hold his shoulders. “Hop up?”

Christ, the look of sincere puzzlement in those bright eyes almost took him back to that sweet, shining moment they had shared seventeen years ago.

Almost.

“Mmm.” Lightly he ran his hands down the feminine curves of her body. “Once you have a good feel for the rhythm, I’ll let you down and you can follow my lead. But we need to loosen you up first.”

His fingertips drifted up her back to briefly rub her bare, stiff shoulders to emphasize his point.

“Give you a natural, assured feel of the movements. So...” he slightly raised a shoe and nudged her bare toes until they rested on the glossy tip. “Hop up.”

“You really want me to stand on you?”

“Mmm.” He traced his thumbs reassuringly down the sides of her neck. “You know, there was a time when you were just a little thing and we danced in the way I’m suggesting we do now.” The expression in his eyes was soft as they met hers again. “But you don’t remember, do you?”

The woman slowly shook her head. “We did?”

“It’s one of my fondest memories of you as a youngster.”

Faint color tinged her cheeks as she gave him her best unsure-but-game smile while she inched her delicate foot further up on the top of his, only stopping when her toes curled around the leather laces. “You sure this won’t be uncomfortable for you, right?”

“Not a bit,” came his easy reply as he cupped her small waist in his palms, giving her an affectionate squeeze. “You’re still as light as a feather, you know!”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” she playfully grinned at his exaggeration as she carefully placed her other foot on his right. Once she steadied herself, she lifted her eyes trustingly to his face.

“Now hold on to me like we are dancing.... Yes,” his large hand engulfed the slim one she offered while he applied an intimate pressure to her lower back with his other to hold her close. He could feel her body responding to his assured confidence as it slowly began melding into his. “That’s right....” His eyes crinkled as he flashed a tender smile down at her. “One...two...three.... And....” He swept forward. “Here we go....”
“And you were so worried you’d be tripping all over yourself—and me!” Red chuckled as he gracefully maneuvered Elizabeth around one of the corners of The Lounge’s gleaming dance floor.

“Well, practicing before we left did help,” the woman responded primly, her sapphire eyes glinting with a bashful challenge as they lifted to his. “I would be stumbling over two left feet right now if we hadn’t!”

“If it had come to that...which I highly doubt...I would have allowed you to stand on me again,” he teased, whirling her under his arm.

“With these things on?” she laughed in disbelief, quickly shooting a pointed glance down at the chic shoes she wore as she lifted one higher off the floor than was necessary, the hem of her dress sliding up her pale calf to reveal the impressive heel. “I doubt you’d want that digging into your toes!”

“Quite right,” he grinned, adeptly bringing her back in front of him. “I’d insist you be barefoot!”

Elizabeth playfully pretended to be affronted as she swished even closer. “In front of all these people? Yeah right!”

“No one would have known! Your dress would have covered our feet. It’s certainly full enough.” His admiring gaze swept down her lithe body as they glided to the left. “It really is a stunning gown, Lizzy.”

“You’ve told me before that red is my color,” she dimpled impishly.

The man chuckled at the flirtatious emphasis she put on the word red. “You look utterly ravishing in any of the jewel tones.”

“Thank you,” she blushed in pleasure at his compliment. Even though he’d lavished it on her before, she knew her vanity would never tire of hearing it!

“But I know red is your favorite....Red.” She briefly glanced down at herself, admittedly gratified to observe how the fine lace and the smooth sheath beneath clung flatteringly to her figure before flowing in exquisite ripples around her legs as the man skillfully lead her through the throng of other dancers. “This one was a bit over the budget I set for myself,” she confided. “But....”

He raised an expectant brow when she trailed off. “But....?”

“Well...since it’s my birthday, I figured I could splurge without guilt!”

“You can always splurge without guilt,” Red rumbled firmly.

Elizabeth snorted lightly, shaking her head in denial. “If you’re hinting—again—that I should come to you for money when I have the wants—“

“I am.”

“Red,” she sighed in exasperation, “I know you’re loaded and everything, but your funds aren’t limitless.”

“I know of many people who would vehemently disagree with that statement you just made.”

She flushed, eyes narrowing. “I just mean...eventually you could run out.”

“I’m not going to ‘run out’ by throwing a couple hundred here and another couple hundred there for
“I have money too, you know,” she grumbled, eyes flashing proudly as she tried a different tactic so he would take her point seriously. “I can pay for my own stuff.”

He quirked an eyebrow at her. “Surely you don’t think that if I buy you expensive things more often than not, I’ll become nothing more than a sugar daddy?”

“You’re more to me than that!” she hissed angrily. Immediately after the heated words escaped her mouth, bright color flared in her cheeks and she glanced self-consciously to either side of her, hoping to God the couples dancing closest to them weren’t eavesdropping.

Red gazed silently at her, obviously bemused by her unexpectedly fierce response to what had been a light-hearted tease.

Nervously biting her lower lip, Liz looked embarrassedly away from his still face and searching eyes and instead focused her attention intently on the knot of his silk tie.

It may have seemed like it because of her behavior just then, but it wasn’t Red she was angry with.

Even though she did her very best to ignore the snide comments that came to her secondhand about her near-scandalous relationship with a man old enough to be her father, it still didn’t change the fact that they were made at all.

And that bothered her.

She had thought her acquaintances would have dropped the matter of her rather...unique...love life a long time ago.

But they hadn’t.

Apparently her relationship with Red, her “sugar daddy,” was the juiciest of all gossip fodder they had to gnaw on.

As much as she tried not to let them, those judgmental remarks deviously found ways to slip past her walls of self-protection and burrow themselves in her heart, piercing the old insecurities already festering there, making them bleed and seep outward into her conscious thoughts and behaviors.

Like now.

“Elizabeth?” he inquired softly.

The young woman quickly shook her head. “I’m—I’m sorry,” she managed to breathe, flushing hotly as she shoved those poisonous thoughts to the back of her mind. “Let’s just drop it, okay?”

She could tell the man wasn’t at all pleased to let it slide. It was his nature to dig his way into the heart of any ambiguity or problem, and by the way he was silently working his jaw, she knew he was having a difficult time holding his tongue. But it was clear to her that since he wasn’t persistently pursuing an answer to why she had released that flash of temper, he understood the wisdom of not having a serious discussion with her while they were surrounded by strangers.

“I’m fine, Red.” Elizabeth offered him a small but genuine smile. “Really.”

The slight twitch beneath his eye betrayed his disbelief, but he didn’t push her. But he probably would...later, when they were at home...either tonight or tomorrow.
She would have to figure out what to say to him, or how to brush his concern away again, if that moment came to pass. And knowing him as well as she did, it would.

“I’m starting to get a little thirsty,” he murmured, waltzing her towards the end of the dance floor closest to the bar islanded by a myriad of round, standing height tables and cushioned stools. “Would you like a drink?”

“I would actually,” she smiled gratefully.

“Wine?”

“Oh that would be nice, sure.”

Once they both slid into the dim lighting of the lounge portion of the club, Red released her body and gathered her hand in one of his, solicitously leading her to an unoccupied table. After he helped settle her on the plush velvet cushion of the high stool, he met her eyes, his own twinkling.

“What?” she grinned at him.

“I would ask you what wine you’d like, but I already know what you’ll say.”

“That I don’t care what it is because I’ll drink whatever you put in front of me?” she giggled.

He tsked at her, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “You should know your wines better than that by now!” he admonished playfully.

“Hey, even though we’re dating, it’s not like I’ve been taught all the intricacies of wine identification and tasting!” she haughtily accused him by defending herself and her relative ignorance regarding the world of fine vintages.

“Oh, have I not taken you wine tasting yet?” His eyes gleamed teasingly at her.

She feigned racking her memories, pursing her lips in puzzlement as she slowly shook her head for dramatic effect. “No.... I don’t think you have!”

“Well, I’ll have to remedy that oversight,” he smiled.

Her eyes lit with surprised pleasure. “You’re serious?”

“I wouldn’t dangle a sweet carrot like that in front of your nose and not follow through with feeding it to you, honey,” the man drawled in a dry tone.

“I’ve never been to California,” she sighed wistfully, her thoughts already awhirl with the dreamy prospect of seeing those clear blue skies and sun-drenched valleys fairly bursting with row upon row of succulent grapes sprouting from lush vines that were every shade of green imaginable.

“Or Europe,” came his amused remark.

Her blue eyes widened as she met his. “You’d take me to Europe?”

“Some of my favorite boutique wines come from truly magnificent places outside the States,” he confided, his longing for those wonderful, extremely rare and highly sought-after vintages making his voice run an octave lower. “I’m fortunate enough to know a few of the proprietors—“

“Of course you do,” she interrupted cheekily, dimpling. It seemed he knew everyone of importance where hedonistic pleasures were concerned!
“—and I’d love to take you to those small,” he lowered his voice even further, leaning closer and recapturing her attention. “...and secret...vineyards.”

Her eyes drifted to his lips, which were now very close to her own. “I’d love to go,” she whispered.

“Good,” he murmured, closing the barest sliver of distance between them.

The kiss he gave her was gentle, but it certainly wasn’t chaste. As his warm lips briefly yet thoroughly explored hers, her blood sang pleasurably through her veins, heating her cheeks and kindling her ardor.

When he finally lifted his head to meet her gaze, it was hazy with desire that vividly reflected his. “Save my seat?” he jested in a gravelly purr.

“You bet,” she laughed breathily, leaning forward to prop her elbows languidly on the table.

With a smile lingering on his lips, Red made his way over the bar. Once he reached the gleaming wooden counter, he leaned comfortably against it and patiently waited to be noticed by the busy bartender.

The man behind the bar was about a decade younger with a head of thick, black hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and an open, friendly face. When their eyes met, the younger man’s widened in delighted surprise. He swiftly finished pouring two glasses of red wine for another of the club’s guests before sidling over.

“It’s so good to see you, Mr. Cartwright!” the bartender beamed at Red, holding out his hand.

Red clasped it warmly. “Likewise, Rob! How are you?”

“Better than ever,” Rob grinned happily. “Alyssa and I are expecting again!”

“Ah! Felicitations!” Red laughed jovially. “Another boy? Or is Alyssa finally getting her princess?” he teased.

“It’s a girl!”

“At last!”

“We’re both thrilled,” Rob’s eyes crinkled with joy. Then he tilted his head closer to Red’s, lowering his voice as he did so, “As much as I want a daughter, you know I would’ve loved another boy, but Alyssa....”

“Five males, including you, is a lot for one woman,” came Red’s understanding remark.

The younger man’s smile was wry. “She informed me just yesterday she probably would’ve had to commit herself to the nearest asylum if she’d had to, as she put it, ‘deal with yet another layer of testosterone in her house!’”

The older man chuckled at that. “Your wife is quite the firecracker, Rob!”

“I said something similar recently,” the bartender winced.

Red’s expression was sympathetic. “Let me guess...it was within her range of hearing?”

“She reminded me with venomous sweetness that she had warned me a long time ago of how biting her temper could be, so I have no excuse to ever be shocked by what comes out her mouth.” Rob
rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Sometimes I forget how sharp her hearing is!”

“Her ears are like most, if not all, women’s!”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, truer words have never been spoken,” the younger man sighed dramatically, but the passionate heat burning in his eyes demonstrated to Red just how much he loved his fiery Alyssa. Then he blinked, refocusing his gaze on the older man. “So, what’ll it be tonight?” he asked, rubbing his hands together in an eager, businesslike way. “We’ve added even better stock to our shelves since you were here last.” His expression grew thoughtful. “It has definitely been a while, hasn’t it?”

“At least a couple years,” the older man smiled.

“You must have a good reason to be back,” Rob grinned slyly, eyes pointedly shifting around the tables closest to them as he looked for that good reason.

“The best reason,” came Red’s sincerely honest reply.

The look the bartender slanted his way was both inquisitive and knowing. “The best, is she? In that case, I’m assuming you want two glasses of the best of the best?”

“And what is your best of the best now?”

“The Château Pétrus.”

A slow, pleased smile spread across Red’s face. He had just been telling Elizabeth about boutique wines! “That will do splendidly, Rob!”

“What year would you prefer, Mr. Cartwright?”

A brow rose. “Need you ask?”

Laughing, the younger man inclined his head and stepped away to the furthest corner of the bar where the rarest bottles of wine were glittering on display.

“The surname Cartwright suits you,” came a throaty, feminine murmur to his left.

Glancing over, his eyes met a bold pair of the most startlingly light green eyes he’d ever seen in all his years walking the various countries of this Earth.

Where had she come from? She certainly hadn’t been here a moment ago!

“Does it?” he smiled politely, keen gaze trained to quickly pick out distinguishing features of anyone he encountered taking swift and thorough note of her.

This elegant, buxom woman was one of those rare creatures where the passage of time had treated her very well indeed. The lines around her striking eyes betrayed she was most likely close to him in age, but besides those, her golden skin was tight and smooth around the rest of her face, arms, and what he briefly glimpsed of her décolletage just above the scooped neckline of her amber-hued gown.

“It does,” she smiled back, holding his eyes with a confidence most likely born from her years of successfully prowling upscale clubs, and from the fact that she knew very well that she was quite beautiful. “It’s an intriguing name, and attractive...rather like the man attached to it.”

Before Red could respond, the woman tilted her head to the side in a friendly fashion, her glossy,
chestnut hair drifting over her shoulder as she leaned a little closer. “Something tells me I should get to know you better. And I always follow my intuition. It has never once steered me wrong,” she confided, tone husky with an engaging mixture sultry flirtation and frank honesty. “Would you like to join me for a drink?”

“I’m quite flattered,” the man replied kindly, courteously keeping his voice quiet so those closest to them wouldn’t hear him reject her smooth advances. “And I appreciate your offer, but I’m afraid I must decline.”

Disappointment flashed in those enthralling eyes. “You’re with someone?” she asked softly, curiously.

“I am,” Red steadily confirmed, suddenly very aware of Rob surreptitiously glancing over at him now and again as he busied himself with other patrons, waiting for a convenient moment to return with the two glasses of the Château Pétrus he’d poured.

He blessed the young man for his thoughtful tact. Rejection was both difficult to parcel out and, of course, to receive. This woman seemed genuine and she certainly didn’t deserve to be embarrassed by having an audience of any number look on as she was being refused.

“Well,” she sighed prettily, the corner of her mouth curving up in an attractively wry, if resigned, half-smile. “I knew I couldn’t leave here tonight without at least trying to beguile you.”

Reaching across her generous bosom, she slipped two fingers just beneath the rustling fabric of her dress and pulled out a crisp, white business card.

As Red’s eyes flickered to it, he could see the printed swirl of a name and a phone number etched visibly beneath it.

“If you ever find yourself alone and wanting companionship for the evening....” the woman placed the card on the counter and slowly moved it over to where his hand was resting on the polished surface until the edge of it lightly brushed the tip of his index finger, “here’s my card.”

Her low tone left no doubt as to what kind of companionship she would willingly offer him if she ended up liking him well enough over drinks and dancing.

Raising her chin, she unabashedly met his eyes again before she offered him yet another, captivatingly sweet smile. “I sincerely hope I’ll see you again someday.”

And with that gracious, parting remark, she glided away from him to lose herself amongst the people milling around.

Red gazed down at the small rectangle of thin, textured card stock for a brief moment before decisively picking it up and tucking it into the inner pocket of his jacket. As much as he didn’t want to keep it on his person, it would be incredibly rude of him to just leave it languishing on the counter. If that woman happened to be watching him from afar, he didn’t want her to feel slighted. She had taken his rejection gracefully and therefore didn’t deserve to be hurt.

“Your best must be that if you declined her,” Rob murmured, carefully setting the two wine glasses down in front of him.

“Indeed she is,” the man told him gravely. “When I come back over to close out my tab for the night, I’ll introduce you to Elizabeth.”

“Elizabeth? That’s her name?”
At Red’s proud smile and slight nod, the bartender grinned broadly. “I’ve always liked that name. I can’t wait to meet the woman who has bewitched you out of your bachelor ways!”

“And I am looking forward to making the introductions!” he chuckled back, inclining his head in goodbye as he carefully lifted the stemware in his hands and made his way back to his table.

He couldn’t blame Rob for being so interested in Lizzy.

There had been a time not too long ago when Red would have accepted that lovely woman’s invitation, would have enjoyed the intricate art of conversing with her, would have delighted in whisking her out onto the dance floor, would have found fierce pleasure in seducing her there...and in completing his seduction of her between the sheets of a bed found in one the nearest hotel suites.

But Elizabeth was in his life now, filling an aching gap with her passionate, vivacious spirit. He didn’t need to look elsewhere for feminine companionship.

Not while they remained together.

Ignoring the bitter pang he felt whenever he allowed himself to even begin to entertain the thought of letting her go, Red approached their table from the side. Elizabeth had one leg crossed over the other, feet comfortably hooked around the rung of the stool, and was staring down at her hands clasped in front of her on the polished wood. He admired her profile...her straight back, the swell of her hips and breasts, the loose braid that tickled the smooth skin of her neck, the curve of her throat, the angles of her lovely face....

Pride in her surged within his heart, mingling with the steady feelings of love that had been abiding there for years.

“Wouldn’t you know it!” he exclaimed with a smile as he gingerly placed one of wine glasses on the table in front of her. “The Lounge is offering boutique wines now!” After setting his own glass down, he slid onto the seat across from her, propping his forearms against the round table’s smooth edge. “I may have to purchase the entire bottle tonight since I know I won’t be going to France anytime soon and I can’t stand the thought of someone else nicking it out from under me.... Lizzy?”

The young woman slowly lifted her eyes to his and he was taken aback by how guarded they were. Before he could ask what was wrong, she spoke.

“That woman you were talking to at the bar seemed...nice.”

Her tone wasn’t angry. Not quite. But it definitely held a slightly sarcastic edge to it, as if she were caught between being unable to decide whether she should be irritated or amused by the encounter she had witnessed.

“I don’t know if she was nice or not, Elizabeth,” the man replied evenly. “I didn’t speak to her long enough to discern what kind of person she is.”

“You took her card.”

It wasn’t quite an accusation, but her implication couldn’t have been more clear to him.

Disappointment pierced him. How he had hoped she would swing toward being amused by the whole thing! But instead she was giving in to vexation...and that emotion betrayed something deep within her that had to be related to what he’d unintentionally scratched the surface of earlier tonight, while they’d been dancing.
“I did.”

Hurt flashed in her eyes. “Why?” she asked bluntly.

“I took it because leaving it there would have been impolite,” he explained matter-of-factly. “While I didn’t welcome her attentions, she certainly didn’t deserve such a public slight.”

He watched her absorb that before he purposefully shifted, drawing her attention back to his face. Holding her eyes with his, he slowly reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. Using his middle and forefingers, he pulled out the piece of white card stock. Without giving it a glance, he propped his elbow on the table and flicked his wrist, holding it out to her.

“Take it,” he encouraged in a low voice.

Elizabeth stared at the card for a moment, flushing with embarrassment, before she glanced uncertainly back up to his face.

Now that the heat was gone from her eyes, he knew she was much more willing to listen to what he had to say.

“I don’t need it,” he told her, every word enunciated precisely. “I don’t need her or what she offered me. I have you.”

Shaking her head, she reached out and placed her hand over his, lowering it to the table. But she didn’t take the card out of his loose grasp.

He was so damned proud of her for that.

“You could have any woman in the world,” Elizabeth said quietly, gazing down at their hands. “Even her.”

Even her? “And why is she so threatening to you, Lizzy?” he asked gently.

Red half-expected her to shy skittishly away from his direct question. And while she wouldn’t look at him, she did purse her lips pensively...her tell that she was formulating a meaningful reply.

He waited.

“She’s....” She hesitated briefly, then sighed enviously. “She’s really beautiful.”

The man couldn’t help the twitch of his eyebrow. “You’re not exactly lacking where beauty is concerned, sweetheart.”

“Don’t laugh at me, Red,” she warned, flicking a glare at him as she withdrew her palm from the top of his.

His expression was neutral when it met hers. “I’m not laughing at you.”

“You had a tone.” Then she sighed again, shaking her head and letting it go. “I guess by beautiful I do mean in looks. I mean, I would kill for her figure.” Her brow puckered, her fingers self-consciously plucking at the feathered end of her braid. “But it’s not just physical looks I’m talking about. There’s something else that makes her beautiful.” She nibbled on her lower lip briefly before continuing pensively, “And I think I know what it is. When she was talking to you, she was just so...confident.”

Red was genuinely puzzled. “And you don’t think you are?”
“Well, she’s older than me.” Her eyes flicked back to his, a wry half-smile twitching at the corner of her mouth. “As you’ve pointed out to me before, age brings the kind of confidence I’m talking about. Women like her...they’re settled in their lives. They know exactly who they are.”

“And you feel threatened by that?”

She shrugged uncomfortably.

“Why, honey?” he prodded softly.

“Because...” She hesitated uncertainly, rubbing her rosy thumbnail along the grooves in the wood. Then she decisively pressed her hand flat against the table, swiftly gathered her courage, and plowed on, “Because I would think you’d be really attracted to that.”

“Why?”

She shot him a frustrated look. “Because you’re you. You’re almost fifty.” At his warning growl, she waved an apologetic hand. “Okay, okay. You have a few more years until then,” she conceded, blushing. “But my point is...you’ve got your life figured out. You know who you are. Like her,” she reached out and tapped her nail against the woman’s business card resting between them in the middle of the table. “And like...Madeline.”

“But, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, Elizabeth...I’m not in a relationship with a woman like either of them.” Despite his dry tone of voice, the expression in his eyes was kind when they met hers. “I’m in one with you.”

“But why?” she wanted to know. “When you could be with any woman, especially someone like them, why are you with me, a twenty-two-year-old girl who hasn’t even graduated from college yet?” She wrinkled her nose, perplexed. “I mean, I barely have anything figured out at all!”

“You’re projecting what you think I’m most attracted to onto me, Lizzy. And you’re believing it’s real.” The man slowly shook his head, wondering just how long she’d been harboring this particular insecurity. Months? Years? In either case, it was long past time to alleviate her concern. “I’ve been with women like you’re describing, and not just sexually. Over the years, I’ve tried to have relationships with a handful of them...relationships that went beyond the bedroom.” He gave an almost imperceptible sigh. “They never worked out.”

“Why not?” she asked quietly.

“I was never entirely certain if they were only attracted to me because of my wealth and the influence I wield in certain...public and private circles.” A sad sort of smile touched his lips. “Sometimes I don’t think even they knew for certain.”

Elizabeth frowned, her temper beginning to simmer at the very thought of Red being used. “So...there was a lack of trust.”

He nodded, his smile turning warmer the longer he gazed at her. “But obviously it’s different with you. You’ve never given me a reason to consider for one moment that you’re only with me for my money.”

Her anger died away as her amused chuckle echoed his.

“You’re a breath of fresh air, sweetheart,” the man continued seriously. “You see your youth as disadvantageous. You shouldn’t. I certainly do not.”
“No?” she asked rather shyly, a part of her daring to hope he’d elaborate.

“No,” he confirmed, studying her thoughtfully. “You’re incredibly beautiful, you know. You were always a pretty girl, but now....”

She blushed as his eyes appreciatively roved down her body before once again tenderly tracing her face.

“Now, you’re such a radiant young woman.” His gaze adamantly searched hers. “You have a tenaciously passionate spirit that shows itself in the bedroom...and outside of it.” His smile grew as the color in her cheeks deepened. “You’re intelligent. Clever. Sharp. Determined. You’re loyal...caring.” The look in his green eyes softened. “Remember when we spent Christmas Eve together? And Christmas Day?”

At her slow nod, he quietly confided, “Normally I go to a devastatingly deep, dark place on those days, Lizzy. But this year...you were with me. You set that awful darkness ablaze with your brilliant vivacity. Your sweetness. Your love.”

Passionate heat smoldered in his eyes. “When we were beneath the tree and I held you above me,” he murmured huskily, “and you were moving so sensually to pleasure yourself...to pleasure me...and all those Christmas lights were twinkling around you, framing you, wreathing you in gold, I remember asking God right then and there what had I done to deserve the love of a vivacious spirit like you.”

Tears slowly filled in her eyes as she gazed wordlessly at him.

Red’s expression became graver as his voice lowered intimately. “You told me earlier you don’t think you possess the confidence mature women do. I don’t think that’s quite true. After all you’ve faced and have successfully overcome, you’ve proven you have it. It’s there, riding within you right beside all that inner strength.”

He leaned even closer toward her. “And I’ll tell you, Lizzy, watching you tap into all of that fire as you continue to discover yourself has been one of the greatest joys of my life.”

Elizabeth’s smile was filled with elation and love even as the sheen in her eyes grew brighter. “You would make me cry in a huge room full of strangers,” she breathed with a husky, laughing touch of playful asperity.

His slow, answering smile was one of loving affection because after their long history together, he understood her cover exactly for what it was. “I meant every single word, Elizabeth.”

“I...I don’t know what to say,” she finally whispered once she had resolutely gathered enough control over her trembling voice.

Red extended his hand across the table, large palm facing upwards in silent invitation. Within seconds her slim fingers were wrapped around his, her grip tight with feeling.

“You don’t need to say anything.”

She dimpled at him as she reached up with her free hand to quickly brush the glittering wetness away from beneath her eyes. “I love you, you know.”

Lifting her hand in his, Red placed two tender kisses along the line of her knuckles. “I love you too,” he told her, his gravelly voice low with the fierce depth of emotion.
After giving her hand one more squeeze, he gently released it to pick up his wine glass. Once she followed suit, he tilted his toward hers. As the rims met, they chimed prettily, and he briefly lifted his a little higher in acknowledgment of her before they each took a drink.

“Oh wow....” Elizabeth breathed, eyes widening in delight as she stared down into her glass. “This is wonderful.”

“I’m glad you think so!” he smiled. “The Château Pétrus is one of my favorites.” He indulgently watched her savor another sip before asking, “If I bought the rest of the bottle, would you help me finish it?”

“In one night?” she squeaked.

“No, no,” the man laughed. “I was thinking over the course of the next week or so.” Then his eyes glinted teasingly. “However, we are celebrating your birthday. So if you wanted to attempt to finish the bottle tonight....”

The thought of chugging a five thousand dollars-worth bottle of wine in one night was almost physically painful for him to even contemplate, but if it was what she really wanted to do....

Elizabeth grinned as she shook her head. “I don’t want to get too drunk.... Besides opening my present you’ve been hinting at for weeks, there are...things...I want to do tonight when we get home.”

An eyebrow rose. “Care to share what those...things...are?” he purred.

“No, no,” came her prim response, but the look she slanted at him from beneath the inky fringe of her lashes was a suggestively coy one.

Rumbling his amusement, Red set his wine glass down on the table. “Since we are being candid with one another tonight, can I ask you something, Elizabeth?”

Curiosity lit her gaze as she also lowered her glass. “Sure.”

“You asked me earlier why I’m with you...now I’m going to turn around and ask you something similar: why are you with me?”

The woman blinked, startled. “What?”

“You heard me.”

A memory of spending a very late, passionate night with him in her old apartment instantly came flooding back to her. It had been the night she had told him she loved him, and he had said it back. That genuinely pure moment had been a significant turning point in their relationship, and he had asked the same question then.

“I know you’ve answered this question before,” Red told her, smiling knowingly.

It was incredibly uncanny how closely he could read her sometimes!

“But now that it’s almost a year later, perhaps you can elaborate a little, hmm?”

The man exuded such nuanced self-assurance that it had never once occurred to Elizabeth before now that he would ever want to seek similar validation from her. Suddenly it was almost like he were a stranger and she was seeing him for the very first time.
And yet...of course he was still the man she’d known for most of her life.

He was still Red.

“"Yes..."” she murmured, a slow smile curving her lips. “I can elaborate.” Tilting her head slightly to the side, she studied him pensively for a moment. “Let’s start with the basics.”

“Basics are good,” he encouraged.

“You’re really handsome.”

The corner of his mouth twitched. “Am I?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “I’ve always thought so. When I was just a teenager starting to get interested in dating...and especially when I was going out with different guys here in Seattle...I always found myself comparing all of them to you. And they always came up short.”

The raw, masculine pleasure darkening his eyes made her blush, and she swiftly glanced down at her wine glass as she carefully considered her next words.

“You’re loyal. Protective. Patient. Understanding. Caring.” Memories of when he’d generously provided for her and had attentively watched over her after Forman’s assault flashed through her mind. “.....Selfless,” she whispered.

The man gazed silently at her, and she wondered if he could surmise her particular train of thought.

“You’re knowledgable about so many things, Red,” she went on after a pregnant pause. “And you’re always willing to share that knowledge with me.” She met his eyes, her own flickering with gratitude. “I really love coming to you with questions about literally everything because the conversations that follow are always so...stimulating. Enlightening. I feel like my eyes have been opened to seeing completely different facets of something I thought I’ve always understood. But those new facets make my understanding...better.” Then she paused, pursing her lips as she thought over what she’d just said. “Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense,” he confirmed softly.

Elizabeth beamed at him. “When I talk to you about my hopes and my future goals, you really listen. You take me seriously. And I can tell they’re as important to you as they are to me. And that means so much, Red.”

Wrinkling her nose in a flash of frustrated disgust, she divulged, “When I was dating guys my age, a lot of them barely heard a word I said because they were really just trying to get me into bed. They didn’t see me...they just saw a girl they wanted to nail.” Her voice grew quieter. “I didn’t let them get too physical because of that very reason.”

The fierce satisfaction gleaming in his intent gaze stilled her tongue for a moment before she slowly continued, “I was called all kinds of things because of the way I handled those guys.” Shaking her head, she gave a disappointed sigh. “‘Cock-tease’ was one of the more...charming...endearments that made its way back to my ears,” she remarked with bitter sarcasm.

Red’s nostrils flared angrily as he swallowed a low, furious snarl before it could escape past his mouth. “They called you what?” he demanded tightly, unable to hide the rage in his eyes, which she observed and acknowledged with the smallest of smiles.

“It wasn’t all of them—and it doesn’t really matter, Red,” she reassured him quickly. “I’m glad I
didn’t sleep with them.”

“So am I,” he muttered darkly, but in seeing her beseeching look, he reluctantly began to let go of his vehement resentment.

“I think even back then, I was just....” she hesitated, then slanted him a smile that was both bashful and flirtatious all at once. “....waiting for you.”

“Romantic,” he teased in a low purr.

Grinning, she hitched a bare shoulder. “I knew the guys I was dating weren’t the kind of men I really wanted.” She suddenly paused thoughtfully. “And I guess I didn’t really see them as men.” Her eyes flicked to his. “Not like you are a man.”

Red tilted his head to the side in silent query.

“I mean, they would harp on and on about their student loans and stress out about how many shifts they’d have to work to make rent and still have a social life,” she tried to explain. “They had a few goals,” to be fair, she’d give them that, “but they didn’t know what they wanted to do with their lives.”

“Not many young people do,” he pointed out gently.

“True,” she conceded. “And because of the way they were approaching life, they just seemed like...older high school guys.“ She shrugged both slender shoulders this time. “But then I would talk to you, and I found that I really loved hearing what you had to say.”

The man grinned. “And what did I say that so captivated you, hmm?”

“Well...since you’re settled and much more, well, worldly, you would always talk to me about how exciting life was rather than how terrifying it could be.” Their eyes met. “It was...refreshing, Red. And I took heart in it.” The smile she bestowed on him was bright. “I still do.”

“I’m moved you think so well of me,” he smiled back. “Truly, Lizzy.”

“I wouldn’t be here right now if I didn’t,” she returned impishly.

“Cheeky girl,” Red growled fondly.

Dimpling sweetly at him, she raised her glass and took another drink. Her exhilarated heart felt so light within her body, and she knew this dazzling, buoyant feeling had to do with everything they’d just discussed and confided in one another.

She wondered if Red felt the same.

All of this had needed to be thrown out into the open long before now. Next time, she was determined not to wait so long to say things that really needed to be said.
“I can’t believe you spent that much money on a single bottle of wine, Red!” Elizabeth exclaimed once again in snorting, slightly tipsy laughter as she leaned companionably against him.

“The price of this bottle,” the man raised it for emphasis, “isn’t nearly as horrible if it’s compared to others I’ve bought in the past!” came his dry retort as he wrapped his other arm tightly around her small waist, leading her outside toward Main Street where George was going to pick them up.

“Did you see Rob’s face when you handed him that wad of cash?” she giggled, pressing her cheek against his shoulder.

“Did you see his face when I tipped him using the price of the entire bottle?” he chuckled.
“I didn’t know a person’s eyes could bug out that much!”

“Or that a smile could be so big?”

“He was really happy, wasn’t he, Red?”

“Very.” He brought them to a halt by the curb. Considering that it was past one o’clock in the morning, the street was relatively empty of cars, but large groups of people were still milling around the sidewalks on either side of Main.

The Lounge wasn’t the only late night attraction on this side of town. There was a popular jazz club just down the way, as well as a few spas and quite a few five-star restaurants sprawled between here and there.

“That kind of money will come in handy in preparation for their newest little one,” he added, looking impatiently up and down the street for his town car.

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” Elizabeth replied dreamily. Then she lifted her head to gaze up at him. “It was really nice of you to do that. Give him all that money, I mean.”

Red shrugged a humbly dismissive shoulder, glancing once more up the street for George’s car. “He’s a good man. A family man. He deserves it.”

“Yeah,” she smiled her agreement. “I wonder what they’ll name—“

”Red! Down!” suddenly came a man’s loud, wild bellow a split-second before the sound of violent gunfire rang out, shattering the joyful beauty of the night.

Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤️

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!

Congratulations to kris_and_jen for receiving a Daily Deviation Award on DeviantArt for the illustration of Red and young Lizzy dancing!
April 30, 2007

Before Liz could blink, she found herself smothered by Red’s body as he grasped her tightly, hurling them both roughly off the sidewalk to plunge alongside a parked and vacant sedan.

She didn’t have time to scream.

As the asphalt rushed up to meet them, one of Red’s arms shot out, breaking the force of their fall just enough so they would accumulate nothing more serious than some irritating scrapes and a few deep bruises.

The second their knees jarringly hit the ground, the sound of another gun firing echoed deafeningly around them and one of the car’s windows exploded.

This time, Liz sucked in a ragged breath and did scream.

Red squeezed her closely into his chest as he hunched over her, but even his bulk couldn’t shield her entirely from the dangerous hail of shattered glass.

As the glittering shards rained down upon them, they sliced his unprotected scalp as they fell past to catch in her long hair and painfully nick her bare arms.

“Red!” she cried, her voice shrill with icy fear.

“Stay down! Stay down!” the man snarled in her ear, his vehement warning drowning out the panicked screams of the mobs of innocent pedestrians fleeing the scene.

As she hunched obediently in on herself, he unwrapped one arm from around her waist and swiftly drew his pistol from the deep pocket of his jacket.

Rocking to the balls of his feet, Red knelt over her small frame, bracketing her vulnerable body between his thighs.

It wasn’t the best protection for her, but it was certainly better than nothing!

Lifting his stony eyes, he faced the direction of the deadly threat and caught a glimpse of one of the shooters dashing just beneath the yellow street light. After steadying one hand against the tire, he quickly raised his weapon and fired twice over the hood.

“Red! I’m coming up on your six!”

And suddenly Baz was there with them, crouching down alongside the sedan. The guard’s expression was grim as he reached out and pressed his warm hand briefly and reassuringly to Liz’s bleeding arm, but his gaze was gleaming with a fierce sort of satisfaction.

“Aaron secured the store directly behind us,” he informed Red.

Liz’s eyes flicked around Red’s bulk to the boutique. Between the shadows of bolting people and speeding cars escaping the area, she could just make out the silhouette of a man—another of Red’s
guards—wedged between the door and its casing...waiting for them.

So that was why an alarm system had started wailing, filling the chaotic night with its shrieking indignation.

Both men braced themselves against the driver’s side door as Red’s gunfire was viciously returned.

“We need to move _now_, Red! I’ll cover you both.”

Red shifted slightly away from Elizabeth to swivel his body towards their new destination so he could intently eye their path.

Bitterly cold shock gathered within her, spiraling like an unpredictable tempest. As it whirled through her mind to seep into her entire body, time seemed to slow down to a sluggish crawl and she swore she could almost _feel_ their adversaries’ bullets whip forcefully past them to disappear into the night beyond.

_They’re trying to kill us!_

As the belated thought agonizingly struck her consciousness, the foreign surreality of it completely and utterly paralyzed her to rigid stillness.

_They want us dead!_

After giving a sharp nod of approval to the guard, who immediately raised his weapon and trained his gaze on the enemy, Red turned back to her.

“When I tell you to,” the man instructed tersely into the brief yet strained lull, “_run_. Go to Aaron.”

...._Run?_

She stared numbly at him, uncomprehending.

_Is all this really happening?_

“Did you hear me, Lizzy?”

_How could all this be happening?!_

“Elizabeth!”

Suddenly two fingers snapped in front of her unseeing eyes twice in quick succession.

Time surged forward, adrenaline rushing like a cold, _cold_ wildfire through her veins.

Liz started, gasping shakily as her blurred vision instantly refocused on those two fingertips swiftly moving, guiding her attention to be on level directly with his fierce, unwavering gaze.

_“We need to run.”_

His eyes bore into hers until at last she licked her dry lips and nodded, wordlessly showing him she understood.

After setting his weapon beside him, Red stooped even lower and quickly unbuckled her heels, holding her wide eyes steadily with his all the while.
“These will hinder more than help.” Once she slipped out of them, he straightened, allowing her to move into a crouched position so she could face the building they would sprint to.

Red picked up his pistol before sliding to her side. He grasped her trembling hand in his free one, squeezing it tightly. “Stay with me.”

“Okay,” she managed to rasp, that spiraling chill of heightened anxiety amassing to brutally settle along the entire length of her spine as she tensed her muscles, waiting to spring forward.

....To run for her life.

“Go!” Baz commanded.

Red immediately leapt away from the shelter of the sedan, pulling Elizabeth after him.

Together they rapidly pelted across the dark, empty street.

The woman was highly aware of everything: the way the asphalt harshly bit into her bare feet, the frantic pounding of her heart in her ears, the frigid night air filling her aching lungs, Red’s strong fingers crushing hers, and the deadly gunfire that once again resounded all around them.

Their mad dash couldn’t have lasted more than twenty seconds, but it felt like it lasted a lifetime.

And then they were charging headlong toward the broken glass door Aaron held open.

Upon glimpsing the jagged shards glinting treacherously just beyond the threshold, Red had just enough time to haphazardly sweep Elizabeth up in his arms so she wouldn’t slash her vulnerable feet to ribbons as they bolted inside.

She cried out in shock as the ground momentarily fell away from her, her fingers clenching tightly around the strong forearm smashed against her body as she was swung over the floor’s perilous coating.

Red’s heavy, leather shoes crunched the glass as they skidded on the slippery marble, but he managed to keep his balance and drop her unceremoniously back down to the tile once they were beyond the drift of sharp fragments.

Elizabeth stumbled, her battered senses reeling as she was instantly swallowed whole by the blaring siren.

“The cops will be here soon!” Aaron shouted over the disorienting din. “We have to get out of here!”

Red jerked a hand in the direction they’d just come from. “Baz is—”

“I’ll wait for him and bring up the rear,” interrupted the younger man with adamant reassurance. “The exit is at the back of the store, to the right. Goes to the parking lot. Go, Red. Go!”

Without another word, Red grabbed Elizabeth’s hand again and yanked her after him. They tore down the main aisle side-by-side and then flew out the emergency exit into the half-lit parking lot emptied of cars.

“How many?” Red hoarsely demanded of Joshua as he and three other incredibly tense and alert guards rushed towards them.

“Enough to have The Lounge surrounded,” the younger man replied grimly in his southern drawl, wiping away blood that oozed from a cut on his brow with the back of his hand before it could
trickle into his eye.

Red hissed his displeasure at the information as he turned briefly away from the guard to regard Elizabeth.

“Someone went through a Hell of a lot of trouble to bring about this little soirée tonight,” he muttered with dark dryness to his men as his intent eyes roved over her, checking her for any serious injuries.

Seeing what he was doing, she mustered enough willpower to squeeze his hand reassuringly.

The man tightened his fingers slightly over hers, relaying to her he understood, before he reluctantly released her.

“We tried to neutralize the threat once we were aware of it, Boss,” Josh continued to explain. “Me’n Aaron took out four of the Japanese bastards before you’n Liz came out of the building. Then we called in Evan, Logan, and Will.”

The man scanned the area for the threat. “They scouted and found two snipers and their guards on this side of the street. Took ‘em out.”

“Japanese?” the older man demanded with a viciously sharp snarl, green eyes snapping with dread—and fury.

Unnerved, Liz’s gaze swiftly darted to Red’s face. She had never heard him utter something in that very particular tone of voice before.

“Sakamoto’s men,” Joshua quietly confirmed his employer’s real, unvoiced question.

The skin beneath Red’s eye twitched as he silently absorbed that most unwelcome piece of information he had instinctively known was coming.

He began rapidly scanning the backs of the buildings surrounding the parking lot, searching for a suitable place for Elizabeth to hide in.

*If those foreign bastards laid their hands on her*....

His upper lip curled in a soundless, savage snarl.

He wouldn’t even fucking entertain the thought!

“Evan!” he barked, his growing need to see the young woman safe deepening his voice until it rolled over the company like thunder. “I need you to get Elizabeth the Hell out of here. Take her to that open dock over there.” The man jabbed his finger toward the deserted warehouse.

In their rush to evacuate the area, the night workers of the department store had left big cardboard boxes and wooden crates strewn around. They also hadn’t dropped the huge steel door to seal off any intruders from entering the building.

Their panicked thoughtlessness was a Goddamned blessing.

“Hide her in the warehouse,” the man directed. “Protect her. Don’t bring her out until George gets here.”

“No!” Liz balked with a fierce rasp, resisting Evan’s gentle but insistent grip on her bicep.

His hot, sweaty flesh made the many bloody cuts and scabbing nicks on her arm sting. She whipped
her head around to hiss warningly at the young man. And while he regarded her with respectful wariness, he didn’t lessen his grip.

At her adamant refusal, Red turned to sternly meet her eyes.

“I don’t want to leave you!” Her voice rose as she imperiously braced her dirty, mauled feet on the cement, her huge eyes fever-bright with defiance—and reemerging fear.

She didn’t want to sound like a hysterical woman in front of all these stoic, seasoned men, but she couldn’t help the way she felt! Her intuition wildly yowled for her not to leave Red’s side, and she couldn’t ignore that ferocity within her.

She wouldn’t!

Liz obstinately set her jaw as she glared pleadingly at Red.

“You will,” the man growled firmly at her, briefly cupping a large, understanding palm to the side of her delicate neck.

Her narrowed eyes flashed stubbornly up into his unrelenting countenance.

Holding her gaze with his, Red traced his thumb down the hollow of her throat in a rough yet heartfelt caress. “You must.” This was said in a much quieter, gravelly tone, but it was no less unyielding.

If anything, his voice had grown even harder with his vehement resolution.

Then his touch abruptly dropped away from her and he nodded curtly to Evan, indicating for him to follow out his orders.

The guard had barely tugged the furious and distraught woman four steps away from Red before Baz and Aaron burst from the emergency exit.

Both men immediately whirled around as they adeptly ran backwards, aiming their weapons at the door slamming shut.

“Seven!” Baz threw the warning over his shoulder to Red and the rest of the guards, all of whom already had their handguns cocked as they rushed toward their hunted compatriots in a spanning arc.

“Run, Liz! Run!” Evan heatedly urged, tightening his hold on her arm as they both picked up the pace to hurtle toward the safety of the dock.

Just then, the emergency door was kicked open again and seven armed Japanese men exploded from the darkness of the store into the parking lot.

The lime green neon light blazing from the Exit sign above the door’s casing betrayed the positions of the first few mercenaries to bolt forth. It was just enough light for Red and his men to use to take aim and shoot with confidence.

Two foreigners immediately went down, but the rest were swifter than their dead comrades and were able to use the cover of darkness to spread out into the lot and duck behind the closest crates and planters.

Then the loud cacophony of frenzied gunfire erupted.

Each time a weapon was discharged, the blasts lit up different areas of the parking lot, briefly
revealing the positions of men from both sides. Some of the bolder ones were even caught by the
deadly flashes of light running to change positions so they could hit their targets with greater
accuracy.

Unaware he was doing so until it was too late to halt his progress, Aaron careened in Liz’s direction
in order to escape the Japanese man who spotted him and was now pursuing him with single-minded
intensity.

The guard tried to spin around and dash in another direction away from the fleeing woman
silhouetted in the night, but his way was blocked by a sudden river of crossfire. He whipped back
around to directly face the oncoming foreigner whose almond-shaped eyes blazed with viciously hot
lust for his death.

Even though the strobing blasts were extremely disorienting to his vision, Aaron still jerked his
weapon up and took a shot at his pursuer.

He missed.

With an angry roar, the Japanese mercenary put on another burst of speed and charged straight for
the American, squeezing the trigger of his gun and firing the very second Aaron grimly fired again.

Both bullets found their marks with loud, sickening thuds.

As his adversary collapsed facedown in a boneless, dying heap, Aaron fell backwards, screaming in
agony and clutching his profusely bleeding thigh.

As the ghastly scene unfolded before her horrified eyes in flaring snippets, Elizabeth was suddenly
overcome with a powerful compulsion to aid Aaron.

Despite her gnawing terror and the imminent danger and death surrounding her on all sides as she
ran, she couldn’t just leave the man lying helplessly there in the dark as if no one cared. As if he and
his deeds didn’t matter.

She found that she vehemently did care. He and his deeds did matter.

She couldn’t abandon him to die!

With a surge of inner strength and bravery she hadn’t known she truly possessed until this very
moment, she dug her bare heels into the asphalt and attempted to skid to a halt, hissing in pain as the
rough cement tore her fragile skin.

But she knew the piercing and burning sensations that shot through her feet were just minor pangs
compared to Aaron’s severe, life-threatening suffering.

“Evan, stop!” she shrieked, blinking back tears as she forcefully yanked her arm out of the guard’s
hold. “Aaron needs help!”

Free from all restraint, Liz sprang to the wounded guard and fell to her knees protectively over him.

Jesus, there was so much blood! It gushed from the gaping hole in his right thigh to pool sickeningly
beneath him...to coat the bottom of his pistol that lay so close to his leg.

Acting on pure instinct, she reached out and snatched the weapon from the ground. Dark red blood
dripped from it as she clutched it tightly in her hand.
“Grab his feet!” Evan ordered even as he roughly lifted the man’s torso. “Shit, Aaron, I’m sorry!” he gritted over the wounded man’s pained snarls and cursing as he lurched upright.

With the slippery gun swinging precariously from two of her slim fingers, she grasped what she could of Aaron’s legs and stumbled to her bruised and bleeding feet.

Red would blister her ears if he saw her carrying the loaded and ready weapon so irresponsibly.

A shrill, almost wild laugh bubbled up in her throat at the utter absurdity of worrying about what Red would think at such a critically dire time like this!

“You—should’ve—left me,” Aaron hissed at them both, the raw anguish in his voice tearing Liz away from the border of overwrought thought and plunging her back into the stark present. “If you,” his glassy eyes fixed on her, “—die—because of—me—”

“No one’s dying today,” Evan cut in with a snarl as they rushed toward the gigantic industrial trash dumpster to their immediate right.

It wouldn’t provide nearly as much cover as the warehouse would, but even Liz knew they would never make it there without dropping Aaron, or getting shot by the enemy themselves.

The moment they laid the moaning guard back down on the ground, the woman determinedly adjusted her hold on the unfamiliar weapon. It was much too big for her small hand, but that couldn’t be helped.

And it certainly wouldn’t stop her from squeezing the trigger if she had to!

Then Elizabeth reached down with her other hand and rucked the ripped hem of her dress up her scratched and trembling legs. After bunching as much of it as she could in her sweaty palm, she leaned over and pressed the wad of scarlet lace against the flowing rush of blood.

She watched in horror as the thick, sticky warmth poured through the delicate silk to gush, unstoppable, over her fingers.

Evan cursed under his breath, quickly shrugging his arm from his light-weight shirt before transferring the weapon in his hands, removing it completely.

“Here,” he grunted, tossing the shirt in Liz’s direction.

She deftly caught it, wadding up the black cotton and pressing it against the overflowing wound.

Hearing a scuffle of boots pounding on the cement, she lifted huge, frantic eyes as another man rushed for their position. Grappling for her weapon one-handed, she shakily breathed her relief when Baz took the man down.

This wouldn’t do. She really needed both hands to hold the gun.

Aaron’s awful howl of pain echoed around them almost as loudly as the gunfire as she jammed her knee into the wound to keep the roll of material in place.

Using both blood-stained hands, she raised the heavy pistol and pointed it determinedly in the direction of the chaos.

Evan spared a brief yet intently considering glance at her, his eyes gleaming with admiration for the way she, a young civilian, was handling herself.
“If anyone comes at us...don’t hesitate,” he gravely directed as he shifted, intently focusing on the bedlam surrounding them.

Red had been acutely aware of Elizabeth the second he realized she hadn’t made it to the warehouse with Evan.

When he’d been able to with relative safety, he quickly glanced to the area of the parking lot she’d been last whenever gunfire briefly illuminated it.

He had seen her dart to one of his fallen guards, Evan hot on her heels.

Grinding his teeth, Red locked away his disappointed fury at her insubordination.

Another spark of light had revealed them dragging the wounded man in the direction of the huge metal dumpster.

Obviously they were going to take refuge behind it.

He marveled at her tenacity, and found that even though he was still so angry with her for defying his orders, he also vehemently esteemed her for her selfless show of courage.

With Baz as his dependable cover, they made their way towards her and the two guards with her, brutally taking out any hostile who dared to cross their path.

They swiftly approached her and Evan from their blind side. Even though the men tried to remain silent so as not to give themselves away to any enemy lurking nearby, the thick soles of their shoes unexpectedly crunched in loose asphalt beneath them, betraying their position.

Before Red could open his mouth to reassure her it was him, Elizabeth instantly spun around at the startling sound, her teeth bared in a silent, feral snarl.

The man felt pride surge forcefully within him as he found himself staring down the barrel of the gun she held to meet her fiercely luminous, furiously snapping eyes.

Christ, were her instinctive reflexes truly excellent!

Relief swept through the young woman, leaving her feeling fairly giddy as she immediately recognized him.

“Red!” she breathed, quickly lowering the pistol. “I almost blew your head off!”

Her hissed admonishment almost amused him.

“Glad you didn’t,” he returned dryly, eliciting a quiet snort from Baz.

The corner of her lips twitched slightly.

Unwilling to suppress his ardent desire to touch her, to connect with her, to reassure himself she was whole, he reached out, possessively brushing the backs of his fingers down her grimy, blood-smeared cheek in a swift caress.

He was very grateful the red streaked there wasn’t hers.

“How bad?” he asked Evan, his green eyes flicking from Elizabeth to Aaron, who lay pale and shaking beneath her in a suffering daze.
“Nicked femoral artery,” Evan grimly informed his employer just as Joshua rushed over to join them. “If it were completely severed, he’d be dead by now.”

Baz swore.

“He killed the bastard who did it to him,” Liz chimed in.

All men present turned their appraising eyes to her.

A hot flush suffused her cheeks, for she found it was a rather uncomfortable thing to be the immediate center of all their steadily focused intensity.

Raising her chin, she set her gaze unwaveringly on Red and spoke directly to him. “I saw it happen. He—Aaron—got him.”

“Good,” Joshua muttered darkly after a beat. “One less fucker to put down.”

Just then, two huge, black SUVs tore into the parking lot, large tires squealing on the asphalt as they both made straight for where the company was crouched alongside the industrial dumpster.

“It’s George and Ben!” Evan declared, fierce relief coloring his voice.

All the guards surrounding Liz and Aaron flew into action. As one, they and Red rose to their feet, guns fearlessly raised to protect their own.

“Logan! Will!” Joshua bellowed, calling the last two men back to the fold.

Once both SUVs jerked to a stop, the wide doors were flung open. It was only when Evan and Josh swiftly moved to heft Aaron into their arms to transfer him inside one of the cars did Liz reluctantly take the pressure off of his gaping wound.

As the two men effortlessly lifted Aaron, she jumped to her feet to stand beside Red and Baz, determinedly training the heavy pistol on the darkness just beyond them, poised and ready to shoot...if she had to.

Flaring gunfire erupted behind Will and Logan as they bolted out of the night toward the rest of their party.

Before Liz could react, Red and Baz immediately shot back at the last of the Japanese mercenaries who were attempting to bring the running guards down.

“Get in the damned car!” Baz shouted at the men at the same time Red growled at her in a harsh, strained voice, “Lizzy, go!”

Following his direction, the woman clutched the handgun tightly and swung gracelessly into the backseat of the SUV closest to her. Upon glimpsing Aaron lying down across the row of leather seats looking so pallidly ashen, she contorted her body at the very last second so she wouldn’t collapse clumsily on top of him.

Instead she landed painfully on the car’s floor with a teeth-shattering jolt, grimacing as her bruised and bloodied knees took the brunt of the fall. She barely had time to gather her bearings before someone roughly pushed her from behind with his body, unceremoniously shoving her further across the floor, his panting breath hot against the sweaty nape of her neck.

Red.
“Everyone’s inside!” Baz declared as he leapt smoothly into the front seat beside George, slamming the door tightly shut and locking the entire SUV down.

“The others?” Red demanded tightly.

“With Ben,” the guard reassured him.

“Go, George!” Red commanded brusquely.

The Englishman, who Liz now realized was so much more than just Red’s chauffeur, jammed his foot into the gas pedal.

The SUV sped into motion.

“Keep down!” Red warned in a curt rumble, his breath tickling the shell of her ear just as loud pinging noises spattered across the side of the car he and Baz were on.

“Why aren’t the bullets going through?” she gasped, cringing at the awful, deadly sound.

“This is an armored car,” came the husky explanation in her ear. “So is Ben’s.”

Within moments, both SUVs frantically exited the parking lot and peeled off into the night.
Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤
UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
April 30, 2007

_Armored car?_ Liz wondered dazedly just before she and Red were thrown against the back of the driver’s seat as George whipped the SUV sharply around a corner.

Her stuttered hiss echoed Red’s grunt of pain as his strong arms briefly tightened around her waist to secure her against him while they rode out the wild turn.

Wincing, she followed the man’s lead and stiffly righted herself on all fours after their vehicle began zooming down a straightaway once more.

Liz stared numbly down at his bloody hands braced on either side of her, watching how the lines and nicks in them blurred before her very eyes with the rumbling vibration of the armored car.

_Armored car._

Jesus. And Red had not just one, but _two_ of them?

Perhaps there were even more....

She had known for some time now the man went to great lengths to keep himself protected from...business rivals.

But keeping a fleet of _armored cars_? That took his need for self-preservation to an entirely new...and severe...level.

_But thank God for them, Liz!_ the rational and calculating part of herself admonished coldly. _If it weren’t for them, you’d probably be dead!_

The pragmatic rebuke sobered her even more. Yes, she owed her life to the bullet resistant metal...to Red...and to the guards who’d swarmed into action to rescue them both.

What business could Red possibly be in where he had an arsenal of weapons and assets at his disposal, including a small army of men to protect him—and her—against armed killers?

“Are we being followed?” Red demanded as he pushed himself away from Elizabeth to rise fluidly to his knees.

As Baz lifted his live cell phone to his ear and gruffly relayed to his employer’s question to the guards in Ben’s car speeding closely behind them, Red abruptly shrugged out of his expensive silk-lined jacket.

His hands were a blur of motion as he hurriedly folded the material in upon itself before adamantly shoving the makeshift compress against Evan’s crimson knuckles.

The guard grimly discarded the now useless, blood-soaked t-shirt he was clutching against the gaping hole in Aaron’s thigh. The sopping garment fell to the floor of the SUV with a heavy, wet slap. He hastily jammed the proffered jacket into the younger guard’s wound, using all his strength to hold it there.
Red watched the mounting horror cross Elizabeth’s features as she stared at the blood continuing to seep far too quickly through the fibers of the material to drip down in a steady stream, coating her knees and the rough, black mat beneath her.

As his gaze raked concernedly over her, the skin beneath his eye twitched with agitation upon finding Aaron’s weapon dangling loosely from her sanguine-stained hand.

She didn’t seem to notice when he reached over, carefully pulling the object, tacky with blood and sweat, free from her limp, unresisting hold before tucking the now warmed metal out of sight into his waistband.

The man’s mind agitatedly swirled with unpleasantly disjointed thoughts, wondering how he could possibly explain what happened this night to Elizabeth before he reluctantly turned his attention to Baz as the head guard’s call began to wrap up.

Liz’s sore knees squelched in the ever-expanding puddle as she shifted upright to thrust her small hands alongside Evan’s in an attempt to help him slow the rush of bleeding.

Jesus, it was so much blood.

*Too much blood!*

“No, Red,” Baz repeated the vital information back. “If those Japanese bastards had anyone else lying in wait to chase us, we managed to lose them.” The guard turned about slightly, his steely eyes connecting with Red’s. “You know this is revenge for killing Endo, don’t you?”

Red’s nostrils flared angrily as he jerked his head once, glancing pointedly at Elizabeth before his stony gaze met Baz’s again.

It was a crystal clear indication now was *not* the time to discuss the matter.

Irritated, the guard shook his head and let out a heavy sigh before turning his attention out the front window, his keen eyes scanning for danger as they sped through the night.

Red wasn’t sure if Baz just expressed his general annoyance with the evening’s events or his disapproval Elizabeth was being kept in the dark.

But he didn’t have time to dwell on it at this point.

Even though the news Baz delivered swayed in their favor, Red set his jaw refused to allow himself even a moment’s respite.

They weren’t out of the woods yet.

But now that he knew for certain they weren’t being pursued....

“George, get us to the safe house,” Red directed, expression fierce. “Baz, make sure the medical team will be waiting there.”

Only once he had Elizabeth and his men safely enclosed within his guarded territory and Aaron was being competently treated by the first-rate professionals he kept on retainer would he permit himself to feel a sliver of relief.

“*The safe house?”* Liz asked incredulously at the same time Baz repeated those exact words into the phone he once again held to his ear, directing the rest of the company to the rendezvous point.
“It’s just outside the city limit,” Red explained to her, silently acknowledging but verbally ignoring the real reason for the shock gleaming in her wide eyes.

Four years ago, right after Elizabeth declared her intention to attend college in the state of Washington, he had acquired the house and surrounding property. He had upgraded the impressive home to his particular specifications, furnishing and equipping it with all his professional and personal needs...and hers.

The sole purpose of the safe house was to be a temporary refuge to lie low in if the Cabal or other unsavory and highly dangerous people had somehow tracked her down in Washington. It was meant to be a lush watering hole, a bountiful oasis to take full advantage of until it was at last safe enough to stealthily flee the state.

Even though Red’s sources informed him Sakamoto wasn’t working directly with the Cabal, it was still extremely dangerous the yakuza boss was now aware of Elizabeth’s existence.

The vengeful crime lord couldn’t possibly know she was Katarina Rostova’s daughter and was, therefore, more valuable alive rather than dead. But he obviously knew she was intimately involved with Red himself.

That factor alone was enough for Sakamoto to slap a fucking target on her back.

Red had to discover how the yakuza boss and his Goddamned mercenaries tracked him to Seattle, a place he had been so sure he could slip away to completely undetected.

He also had to ascertain how much they uncovered about Elizabeth, for the hotel must have been under surveillance.

....But for how long? And how had his people not known?

His temper sparked and then seethed hotly through him.

Once again, his own arrogant confidence in himself and his people’s abilities undermined him.

But this time, Elizabeth’s very life was directly affected by his assured conceit.

At this point, for her safety as well as his own, he had no choice but to assume his long-standing partnership with the hotel proprietor was compromised. That meant he couldn’t take her back to the penthouse.

Neither of them could ever go back there again.

Deep regret for this hazardous situation he wrought pierced him...painfully twisting through his heart as he realized how widely events had spiraled beyond him to sweep his innocent girl up in their menacing current.

But to acknowledge such an emotion had even entered into his consciousness was dangerous, and allowing himself to really feel it was an unthinkable, selfish indulgence he certainly couldn’t capitulate to.

He would not allow his personal feelings to knock him off the sharp knife’s edge of reason he currently rode.

Not now.
Locking away the regret looming darkly within him for thrusting Lizzy into such a perilous predicament, he looked angrily from her mystified eyes and pale, blood-streaked face to stare down at Aaron.

Christ, the boy was so drained of color he looked like a fucking corpse!

Red’s nostrils flared in anxious fury. “What’s our ETA?” he barked at George.

The Englishman spared a glance at the GPS set into the dash. “Seven minutes,” came the tight reply.

“If we retain the speed we’re going,” Baz added.

“Faster, George. Or Aaron won’t make it,” Red snarled, adding the weight of his hands to Evan’s.

“He’s losing too much blood,” Evan muttered grimly.

As both men and Elizabeth pressed down even harder on the wound, Aaron sucked in a trembling, shallow breath, agony blazing in his glazed eyes before they fluttered shut, his head lolling limply to the side.

“Shit!” Evan hissed. “Aaron? Aaron!”

"His chest isn’t moving,” Elizabeth shakily observed.

“Lizzy, feel for a pulse,” Red directed steadily, but his expression was gravely concerned.

With apprehensive dread, the woman reached over and placed her slick fingers against the young guard’s neck.

His pulse was barely discernible.

“It’s really weak,” she whispered bleakly, tears filling her eyes. “Oh, God, Red....”

“But he’s alive. We’re going to get him breathing again,” came Red’s fierce reply. “Lizzy, tilt Aaron’s head back. Open his airway.”

He watched her drag her fingers through the guard’s hair and move his head as directed.

“Good. That’s it. Now when I tell you to, pinch his nose and then breathe once into his mouth. You’re going to do this every five seconds,” the man told her firmly, adjusting his grip on Aaron’s leg. “Keep one hand against his pulse. You need to tell me immediately if you don’t feel it anymore.”

His gaze bore into hers. “All right?”

His hard eyes and resolute expression bolstered her confidence...ignited the flame of mental strength she needed to see this nightmare through.

After deeply inhaling a shuddering breath, she squared her narrow shoulders nodded determinedly.

“Now.”

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut, those hot tears escaping from the corners of her eyes to trail down her cheeks as she bent her head to breathe into Aaron’s mouth.

“Good. Good girl,” Red encouraged roughly as he continued to aid Evan in keeping pressure on the wound. “Again.”
The woman sealed her lips over Aaron’s, doing her best to drive everything from her direct focus: her acute anxiety and intense fear for the dying guard, the drying blood crackling all over her as she shifted, the startling pain shooting from her abused knees up to flare along her spine, the sweaty, blood-matted hair sticking to her skin, the rumbling of the SUV beneath her as they tore down the highway, the deadly serious conversations happening between the men surrounding her...all of these distractions she tried to ignore.

Instead, she intently kept her attention fixed on Red’s instructions, on how her mouth felt over Aaron’s, on the significant timing of her rescue breath, on the pulse that was threading weaker and weaker against her fingers...until at last, she couldn’t feel it anymore.

Not even a flutter.

“Red!” she gasped sharply, ripping her lips from Aaron’s. “I can’t feel his pulse!”

“Keep your hands on the wound,” Red commanded Evan as he released the guard’s bloody leg to move closer to Elizabeth. “When I tell you,” he fiercely directed her, locking his arms and positioning his palms over Aaron’s chest, “give him two breaths.”

Using the weight of his entire upper body, Red began urgently pressing down on the guard’s chest in the rapid yet steady rhythm CPR required.

“Come on, Aaron!” he vehemently implored the guard under his breath. “Come on....”

Blood roared loudly in Elizabeth’s ears as icy adrenaline once more coursed madly through her veins in a chilling rush, fueling her on as upon Red’s command she once again sealed her mouth over the guard’s and gave him two breaths.

Her entire world centered around the vigorous compressions Red gave, the air from her lungs forcefully pushing into Aaron’s, the desperate searching for a pulse and the silent, heartfelt prayer consuming her consciousness while she did so, silently begging God to show mercy, as the two of them attempted to save the man who had helped save them.

She was so caught up in the routine she barely noticed when the SUV finally jerked to a stop, or when the doors instantly yawned open and a group of professional medics smoothly integrated themselves with the people inside the car before replacing her and Red completely.

The woman clutched wildly after the sleeve of Aaron’s shirt as he was torn from her grasp. “Wait!” she cried hoarsely.

“It’s all right, Lizzy!” Red soothed roughly, grabbing hold of her upper arm and hauling her out of the car with him. “They’re medics. Come on!”

Together, they jogged hurriedly after the gurney the medics had placed Aaron on and were quickly wheeling into the rustic mansion sprawled before them. Two of the men were still continuing the CPR method she and Red began in the car and they would keep at it until the guard’s heart began to beat again.

Fearful trepidation once again flooded her mind at the thought.

....If it would beat again.

The flurry of activity that met Liz’s eyes as she, Red, and the rest of the guards flew across the threshold astounded her. As they all came to a brief halt in the grand foyer, she stared in both fascination and awe as each medic, nurse, and doctor carried out their separate jobs to work as a
unified whole with one goal in mind: save Aaron.

“I need more light!” one of the doctors roared over the mechanical beeping and movement of at least a dozen bodies surging around him.

Liz started, her gaze immediately landing on a shaded lamp on an end table to her left. Whipping herself out of Red’s hold, she grasped the wrought-iron neck and flung the lampshade off.

Fluorescent light blazed forth.

Red took the heavy lamp from her and passed it to Baz, who then leapt into the fray to hold the glaring light over where the doctors were furiously working on the guard.

“We have a pulse!” one of the medics bellowed triumphantly as Aaron weakly heaved a gasping cough.

Elizabeth clutched at Red’s arm with both hands, her legs suddenly trembling as relief swept powerfully through her.

“He’s alive!” she cried faintly.

“He’s alive....” Red confirmed quietly, a savagely exultant smile curving his lips.

“And it’s partly due to you, Miss Eliza,” a quiet, English-accented voice rumbled on her left.

Surprised, the woman glanced over at George, who was smiling at her. “Evan told me some of what happened,” he explained.

“Oh—I—uh, I didn’t—I mean—” she stammered, blushing with pleased self-consciousness as she straightened. “Evan was the one...well, all of the men.... I mean,” she winced for her blatant lapse, “all of you,” she amended with a splutter, including the Englishman and Red in her collective.

“You have quite a selective memory there, Liz,” Evan remarked dryly, suddenly appearing next to George.

When she glanced shyly at him, he raised a brow that silently challenged, Well, don’t you? right before he gave her a teasing half-smile.

Before she knew what she was doing, she wrinkled her nose defensively at him, huffing softly.

The guard’s lips twitched even more, pleased to have gotten a rise out of her so quickly. “Is she always like this?” he inquired of Red in an amused drawl.

“Are you asking if she always has a selective memory?” Red asked mildly, his hard arm snaking around her waist to give her a supportive squeeze. “Or are you asking if she always gets huffy when she’s backed into a corner?”

Liz turned her huffy glare good-naturedly on him, and the look he bestowed on her in return was a gently knowing one.

“The answer to both is a resounding ‘yes,’” Baz snorted as he strode up to them. But like Evan’s had been, his grin was a kindly teasing one as he turned it on her. “I believe you dropped these,” he said, flourishing his forearm.

Liz’s mouth fell open and her eyes widened in shocked delight as they landed on the small, red leather clutch swinging from his sinewy wrist and her very expensive, designer pumps dangling from
his fingers.

She had mournfully thought she’d never see any of that ever again!

Wordlessly reaching out, she covetously traced her fingertips over the smooth leather of her purse and the silk straps of her heels, still not quite believing what she was seeing.

“Don’t worry,” the guard reassured into the stunned silence, “your wallet and IDs are still in this.” He jiggled the wristlet in emphasis. “I checked.”

The woman lifted grateful, wondering eyes to his laughing ones. “Wh—What—I mean—how in the world did you—”

Baz chuckled her stuttered, half-formed questions away, finding her show of utter bewilderment charming. “What room should I put them in?” he asked, gaze sliding deferentially to Red’s.

“The west wing’s suite, if you don’t mind,” came the murmured answer.

“Thank you, Baz,” Elizabeth smiled happily at him, at last having found her composure to form and say a complete thought. “Really.”

“At least now you won’t have to stand in that miserable, Godforsaken line at the DMV to get a new license,” the guard waved her gratitude aside.

She giggled.

He dipped his head and caught her eyes once again, his own gleaming with affection...and regard. “You did really good, kid,” he told her, voice deepening with his pride in her. “Really good.”

“All right, gentlemen, enough. Break it up,” a querulous, feminine voice sounded abruptly from behind the guards. “You’ve gawked at her long enough. Don’t you all have jobs to do?”

In the next instant, a diminutive, bespectacled woman with a severely stern expression boldly pushed her way through the hulking bodies of the men surrounding Red and Liz in a semicircle.

“Even though Aaron’s breathing again,” she continued with a touch of dark dryness, “the night’s far from over. You’re guards. So you should be....” her gaze raked unforgivingly over each and every one of them, “guarding.”

Evan spread his hands placatingly. After all, there were plenty of other men patrolling the grounds. “Now, Kate, be reasonable—”

Baz sucked in an exasperated breath. When Kate was in a peculiar mood, it served no good purpose to argue with her...even if the one arguing had a valid point. “No, Evan,” he muttered warningly.

But it was too late.

The woman’s shrewd attention fixed on the young man, her eyes slitting dourly.

“And you,” she interrupted Evan before he could finish defending himself and his partners, jabbing a long, bony finger at him, “wash up and put on a shirt. No one here wants to see all that.” She flicked an unimpressed hand at the muscular guard’s naked, blood-streaked torso. “Not even her,” she jutted her pointy chin in Elizabeth’s direction.

Her beady eyes then swept more intently over the younger woman, who was leaning closely against Red, before they flickered down to linger briefly on his hand, which was intimately cupped around
the curve of her hip.

“Especially not even her,” the woman murmured.

The young man’s pride—and vanity—smarted. That unpleasant pang, on top of riding out the stress of the night, was enough to make him lash out. “Or especially you, Kate?” Evan incorrigibly goaded, his eyes glinting wickedly.

The woman planted her palms on her hips, her gaze glittering strangely as she eyed him up and down.

“Mayday,” George muttered, recognizing Kate’s stony glare for what it was.

Red gave an almost imperceptible sigh.

Things ran much more...comfortably...when the guards didn’t bait the austere woman, who obviously was already on more of an edge than usual tonight.

They all were.

But if Evan didn’t curb his surging testosterone, he would inevitably bring the rest of the guards down with him.

When Kate was ticked off at one male, she tended to take out her frustration on all of them.

Liz silently watched the interchange with wide eyes.

Despite being a little unnerved herself by Kate’s domineering presence, she was impressed that even though Evan physically towered over her, the very small, older woman actually managed to appear to loom over him.

I need to learn how to do that, she thought admiringly. After all, she was petite too.

“No,” Kate finally replied forbiddingly, eyes narrowing as she exerted the effort to withhold a truly cutting retort. This moment wasn’t the time to get into it with young Evan. “Now get going, the lot of you,” she growled.

“Don’t let her rattle you,” Baz whispered to Liz as he brushed past her.

At her startled glance, he gave her a fleeting, reassuring wink over his shoulder before rounding a corner and disappearing from sight.

She stared after him, nonplussed.

That was the quickest she had seen him leave any room.

“You heard Kaplan,” Red rumbled softly to the rest, eyes landing pointedly on a defiant yet quieter Evan.

Uttering those three words in that deeply rolling, authoritative tone was all it took for the guards to automatically square their shoulders and nod respectfully at him and the two women before melting away to competently do whatever was required of them.

“You’ve had quite a night,” Kate remarked once they were gone, pursing her lips unhappily as she studied Red and Elizabeth. “Although I’m sure ‘quite’ doesn’t quite describe tonight’s events good enough for you, does it, dearie?” she asked the younger woman, her voice softening a little.
“No....not quite,” Liz agreed shyly, offering her a small smile as she lightly emphasized the same word. When Kate didn’t smile back, the younger woman nervously dragged her bottom lip through her teeth. “Elizabeth Scott,” Red gave her hip an encouraging squeeze as he smoothly broke into what would have been an awkward pause to make formal introductions, “this is Kate Kaplan.” Without thinking, Liz stuck out her hand to politely shake Kate’s....and then belatedly remembered she was covered from the tips of her fingers to the very point of her elbow in dried blood. Appalled, she stared speechlessly down the length of her arm, furling and then unfurling her tacky fingers twice before letting out a sharp breath as the events of the night began to bombard the edges of her consciousness. “Poor girl,” the woman murmured, gently pressing down on Liz’s bloodied wrist so her slim arm would once again hang loosely at her side, letting her know through the touch that under the circumstances, shaking hands wasn’t necessary. “It looks like you’ve been bathing in blood.” And it was true. Most of Elizabeth’s skin was plastered with it. She could feel her flesh pull with every movement she made. Even her long hair was coated with the thick mess. Most of her locks had slipped from their thick plait to stick to her cheeks and hang down her back in a matted, crunchy mass of snarls and tangles. She had forgotten for a little while, but Kate’s blunt observation made her self-consciously aware of how frightful she really must look. Without waiting for a response, the older woman shot a fierce, reprimanding glare at Red. “The girl should be basking in a piping hot shower, scrubbing off all that blood, washing away the horror of the night...and you have her standing around out here like she’s one of your men!” Red stiffened, his mental hackles bristling as all she implied with her barbed comment painfully struck his heart. “She’s hardly that,” he snapped coldly. The older woman hardly batted an eyelash at his surly tone, but when he felt Elizabeth flinch, he drew in a long breath through his nostrils, and with it, he reined in his temper. “But you’re right,” he told Kate steadily. “She should be basking in a piping hot shower.” He spared a gently considering glance down at Elizabeth, but the skin beneath his eye was twitching, betraying his irritation with the older woman and the conflict of his inner thoughts. “She deserves to bask in it for as long as she wants.” “I’ll see you to your rooms, then,” Kate stated, lifting her pale hands to imperiously shoo them around the corner and up the elegant, wooden staircase. “I’m sure you need to speak with me?” Her question that wasn’t really a question was dryly directed at Red. “About how you’re in need of my services in some capacity tonight?” This last was drolly asked, as if the answer was patently obvious to both her and Red. Liz glanced curiously out of the corner of her eye in Kate’s direction as they climbed, wondering what services she could possibly be talking sarcastically about.
Red noticed how markedly alert Elizabeth became and unease rippled through him.

_Goddamn it._

The muscles in his jaw tensed as he replied curtly, “Yes. I’ll need you to look Elizabeth over.”

He didn’t trust himself to shoot Kate a significant look without Lizzy noticing, but he made sure his words were edged with a stern warning: _Don’t say anything else provocative._

“I need you to make sure her wounds really are minor. Scratches, scrapes. Bruises. Nothing more.”

Kate had been in Red’s employ for a long time and was, therefore, wise enough to take the hint, but that didn’t mean she had to like taking it.

“You have an entire medical team downstairs at your disposal,” she reminded him tightly.

Red’s temper angrily chomped the bit and lunged against the reins at that.

For Christ’s sake, it was as if she _wanted_ Elizabeth to know more about what was really happening here!

He was already going to have to explain far more tonight than he ever intended. Since there wasn’t any other option open to him as far as that was concerned, he was determined to explicate in _his_ way.

No one would force him to elucidate earlier than he desired. Not even Kate Kaplan.

“And they are all busy with Aaron,” he returned, tone unyielding. “Like you said earlier, Kate, he may be breathing again, and he’ll live, but the night is far from over. Especially for him.”

The woman pressed her lips into a hard, thin line and didn’t deign to respond.

Even though Liz didn’t understand all the reasons for them, she was astute enough to be aware there were unspoken and perhaps complicated motives fueling the animosity flowing between Red and Kate Kaplan.

And it was making her uncomfortable.

If the woman’s services weren’t medical in nature, then what did she do for Red, exactly?

But Elizabeth doubted he would have just anyone check her for injuries. It was apparent Kate was unfazed by blood and knew how to keep her cool in a crisis.

Surely she had an official degree or some kind of medical background?

The more Liz considered, the more she was certain Kate possessed at least one of those.

Did the other woman think it beneath her station to check Liz for minor injuries? All the men downstairs and even Red awarded her genuine respect.

Was she some kind of specialist?

Liz certainly didn’t want to be an inconvenience and get off on the wrong foot with someone clearly so important to Red.

“Most of all this—this blood isn’t mine, Ms. Kaplan,” Liz ventured to mention in an effort to ease the unnerving tension. “You don’t need to, uh...look me over. I’m not hurt like Aaron was hurt. ....Is
hurt.”

“Mr.”

“What?” Baffled, she threw a confused glance over at the woman.

“If you’re going to put a title in front of my last name, it’s Mr.,” Kate informed her in clipped tones once they reached the landing at the top of the stairs.

Wondering if she were being teased in some way, Liz darted questioning eyes at Red.

When he returned her gaze very seriously, she knew for certain Kate Kaplan wasn’t joking.

“Kate, Kaplan, or Mr. Kaplan,” the woman shrugged. “Doesn’t make much of a difference to me. I answer to any of them.”

“Oh. I...um, okay,” Liz slowly replied, wincing at how awkwardly inept she sounded.

She desperately wanted to ask why, but due to Kate’s curt tone and shuttered expression, it wasn’t hard to perceive the story behind the woman’s reasoning wasn’t relayed easily, or often.

“Your room is this way, dearie,” Kate brusquely informed her, impatiently motioning for her to follow down the hallway to the east wing of the large house.

“Oh. I thought....” Elizabeth trailed off as she took a hesitant step forward, glancing uncertainly over at Red.

“Actually, Kate,” the man asserted, his gravelly tone almost low enough to be a growl, “Elizabeth will be staying with me tonight.”

Kate stilled and a beat of strained silence descended heavily over the three of them.

A ruddy flush of embarrassed confusion hotly colored Elizabeth’s cheeks as she looked from Kate’s pinched face to Red’s stoic countenance.

Mere seconds before she was certain one of them would peel back their lips from their teeth and snarl menacingly at the other, the older woman grudgingly inclined her head. “Of course,” she replied stiffly.

Without another word, Red placed a warm hand possessively to the small of Elizabeth’s back and guided her down to the end of the west wing, where his bedroom was.

As Kate trailed behind them, Liz was very conscious of her intent stare burning holes into their spines.

Or perhaps it was only boring a single hole through Red’s hand, which was gently placed just above the curve of her ass.

And it made Liz wonder...why would this woman show such blatant resistance to the notion of she and Red sharing the same room?

The young woman frowned, feeling the prickle of annoyed perplexity.

It’s really none of her business, anyway!

But she didn’t have time to dwell on that particular train of thought.
The distasteful emotion faded to the back of her mind as soon as Red opened the heavy double doors and ushered her over the threshold into the bedroom.

Once Elizabeth came to the middle of the spacious room, she stopped walking and stared in appreciative wonder around her.

The suite was a favorable blend of modern luxury and rustic charm. Huge, shining windows surrounded half the entire room and rose high above their heads to kiss the bottom edges of the impressive, vaulted ceiling.

Small lights strategically placed around the creamy plaster above highlighted the room’s boundaries and warmed the room in an inviting, golden haze.

Liz’s awed gaze followed those boundaries from right to left.

Directly in front of the first set of spectacular windows was a lamp made of woven stag antlers glowing on a small wooden table between two overstuffed armchairs. Matching, hand-embroidered pillows were plumped cozily on top of the suede cushions.

Just beyond the sitting area was a wide fireplace carved deeply into long hunks of dark brown and amber-colored rocks.

Above the flames that were already cheerfully dancing and leaping along the dry logs inside, a mantle proudly displayed one large painting of majestic, purple mountains cradling a lush, gilt valley.

Below at knee level, a thick slab of smooth rock stretched from one end of the fireplace to the other. Liz was fairly certain at least four adults could sit comfortably there to enjoy the emanating warmth.

Absolute darkness outside met her eyes next as they continued to move around the room, and it made Liz think there was probably a balcony jutting out from those windows, which upon closer inspection, were actually double doors.

Wistfully she eyed the doorway to the suite’s bathroom, which was to the left of the balcony. Knowing Red’s penchant for fine amenities, she was certain it contained every luxury her weary body desperately desired.

But her dreamy wistfulness turned to fierce longing when her gaze finally landed on the sumptuous featherbed. How she wanted to throw herself with abandon into that mountain of pillows and curl up on that plush, down comforter with its sable fur blanket and shut the rest of the world out!

But she had to shower first.

Red didn’t miss where she was looking, or the yearning expression on her face as she silently stared. The exhaustion would hit her sooner rather than later, he knew, and it was with empathetic compassion he rubbed his palm in slow circles over the small of her back.

“Go on, Lizzy,” he encouraged softly. “Shower for as long as you want. Kate will check you over when you’re done.”

A frown puckered her brow when she turned her troubled blue eyes on him. “But I’m not—”

“I know,” he soothed. “You say you’re not hurt. Not like Aaron.” His gaze tenderly traced her face. “But besides these...cuts,” concern crossed his features as he indicated her scratched arms, “and the ones on your legs...and your poor feet....you could still have wounds beneath your skin you aren’t
entirely aware of yet.”

His eyes flicked seriously to hers. “The adrenaline currently keeping you upright is blocking your pain receptors.”

She nodded slowly, understanding the logic of what he was saying.

“You may start to feel things when you’re showering.” And she most likely would even if it would be nothing more serious than the painful burning of hot water sluicing over fresh gashes and welts. “I think we’ll both sleep easier once she checks you.”

There was a finality to his tone Elizabeth knew she couldn’t argue with, so she nodded her consent. The man did have a good point, after all. “Will you help me with my dress?” she asked quietly, plucking at the ripped, blood-crusted lace sticking to her figure.

“I was actually about to offer to do that,” Red nodded, ignoring Kate’s rigid silence and hard stare as he lead Lizzy toward the bathroom. “I’ll be with you in a few minutes, Kate,” he called over his shoulder as they rounded the corner and were out of sight.

The same warm color scheme and stonework they just left behind continued into the bathroom as well, which was as large and as rustically luxurious as the suite.

“There’s a fireplace!” the woman softly exclaimed in surprise, pointing ahead of them. The flickering embers cast glowing shadows along the walls and tile beneath their feet, adding a cozy and even romantic aura to the room.

Red smiled, glad to see genuine delight sparkling in her eyes. “You can’t properly live in a cabin in the woods without having a fireplace in your bathroom.”

“A cabin in the woods?” Elizabeth snorted dryly as they came to stand in front of the long mirror above the sink, the reflection of her eyes flicking amusedly to his.

This mansion was hardly a cabin!

Then her expression grew curious. “Is that where we are? In the woods?”

“A patch of it, at least,” the man nodded. “We’re on Mercer Island.”

*Mercer Island!*

Considering the beauty and size of this place...it made sense.

“And we weren’t followed?” she whispered, bracing her hands on the smooth stone counter.

“No, Elizabeth,” the man quietly answered, certainty lending strength to his voice. “We weren’t followed.”

The woman released his eyes and bowed her head for a moment, relieved beyond what she was able to express with words.

Suddenly she felt Red’s hands in her hair and she lifted her face to the mirror once again.

“I see glass,” he muttered, fingertips digging into one of the tangled mats and withdrawing a chunk the size of her thumbnail, its sharp edges gleaming in the firelight as he set it on the counter.

Liz watched his brow crease as he stared intently at the back of her head.
“There’s more tucked in there. Don’t move...I’ll get them out,” the man assured her. “The last thing we need is for you to slice your fingers to pieces while you’re trying to wash your hair.”

“Thanks, Red,” she murmured, eyes flickering away from his to stare at her own reflection, trying not to remember how all that glass had become caught there in the first place.

Wide, bloodshot eyes set in a wan, blood-smeared face gazed numbly back at her. She was beginning to feel the exhaustion she saw in those eyes she almost didn’t recognize as her own.

Liz idly wondered if she’d even make it to the shower without curling bonelessly up in front of that nearby fireplace and drifting off to sleep.

Her fingers gripped the edge of the counter harder and she set her jaw stubbornly.

But she had to make it. No one else who’d survived the harrowing night was sleeping right now.

And perhaps once the hot water ran down her body, and she began scrubbing away all the blood, she would get a second wind...of sorts.

“You’ll feel better after you shower,” came Red’s low voice, as if he’d read her thoughts and was attempting to reassure her.

Bemused, she gazed at his reflection. “I still don’t know how you do that.”

“Do what, honey?” he inquired gently, pulling a few more pieces of glass from her snarled tresses.

“Read my mind.”

Liz observed a half-smile twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Does it bother you?” he wanted to know, carding his fingers carefully through her dark mane to check for any more shards while at the same time gingerly untangling any crusted mats he came upon.

“No,” she sighed drowsily, eyes slowly fluttering closed as he continued to scrutinize and stroke her long hair, allowing herself this brief time to find enjoyment in his soothing touch.

“There may still be some slivers hiding, so be careful when you’re washing your hair,” his deep voice eventually broke through the misty cloud of tranquil pleasure she was floating on as his palms took hold of her shoulders.

Her eyes snapped open, and she found herself disoriented and blinking at him in the mirror. How long had they been standing here like this?

“You were beginning to sway on your feet,” he murmured. “Did you hear what I said?”

She nodded. “I’ll be careful.” Then she brought a hand to her mouth, stifling a yawn before finishing, “....Glass.”

“Right.” He gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Let’s get your dress off, hmm?”

Once she obediently turned around to face him, he deftly plucked her shoulder straps loose. Then he stepped closer and reached down to gather the scarlet material in his hands.

Even though the lace was ruined, he pulled the gossamer silk up her body with care, his jaw tightening as he observed just how terrible her feet and legs really looked.
It seemed as though Elizabeth scorched her feet wading through a sea of hot charcoal, they were so chafed and bruised and blackened from sprinting on asphalt.

His keen eyes picked out how the paint on her toenails was scratched and chipped, and how the tips of those nails were jagged from breaking when she had crouched and run.

He also observed how bits of fine grit and splotches of oil mingled with dried blood from the many scrapes arcing from the bottoms of her feet to the narrow tops.

The skin beneath his eye quivered in both displeasure and sympathy, for he knew how much it would sting when those scabs reopened as she scrubbed her raw feet clean with soap and warm water.

The grimy soot and dirty oil from the streets faded as his gaze traveled up her bare legs. There were a few scratches and bruises marring her calves and shins, but the worst of those injuries accumulated on her swollen knees. They were not only bloodied from deep, serrated gashes, but they were also mottled purple and blue from the abuse of her falling down on them repeatedly.

Regretful anger and pity swirled within him at the truly awful sight.

His poor, sweet girl.

Exhaling slowly through his mouth, Red finally pulled the dress over her head and discarded it behind her on the counter.

Even though it was stained from Aaron’s blood seeping through her gown, somehow her silk lingerie remained whole and intact. But even if both pieces were soaked in the best solvents, he doubted the marks would come out of the expensive, delicate material.

It was a real shame, for it was a beautiful set.

It was obvious Elizabeth had been anticipating an intimate evening and chose this particular, skimpy style to flirtatiously entice him. She knew he loved it when she wore sultry lingerie that exposed as much as it concealed.

How she enjoyed teasing him!

And how he thoroughly enjoyed it with she did.

A hungry yet self-deprecating smile ghosted over his lips, for despite everything, seeing her lithe body clad in such a tantalizing way was stirring his blood.

Even as Red mentally chastised his libido, he couldn’t help but reach out and run an admiring finger over the sweetheart edge of her strapless bra.

“Given the night you’ve had...you’re quite stunning, Lizzy,” he murmured.

She gave a soft laugh, sweeping a hand dramatically down her side. “At least you get to see me in it.”

Even if it wasn’t how I wanted you to see me in it.

The words remained unspoken, but Red could feel them hanging in air between them, vibrating with regret.

Like she did, he also very much wished he were undressing her for a completely different
reason...one much more pleasurable for the both of them.

But he wasn’t.

In an attempt to lighten the weighty moment, he quietly jested, “So, this was a rather memorable birthday, hmm?”

Intuiting the reason behind the effort he was making and deciding to play along, Elizabeth snorted delicately. “One of the most!”

“I haven’t forgotten about giving you your present, you know,” he mentioned as he reached around her with both hands and smoothly unclasped the bra, baring her pale breasts to the warm, fire-lit air.

Perhaps he was grasping for a sense of normalcy, but it was suddenly very important to him for her to know that.

Elizabeth stared at him, flabbergasted. “I don’t care about that!” she breathed fiercely, then flushed a bright red. “I mean,” she stumbled over her thoughts, her words clumsily following, “I don’t expect—after everything that happened tonight, I wouldn’t even dream of asking—or, expecting—Jesus!” she hissed, wincing in embarrassed frustration as she stamped her foot. “I’m not being very clear!”

Her upset, sapphire eyes begged him to understand what she meant.

And he did.

She was both intensely relieved and elated to be alive. And though they had been celebrating her birthday earlier, she was under the impression wanting, or expecting, or even accepting, a material gift after surviving such a harrowing incident was somehow...socially indecent.

But it wasn’t.

Life moved along. He was determined to see her move along with it...and guiltlessly receive his gift.

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” he reassured softly, placing the lingerie on top of her dress. “I know what you’re trying to say.”

Relief cascaded over her face.

“Although,” he continued gravely, holding up a finger to ward off any protest, “I still plan on giving it to you as soon as I can. What happened tonight doesn’t change the fact that your twenty-second birthday is being celebrated.” He then brushed that finger down her cheek. “Nor should it.”

She gave him a small smile even as her eyes flicked uncertainly away from his. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Red gazed tenderly down at her, the jumping fire throwing dappled light over her petite figure. The glittering of her belly ring captured his attention, drawing his eyes further downward.

The pale, unmarred skin of her stomach and breasts was a stark contrast to the rest of her, which was so bruised and crimson-stained.

As he stared, the deep regret he had shoved to the recesses of his consciousness earlier in the SUV reared ferociously up from the darkness to once again painfully squeeze his heart.

All of her skin should have looked pure and glowing and unviolated.
Elizabeth shifted, hand clasping tightly around her other elbow. The self-conscious movement pushed her breasts together, her rosy nipples tightening under his lingering stare.

Desire seared like a tongue of flame through his veins at the sight, and his cock gave a heavy twitch within his gray slacks in reaction to it.

As their eyes met, the man ground his molars together, infuriated with his apparent lack of control...for this wasn’t the liquid warmth following his earlier admiration of her beauty.

This was more.

And it was much more shockingly intense than his body’s natural reaction when her naked flesh was on display in front of him.

Red knew exactly what this was. He had experienced it countless times before after escaping dire situations relatively unscathed and his life fully intact.

This was...heat.

Lust.

And what better way to revel in life than by releasing from himself his frayed temper, all his feelings of dread, anxiety, and stress, and succumbing instead to primal instincts that made him sensually engage with another?

That intimately submerged him in physical awareness?

That forced him to feel every muscle contract and expand, every bead of sweat trail down his skin, every groaning breath inhaled and exhaled, and every single tantalizing sensation of his body pressing and rubbing against a lover’s, of his cock sliding deeply in and out of her?

Many was the night when he had basked in his renewed life by eagerly seeking physical satiation between a willing woman’s sleek thighs.

But this was Elizabeth standing before him, not a causal acquaintance, or an escort.

Allowing himself to indulge his rutting sexuality in any way tonight was far from permissible.

That wasn’t to say the powerful, passionate undertow of his emotional feelings for the woman weren’t also fueling this keenly ardent hunger he felt.

They were.

But even still....

Clearing his throat, he looked away from her guileless face while savagely suppressing his need.

“I’m keeping you....” he apologized with his tone, although he couldn’t keep the gruffness from it.

Red felt rather than saw the quizzical look she gave him, but he ignored it. He had to.

He attempted to gentle his voice. “Clean up.” Moving away, he gestured to the spacious shower. “Whenever you’re ready, Kate will take care of you.”

And with that promise, he turned from her before she could reply and swiftly left the bathroom.
Once he shut the heavy door behind him with a quiet click, he leaned back against it and listened for the shower to turn on.

He didn’t have to wait long.

Mere seconds later, he heard water sliding through the copper pipes to sluice insistently down Lizzy’s body and wash away all the grime and blood of the night.

His eyes briefly slipped closed as he wrestled with his lingering desire for her while at the same time remembering how she looked standing there, wounded in body, with exhaustion and confusion gleaming in her blue eyes.

With a deep sigh, the man rubbed his hand wearily across his brow.

She’d been too tired to ask him any questions, and the physical pain that would hit her tonight would divert her attention for a while...but they were coming.

He needed to be ready for them.

Impatient rustling to his right recalled him to the present, and his eyes flickered open.

Red had momentarily forgotten Kate was still in the bedroom.

“Once you’re through helping Elizabeth, I need you to clean up the penthouse,” he told her without preamble, pushing off from the door. “Remove all traces of her. Of me. Bring all our clothes and personal items back here. Take Baz with you. He can choose his men, but I want more than six with you.”

The woman pursed her lips unhappily. “So many?”

“The hotel had to have been under Japanese surveillance,” he shared his suspicion. “Maybe it still is. Be on your guard, Kate,” he gravely warned.

At her curt nod, the man briskly continued, “Once the penthouse is cleared, and you lose any tail trying to follow you, I need you and the men to go to Elizabeth’s apartment. Survey it. Be certain there isn’t anyone suspicious lurking around. If all’s clear, let yourself inside—”

“Have a spare key?” she interrupted dryly.

Red dug it out of the waistcoat’s inner pocket and handed it to her, speaking on as if he didn’t see her sharp look of askance, “—and get Bronn, her laptop, charger, and her textbooks.”

Kate pocketed the key, visibly blanching. “That dog will tear my throat out the second I walk through the door!” she acerbically informed him.

“But he won’t tear out Baz’s,” he replied drolly, passing her to let himself inside the large, walk-in closet. “They know and like each other,” he explained, eyeing the feminine contents folded neatly on one of the shelves, “so let Baz go into the apartment first.”

“Do you plan for her to stay here long?” Kate asked once he exited carrying a tiny pair of women’s pajama shorts and a pretty modal camisole the color of the sea on a cloudy day.

“For a while,” came his vague answer. In all honesty, he wasn’t certain when Lizzy would be able to go home.

Red could feel the woman’s displeased eyes fixing steadily on him, and his nostrils flared in
annoyance as he put the plush mattress between them.

He’d had a Hell of a night. Like everyone else beneath this roof, his frayed nerves were hovering along the border between exhaustion and anger. But as the minutes he spent with Kate and her unsubtle, disapproving silences and sidelong glances ticked by, that margin was shrinking rapidly.

Now his irritation and his weariness were melding together, creating a mood that was altogether foul.

“Would you rather I leave her to the Japanese?” he finally growled into the strained silence as he lay the pajamas out on the silken bedspread.

“Don’t be daft,” Kate scolded, vexed. “That comment was beneath you. Just like your behavior with that girl.”

Red went very still.

There was a sudden roaring in his ears, and it became louder and louder with every pounding second that passed. It was as if a howling, glacial wind was blasting through the caverns of his heart, his mind, instantly dousing all warmth and heat as it spiraled wide to encompass all.

The feral darkness of his soul threw back its jaws and ululated back, its voice joining with the howling maelstrom as it lunged, throwing itself with predatory grace into the eye of the storm.

Cold, cold fury radiated from him as he finally lifted his chilling gaze to meet hers.

“I beg your pardon?” he crooned too softly.

A compulsive shiver ran through Kate.

So this was what it was like when her employer truly lost his temper.

She’d seen him angry before. How could she not have, considering all the years she’d worked for him? But that anger had been the fiery, passionate kind...the kind one should definitely be wary of, but that only scratched the surface of deeper, darker emotions.

This was more.

Worse.

He loomed before her, suddenly becoming the enthralling yet menacing male he was when he confronted those who opposed him.

The rigid, imposing way he held himself with his cold, cold, calculating stare transfixing her reminded her vividly of a snarling wolf about to spring forth, or a lethal viper about to strike.

And she realized then, despite their decades of history and loyalty to one another, he would not hesitate even a second to violently tear her down if he perceived her as a threat in any way to Elizabeth.

It was a frighteningly sobering thought.

Even though it took more courage than she wanted to admit to herself, Kate defiantly stood her ground against the onslaught of his glacial rage.

She hadn’t meant to state the thoughts she’d long been harboring so bluntly—and she certainly hadn’t meant to provoke his temper—but the words were now released into the world and she
couldn’t take them back.

However, as she looked into his blazing eyes, she knew even if she could, she wouldn’t do it.

The sentiment had needed to be said.

The woman fearlessly lifted her chin. “You heard me.”

“You overstep yourself, Kate,” he informed her tersely, his words as hard and as sharp as his icy countenance.

“No one else in this place will where the girl is concerned, so I must.” Bracing herself against his unnerving fury, she slowly shook her head reprovingly. “Really, Raymond. You’ve carried this affair on long enough. Tonight’s events rather proved that, didn’t they?”

His green eyes glittered dangerously. “With all those Goddamned Japanese gangsters running amuck on Washington soil, hunting us, she needs me now more than she ever has.”

“She hasn’t ever needed you,” the woman countered harshly, broadening the scope of their topic. “Your resources? Yes. Your protection? Yes. But not you. You never should have gotten involved with her.” Disgust twisted her features. “Especially considering her parentage.”

“Her lineage is irrelevant.”

Kate stared at him, utterly mystified by his bored and dismissively contemptuous tone of voice. “Irrelevant?” she demanded incredulously. “It is hardly that!”

“It is irrelevant,” he repeated forbiddingly. “She never saw me as a father figure, Kate.”

She considered him for a moment before conceding, “Maybe not.” Then her expression became shrewdly penetrating. “But perhaps, for a time, she was your replacement for Lilah?”

The man actually flinched, familiar anguish slashing his heart. He hadn’t expected the name of his murdered daughter...his innocent, beloved girl...to fall from her lips.

His eyes half-closed of their own volition as he regathered control over himself, slipping safely beneath the roiling frost of his anger.

“If Lizzy ever was,” he painfully ground out, for that was as far as he was willing to go in confirming there was some truth behind what she baldly insinuated, “the role didn’t suit her for long.” His eyes flashed with conviction. “And it certainly doesn’t suit her now!”

“She’s very young, Raymond.”

“A man can love a woman younger than himself without it being...incestuous, Kate,” he drawled caustically.

While the woman didn’t appreciate his condescension, she wasn’t cowed by his biting retort. Rather than shying away, a faint, almost triumphant smile ghosted over her lips instead. “So you love her, then?”

“Did I not just say I did?” he snarled heatedly, feeling like he unwittingly stepped into a trap he hadn’t glimpsed until now, when it was too late to do anything except stay caught and fight to the last, or chew off his own foot and flee.

He wasn’t a fucking coward.
Kate eyed him silently and severely for a pregnant span. “If you really loved her,” she said at last, “you never would have selfishly put yourself above her well-being.”

The man sucked in an outraged breath. “You dare accuse me of putting myself before her?” he hissed angrily. “After all these years? After everything I’ve done because of her, for her?

“I’m not accusing you,” she irately shot back. “One can argue against an accusation and prove themselves to be right. No,” she vehemently shook her head. “I am stating fact. You absolutely are being selfish by involving yourself with her, Raymond.”

Infuriated, he stared wordlessly at her, his flinty eyes narrowing even further.

She took advantage of his stunned silence by expanding on her point.

“You are Raymond Reddington,” her lip curled humorlessly. “The Concierge of Crime, so they say. You have earned that reputation by your own actions...and choices.”

The perspicacious woman studied him intently.

“Despite that incredibly ostentatious title and your...complicated history...you are an honorable man, in your way.” Her head tilted consideringly. “You are a man who inspires genuine loyalty and is generous to those who prove themselves worthy of your trust.”

She gestured to herself and the closed bedroom door, indicating the guards downstairs. “We who follow you...I, and those men down there...we’d walk through fire for you, Raymond. Devoutly. Without remorse. There are justifiable reasons for that.”

The howling cold within his soul abated slightly as Red gazed at her, admittedly staggered by her verbal admission of what he already instinctively knew.

It was extremely significant to hear such a declaration from her own lips, for she was essentially baring her throat to him by her own will, showing him a vulnerability rarely exposed to anyone.

“But,” she went on unsparingly, “you are dangerous. Violence surrounds you.”

Something like pity briefly flickered in her eyes, overridden by her inherent pragmatism so quickly Red wondered if he saw it at all.

“Anyone involved with you, professionally, personally....they get caught up in your dark world, whether you will it or not.”

As Kate relentlessly hurled each and every aspect of his unadorned reality at him, fury once again surged within the man, replacing his awed astonishment of her.

Christ, how he wanted to deny some of her observations!

But...he couldn’t, for she described acrid truths already well-known to him.

“I don’t know how you managed to keep her out of it for so long, but Elizabeth was finally thrown into your world tonight. As much as you tried to keep her sphere and yours separate...it was an inevitable occurrence, Raymond.”

Her expression twisted into one of rebuke.

“But even as blinded as you are by your feelings for the girl, you had to have known that!”
“I’m far from blind,” he gritted fiercely.

“You are if you thought you could keep worlds apart,” she reproachfully shook her head at the futility of his egoistic attempt. “The girl could have been murdered.” Her stern eyes unwaveringly met his again. “In fact, from what I heard in passing downstairs, she very nearly was.”

Red stayed grimly silent.

“You told me once, long ago, you didn’t want to see her tragically end up like either of her misguided parents.”

Although she and Red both knew misguided was a rather...understated term.

“I remember how you did everything in your power to isolate her from the temptations and complexities of life. Why else would you have sent her to live in that podunk town in the middle of nowhere?”

“To protect her,” the man vehemently growled in his defense.

Kate waved away his litany she knew as well as the back of her hand before he could utter another word of it.

“And yet here you are, pulling her into the world you spent eighteen years protecting her from,” she ruthlessly flung his own words back at him.

Red let out a harsh breath, his nostrils flaring as her merciless comment knifed him.

“She shouldn’t be here. And there’s really no escape for her...unless you cut her loose from the relationship now before she’s in too deep.”

“You’d have me break her heart.” Anger still burned coldly in his gaze, yet his voice was much steadier and quieter now than it had been, concealing the desperate conflict her arguments roused within him.

“Better that than be the one to kill her.”

As soon as the brutal words settled bitterly between them, both man and woman heard the water pouring from the shower shut off.

Elizabeth would be joining them soon.

Red looked away from Kate first, his fingers loosening his tie before twisting the mother-of-pearl buttons from their holes on his blood-stained waistcoat.

“Pay special attention to her knees and feet,” he muttered brusquely.

When their eyes met fleetingly again, his were deceivingly expressionless. He was making an effort to affect a composed, business-like air and act as if the emotionally charged confrontation between them hadn’t happened at all.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asked, tone carefully solicitous as he shrugged out of the ruined article of clothing. Then he rolled it and placed it in a duffle bag at the foot of the bed. “Medicine, bandages, pain-killers....”

She nodded silently, pointing to the first-aid box, two tall glasses, and a pitcher of fresh water set out on the wooden table.
“Good. That’s good,” he murmured, his vague tone betraying his preoccupied thoughts as he began untucking his dress shirt from his slacks.

“Red?” Elizabeth’s soft voice inquired from the doorway.

The man turned to see his towel-swathed girl stepping gingerly toward him. Her sapphire eyes were huge and dark in her pale face when they lifted tiredly to his.

“Hi, sweetheart,” he smiled gently, refraining from touching her...though he wanted to. “How are you feeling?”

Her brow crinkled. “My feet and knees hurt. A lot.” She paused briefly, thinking, then winced. “And my head.” Keeping one hand closed on the towel above the swell of her breasts, she brought the other up to trace her brow from temple to temple, showing him.

“Probably nothing more serious than a headache,” Red crooned reassuringly, “but Kate will check you anyway.”

Her eyes darted shyly to the other woman, who was feigning disinterest in their quiet conversation by unobtrusively busying herself with preparing the medical supplies to be used.

“I don’t have anything to wear,” Elizabeth whispered in concern, flushing nervously up at him.

“I found some pajamas,” he soothed, indicating to where they were on the bed.

“They’re my size,” she remarked in surprise after walking over to look at them, tracing an appreciative finger over each piece.

“And they’ll be soft on your sore skin.”

“They’re really soft,” she agreed, peering down at the care label printed on the inside of the tank. “Modal!” she exclaimed in quiet delight.

It was her favorite material to wear because it was as supple as softened butter and rippled smoothly over her body, like water.

“How do you have these here?” she wanted to know, glancing over at him curiously.

Red could feel Kate listening intently for his answer.

Rekindled anger flashed through him at her intrusiveness and he firmly quelled it before Elizabeth could pick up on the virulence buffeting between he and the older woman.

He forced a small smile past his stiff lips. “Some time ago, I bought them, and a few other things I know you like, and had them delivered to this house...in case I ever brought you here.”

“....Oh.” Her dissatisfied expression was puzzled, revealing to him she knew there had to be more to the story.

And there was, but now was not the time to tell it with Kate all ears nearby.

“If you’ll excuse us for a minute, Kate....” he all but commanded, “Elizabeth needs to change.”

The woman shot him a suspiciously neutral look as she glided past them both on her way to the bathroom. “I’ll retrieve her dress.”
“Thank you,” he murmured rigidly, turning his attention to taking off his blood-crusted tie and unbuttoning the rest of his stained shirt.

Once Kate was out of the room, Lizzy dropped her towel to the floor and carefully pulled on the oatmeal-colored shorts, settling them low on her hips, before shimmying into the delicate, stormy-blue camisole.

“You know I love red on you,” he complimented softly when she was done dressing herself, “but you look just as beautiful in blue.”

When their eyes met, he gave her a genuinely admiring smile.

The woman blushed her pleasure. “Even with me looking like this?” she asked, half in disbelief as she gestured to all the cuts, bruises, and welts tarnishing her body.

Red nodded, shedding his dress shirt as he came closer. “Those don’t change the fact that the color of this top,” he traced a fingertip down one of the thin straps curving over her shoulder, “brings out the lovely shade of your eyes.”

His hand then cupped her warm cheek, thumb lightly stroking her beneath her chin. “Ah, don’t hide them from me now....” he chided in a gravelly whisper. “Give me your eyes, Lizzy.”

When those sapphire depths flickered to his, he gave her a slow smile, his thumb lightly passing over her lips as if preparing her for his kiss. “There’s a girl....”

“I put Elizabeth’s clothing inside the duffle,” Kate Kaplan’s voice jarringly broke into the tender moment between them. “Make sure you put the rest of yours in later before I pick this up tomorrow.”

Red didn’t deign to reply.

After letting out a short, regretful breath for the opportunity lost, he dropped a meaningful kiss to the top of Lizzy’s dark head instead.

The warmth in his eyes faded as he reluctantly moved away, releasing her into Kate’s competent care.

“I won’t be long,” he promised Elizabeth over his shoulder before snatching her damp towel from the floor and vanishing through the doorway.

“Well, come here then, dearie,” Kate directed, waving her over to where the round table stood between the two suede armchairs. “Sit down. Let’s have a look at you in the lamplight.”

And so Liz obediently came closer and perched on the huge cushion, hands clasping apprehensively together as she submitted herself to the small, dour woman’s proficient ministrations.

“I’m going to touch your head some,” Kate warned her gruffly. “Make sure you’re not suffering from anything worse than a headache.”

“Ohay,” Liz whispered, feeling the woman’s fingers slip beneath her hair to rub and probe.

Despite Kate’s reserved attitude and crisp way of speaking, her touch was surprisingly gentle, and the younger woman found herself a little more at ease by the time the examination was over.

“It’s as I thought,” Kate declared smugly, pulling away to pour water into the glasses. “No injury. You’re not allergic to ibuprofen, are you?”
At Liz’s blank look and hesitant confirmation, the woman sourly pursed her lips.

“You really ought to know what you’re allergic to, Elizabeth,” she admonished crossly.

Liz flushed a deep red, embarrassed.

Kate jerked her head to the side. “No matter. I’m sure Raymond would’ve mentioned it if you were. Here,” she handed Elizabeth two pills and one of the glasses of water. “Take these for your headache,” she instructed. “It’ll help with the minor aches and pains as well.”

“Raymond?” the younger woman inquired after she finished swallowing.

Kate glanced at her oddly. “Red,” she clarified slowly.

“Oh!” Liz’s cheeks colored even more. “Of course,” she rushed to show Kate she wasn’t a complete idiot. “I just...I haven’t heard him called that in...” her voice trailed off as she thought back on all the years she’d known him. “God, in years.”

She had maybe heard Sam call Red “Raymond” once or twice, over the phone, when she’d been about ten or so. She remembered those occasions because she had thought it so strange at the time...her adoptive father calling her favorite person “Raymond” when his name was clearly Red.

So it had been how her young mind worked.

“Ah,” Kate murmured stiffly after an uncomfortable beat. “Well, he doesn’t go by Raymond often. He doesn’t like it.”

“Then why do you call him that?” Liz curiously wanted to know before she could stop herself. “The guys call him Red.”

“But I’m not one of the guys, am I?” the older woman returned sardonically.

“No,” Liz hedged, ruddy heat once again flooding her face as she realized Kate wasn’t teasing her in a friendly way. There was a hard edge to her voice and expression.

Even though this woman was important to Red, Liz knew she was, too. She felt she needed to show Kate that even though she was much younger, and didn’t know all the ins and outs of the goings-on here, she wasn’t one to be walked on.

So Elizabeth lifted her chin and boldly met her grave stare. “But I’m not one of them either.”

To her surprise, a flicker of a tart smile ghosted over the older woman’s mouth.

“Touché, dearie.”

Unsure of how to respond to that, Liz frowned at her before glancing uneasily down at her swollen knees.

“Go ahead and prop your ankles on top of the wooden footstool there so your feet dangle off the edge,” Kate’s strict orders knifed through the uneasy silence. “I’m going to cleanse the cuts on them and work my way up to your knees.”

Slowly Elizabeth did as instructed, then grimaced, hissing sharply as Kate poured disinfectant over the deep gashes on her heels.

“I have to do it this way,” the woman muttered, and Liz instinctively knew it was as close to an
apology as she was going to receive.

“It’s okay,” she forced a weak smile. “It doesn’t feel any worse than it did when I was in the shower.”

Both women fell silent as Kate worked briskly and adeptly to clean every scratch, gouge, and scrape. While the feeling between them wasn’t entirely comfortable, it wasn’t quite uncomfortable either.

Liz supposed it was more of a wary stillness, since each of them was still getting a feel for the other.

After a few more minutes passed them by, the younger of the two cleared her throat. “So....”

Kate glanced up, thin brow arching in query.

“Are you a doctor or something?” Liz indicated to her wounds and then the first-aid kit. “You really know what you’re doing.”

“A doctor or something?” the woman repeated, almost as if the description amused her. “I suppose you could say that.”

“So...you don’t have a credential?”

“I’m perfectly qualified to be looking after you, Elizabeth,” came the sharply indignant retort.

“Oh, no!” Liz shook her head quickly. “No, that’s not what I’m getting at. I’m just....”

The same eyebrow rose again. “You’re just....?”

“....Just trying to make conversation,” she mumbled awkwardly, wrinkling her nose.

“You’ve had a hellish night, dearie.” Kate’s tone seemed just shy of commiserating as she continued to clean the last of the deep scrapes on Liz’s left knee. “You’re in pain, not to mention exhausted, so don’t feel obligated to try conversing on my account.”

Satisfied with her work, she threw away the last of the bloodied cotton swabs into the trash bag next to her with a snap of her wrist.

“I prefer silence, anyway.”

“Then you’re hanging around the wrong kind of people,” Liz joked.

At Kate’s blank look, she offered her a careful smile. “You know, since Baz, the guys, especially Red...well, they all like to talk. A lot.”

“That they do,” the woman snorted dryly.

Encouraged by her show of amusement, even if it was sarcastic, Liz grinned up at her. “You’ve known Red a long time, huh?”

Kate eyed her consideringly. “Yes.”

“I bet you know more about him than I do!”

“I suppose you could say I know where the bodies are buried,” the woman agreed wryly, her unsmiling gaze gleaming.
Liz’s laugh faltered a little at the metaphor, but before she could think of anything to say in response, Kate swiftly rose to her feet.

“Putting gauze and tape on your wounds won’t be necessary,” she explained, changing the topic so abruptly it bordered on being rude. “When you’re ready to go to sleep, the large, square Band-Aids I’ve left out on the table here will do well enough. Have Raymond help you put Neosporin on before you lay them over the deeper scrapes on your knees and feet.”

The woman picked up the plastic bag of trash and deftly tied it. “While I examined you, I didn’t observe any injuries worse than what you have already. But if you feel any twinges tomorrow, especially in your knees, let me know immediately.”

“Oh. Uh, sure.... Okay.” The younger woman rose gingerly to her sore feet, watching as Kate made for the bedroom door. “You’re leaving?”

Kate paused after opening it, glancing impatiently over her shoulder. “Unless you needed anything else?”

Liz slowly shook her head. “No, I just....”

The woman’s expression was almost kind. “You just....?”

“I just wanted to say thank you.” She gave her a lopsided smile accompanied by a helpless sort of shrug. “So...thank you, Kate.”

The woman regarded her severely for a moment longer. “Try to get at least some sleep tonight,” came her stern response before she swept from the room.

Elizabeth was admittedly too tired to contemplate the strange advice or odd inflection in Kate’s tone when she’d said *some sleep.* What had the woman meant? Of course Liz would get some sleep tonight! And probably even more than just *some.*

As she stood there, alone in the middle of the grand master suite, it suddenly occurred to her there seemed to be more room to turn around in, and quite a bit more air breathe.

Kate Kaplan exuded such a presence that she actually made the huge room seem significantly smaller while she was in it!

After heaving a deep, relieved sigh, Liz wandered over to the king-sized bed, fingers unconsciously reaching out to slide across the soft pelt draped over the bottom corner.

As she gazed longingly down at the inviting sight of feather blankets and pillows, she knew she’d be asleep within moments if she allowed herself to nestle into them. And while her body and mind longed to shut down, her heart ached for Red.

Determinedly shaking herself from the tempting thoughts of slumber, she turned her attention to the nightstand. Her eyes traveled over the glowing ceramic lamp and the well-worn book of Shakespearean poetry set alongside it.

On a whim, she lifted it and tucked it alongside her hip while her other hand drifted down to curiously open the top drawer.

She peeked inside, her sharp gaze taking in all the various weapons and random items she’d expect
to see in any drawer Red slept beside.

Then a thoughtful smile, full of amusement and serious consideration, curved her mouth as her eyes landed on a stack of one particular item he hadn’t kept stocked anywhere at the penthouse.

Folding the corner of her lower lip thoughtfully between her teeth, Liz closed the drawer with care and walked away toward the fireplace.

Comforting heat crackled over her as she sat down on the stone bench before the hearth. Turning her head, she watched the dancing flames meld and flow upwards together, their sensual movements mesmerizing her, ensnaring her tired mind, drawing her into their seductive cavorting.

Jesus, she could fall asleep here too and plummet into the leaping embers if she wasn’t careful!

Blinking herself out of the fire’s alluring entrancement, she turned away from the coaxing heat and instead savored the feeling of how its glowing warmth spread across her back to hug her sides.

Breathing out in contentment, Liz opened the book of poetry and began to read.

While poems weren’t quite her cup of tea, she determinedly lost herself in the words of the Bard. It was much easier to do than to think about what had transpired tonight, or to even begin contemplating how to ask all the questions she wanted Red to answer.

So she allowed the poems to do what she hadn’t allowed the tongues of flame licking behind her do: sweep her mind and thoughts away. In fact, she became so absorbed that she didn’t hear the shower turn off, the door to the bathroom open, or even the man’s footsteps padding across the carpet as he reentered the room.

“What are you reading so intently?” he asked softly, startling her from the lyrical dipping and soaring of words.

She blinked disconcertedly, amazed she hadn’t even heard him approach.

How long had she been sitting here, completely taken by the passages of the book?

Liz glanced to the top of the page. “I just started a song from Cymbeline.” Tearing her eyes reluctantly away from it, she fixed them on Red, who was moving pillows to the floor and pulling down the creamy sheets of the bed. “It’s Shakespeare,” she added belatedly, momentarily forgetting it was most likely his book.

“I know Cymbeline,” he smiled. “What is the song?”

“So far it’s...really beautiful. I’m a few lines down, but it begins, ‘Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,’” she murmured.

“Mmm,” came his nod of appreciation. “Keep going,” he encouraged, sliding onto the bed.

“‘Nor the furious winter’s rages; Thou thy worldly task hast done, Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages: Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust. ‘Fear no more the frown o’ the great; Thou art past the tyrant’s stroke;
Once she stopped reading, she lifted her gaze to see the man sitting against the headboard, legs slightly apart and stretched out before him, hands hanging loose in his lap.

A sudden, powerful craving to feel those hands on her body, to feel his strong arms surrounding her, sheltering her, protecting her, flooded her heart, making it ache in her breast.

When their eyes met, he smiled tenderly at her and bent his knees, patting the empty space he created between them.

“Come here, sweetheart,” he beckoned quietly.

Slowly she rose from her seat in front of the fire and came over to him, doing her best to walk on the balls of her feet to protect the deeper, scabbing wounds on her heels. After setting the book aside, she climbed on top of the bed as nimbly as she could, taking great care with the fragile scabs covering her injuries.

As soon as she settled herself comfortably between his hard thighs, resting languidly back against his naked chest, Red snugged her more tightly against him.

“That song I read,” she murmured, feeling comforted by his heart beating solidly against her spine, “even though it’s beautiful, it’s...kind of sad.”

“You think so?” he asked, stroking his fingers through her long hair. “I actually find it rather comforting.”

The line between her dark brows puckered in confusion as she reached for his other hand.

“Comforting?”

“Mmm.” He laced his fingers with hers, giving them a squeeze.

“Why?” she wanted to know, genuinely puzzled. “It’s about death.”

“True,” the man conceded, watching as her thumb rubbed against his. “But, for me at least, it’s a reminder not to fear death itself. It will come for us, no matter who we are...and when it finds us, the burdens of this world will fall away from our shoulders. It will be a relief. And a release.”

“It wouldn’t have been that way for Aaron,” she whispered tremulously, drawing her knees up to her chest.

“It would have been the very moment he passed from this world,” he assured, lips brushing gently against her ear.

She shook her head in disbelief, hooking a foot around his ankle. “He was in so much pain, Red.
I’ve....” her eyes winced closed of their own volition as the memory of how Aaron had looked flashed through her mind, “I’ve never seen anyone in that much pain before.”

Not even Sam when he’d been battling cancer. But then...she was intuitive enough to understand he had hid his agony from her.

“The way one approaches death’s door is different from actually...crossing over.” Red replied gravely.

The woman turned in his arms to give him a skeptical look. “Are you sure there’s a difference?”

A wry sort of smile curved the corner of his mouth. “Sometimes I forget, myself. In this cruel world, it isn’t hard to forget there’s a difference.” His expression became more pensive. “It’s easy to confuse the pain of dying with actually dying. To think of them as one experience. But...yes, I’m positive there’s a distinction.”

With the earnest way she was gazing at him, he could tell she wanted to believe him.

“If it had been his time, Aaron would have been all right, Lizzy.”

She lowered her eyes, a part of her still wavering between certainty and uncertainty, but finding the genuine conviction he shared with Shakespeare, of all people, reassuring nonetheless.

After all, there had to be a valid reason—a truth—for why the poem struck her as so beautiful, even if she still thought it more poignant than comforting.

“Aaron’s all right now, isn’t he, Red?” she asked softly.

The man nodded his assurance. “He’s downstairs still, resting as comfortably as he can get, considering everything. The doctors will be watching him around the clock until he’s on his feet again. And even after he’s walking around again.“ Red chuckled. “That will be much to his chagrin, I’m sure.”

His small laugh was infectious, and she found herself smiling back at him. “Good,” she breathed her relief. “That’s good.”

They were both silent for a time, each lost in their own, private musings, before Red finally broke the solemn stillness that had fallen between them.

“You did very well in the car tonight, Elizabeth,” he husked, looking down at her profile edged in golden firelight. “And in the parking lot. What you selflessly did for Aaron, how capably you handled yourself, how incredibly brave you were....”

Her eyes flickered to his when his voice trailed off, and she was shocked to find a slight sheen of wetness gleaming there.

“I’m very proud of you,” he finished deeply, veiling his gaze from her as he leaned forward to kiss her forehead.

Liz felt her throat constrict with profound sentiment as his warm lips pressed lovingly against her. Then she was aware of his arm curling even more tightly around her waist, his large palm cupping the side of her leg to hold her closer still.

Startling heat seared desperately from those points of contact to unfurl like a blossoming flower through her, and her mouth parted in a soundless gasp as a yearning for more twined seductively
around her body.

Wrapping her other hand around the top of his she already held, she brought it to rest above her breasts, close against her pounding heart.

When the man felt the smooth flesh of her chest greet his fingers, her heartbeat thudding alluringly beneath his palm, he released a slow breath against her brow before pulling back to look knowingly, soberly, into her face.

Despite the reticence she discerned in the creases beneath his eyes and the hard lines around his mouth, she could see a fierce hunger that mirrored hers darkening his gaze.

“Elizabeth....” he urged hoarsely when she tilted her chin up, her misty expression fervently searching as she offered her lips to him.

But whether he was imploring her to wait a moment or surrender to the passion flaring, burning, within...it suddenly wasn’t a concern, for he didn’t hesitate to take her mouth with his.
Thank you for being so patient in waiting for this chapter!

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much again for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!
Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration❤

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. This gorgeous piece of artwork is by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
April 30, 2007

Their kiss was not an unforgiving echo of the hard restraint Elizabeth had seen in his face but moments ago.

Oh, no.

Red’s wary reticence was being drowned by the heady need frothing hotly between them, through them, binding them together in frenzied lust.

As his mouth crashed down onto hers, vigorously catching, nipping, pulling, sucking, his very pulse seemed to throb in her ears.

It was louder than sirens, than bells, than even bass. It swept provocatively through her, inundating all her senses.

She welcomed that furious, exhilarating beat with her whole heart, enthusiastically urging it to meld seamlessly with her own pulse as she matched his kisses in both pace and fervor.

This was life.

Pulsating, stimulating, glorious life.

Fierce joy suffused her as her blood sang through her veins to harmonize with that which rushed intoxicatingly through his.

They were alive!

With a heaving rasp, Liz threw her arms around his thick neck, palms clutching the back of his head as her tongue dipped past his lips to caress his with such imperiousness that a reverberating growl startled from deep within his chest.

“Impossible girl!” he rumbled, large hands gripping her tightly beneath her ribs as he lifted his head to stare down into her face.

She gazed hungrily back up at him.

The rational part of her that wasn’t driven half-crazed by the blinding heat of desire wondered at his low, gravelly tone of voice. It was a curious and conflicting blend of frustrated yearning, affectionate chiding, and frank admiration.

Liz didn’t know what he was getting at speaking to her like that, but she wasn’t about to stop indulging the humming passion mesmerizing her body...her heart.

“Hardly impossible,” she dimpled impishly, one hand sliding down his throat to coquetishly stir the hair on his chest. “And...hardly a girl,” she added in a quieter, stout tone.

“About that....” the man cleared his throat, images of Elizabeth covered blood and crouching in a ripped evening gown on the oily cement, snarling fiercely while bravely aiming a loaded gun at their
adversaries flashed through his mind. “We really should talk about what happened, Lizzy,” he murmured with difficulty as her fingertips came to linger over his nipple, circling it, brushing it, teasing it until it puckered beneath her insistence.

“I know.” A shadow passed fleetingly over her face before she looked away in an attempt to feign unconcern.

Red was right, of course. They did need to talk. And she wanted to ask her questions and receive his answers.

But....

Now wasn’t the time.

The man shifted slightly, drawing her awareness fully back to the close heat of his body and hers...to the fire scintillating between them.

Elizabeth slid her hand suggestively up his thigh, purposefully stoking that fire.

“Lizzy....”

Her fingers clamped around his muscled flesh, almost as if she were urging him to silence. Then she focused her attentions on the other dark bud of his chest, drawing it to a rigid peak within seconds.

His heartbeat thrummed deliciously beneath her hand.

Emboldened by the fact that he didn’t still her efforts, she lowered her head to coyly brush her mouth against his unshaven jaw once...twice...and then again.

“We should...talk,” he muttered, but his body betrayed his eagerness for her by curving around hers, his breath warm and inviting against her temple.

She held her silence as she continued to drift kiss after kiss along his neck. When she paused at his pulse point, her teeth and tongue slowly and purposefully working his flesh there, she felt him exhale shakily, his long fingers tightening around her sides.

Was he wordlessly warning her to stop?

Or...was he encouraging her not to?

Liz reached up to caress the prickle of his shorn, graying hair at the base of his neck, palm cupping him there as she continued to sensually lave and suck.

When she felt him lean closer, a rasping sigh of pleasure escaping him, she knew for certain his hard grip on her waist wasn’t quite an admonishment.

She smiled against his skin.

The man closed his eyes in silent admission to himself of just how much he was thoroughly enjoying her seduction.

Her scent, sweet and salty and so utterly feminine, filled his nostrils. It was so heady he could actually taste it in the back of his throat.

As he inhaled deeply, he realized that her musk mingled tantalizingly with the shampoo she’d used in her hair—his shampoo.
The visualization of his girl lathering herself in his own bath products was downright erotic. Perhaps because it stirred some sort of primal instinct deep within...momentarily reverting him back to when man was a baser, non-spiritual creature existing in a darker, somatic Age.

His scent was rubbed onto her skin, woven into the very fibers of her hair, so, therefore, it naturally followed she was his.

His to claim, possess, fuck, provide for, love....

Red growled softly as his arousal surged, highly cognizant of how hot and turgid his cock was as it strained against the confines of his clothing.

Her proximity and the way she was coaxing his thudding pulse to rise to her demands was making it difficult to recall his misgivings for why they shouldn’t be doing this.

Yet he was a man in his prime and possessed the sexual maturity to not be swept away by his lust, no matter how powerful it was.

And so he took a firm, experienced hold on his rutting desire while at the same time acknowledging the significance of those lingering reservations.

Though he’d been averse to hearing Kate Kaplan out earlier, he couldn’t deny there was truth to her observations. As much as he wanted to ignore them, her curtly disapproving statements could not be so easily forgotten.

Even now, as Elizabeth pressed herself against him, massaging his leg and kissing and suckling his neck, Kate’s blunt assertions rang discordantly in the back of his mind.

If he succumbed to Lizzy’s advances, would he be using her, as Kaplan had so brutally accused?

In a way...perhaps.

But then again, perhaps not.

Elizabeth needed this.

Needed him.

It was apparent to Red she was seeking solace in his arms in order to cope with the aftermath of a terribly shocking night. She was acting as though she were almost desperate to be reassured that life, and their relationship, would go on as it always had.

But her ardor wasn’t kindled only because she desired comforting stability.

Red recognized her yearning to bury herself in him as clearly as if he held a mirror up to his own soul.

To spiritedly lose herself in uninhibited passion was also the way she wanted to express her fierce relief and joy that they both were alive.

God, how often had he committed the same exact act for the same exact reason?

Red understood her well...and he earnestly craved her just as much as she wanted him.

He longed to wrap his arms tightly around her, to tumble her back into the crisp sheets before sheathing himself deeply inside of her, rocking against her, into her, while he palmed and suckled her
breasts, drawing moaning whimpers and sharp cries from her lips—

His stiff cock pulsated heavily in his boxers as the vivid imagery flashed through his mind. The intensity of his physical reaction was compounded by the bewitching sensation of Lizzy’s mouth pleasuring him, and the man clenched his jaw.

Yes, he wanted to do all of that—and more.

But considering everything that had transpired tonight and the conversation they needed to have sooner rather than later, he still wavered on whether giving in to sexual temptation was the right thing to do.

His brows drew together in a painful expression of both acute frustration—with himself, with their tenuous situation—and venereal longing as he tried one more time to deter her lust.

It took every scrap of willpower he had to hone a stern, insistent edge to his husky tone of voice. “Are you all right?”

But Elizabeth remained unfazed. “Yes,” came her whispered promise once she lifted her head.

Red caught a glimpse of her gleaming, willful eyes before they passed from his line of sight. “....Yes,” she breathed again along the shell of his ear.

Lightly the woman trailed a pale hand down his chest, down his belly, down further...to linger just above the gray waistband of his sweats. Her slim fingers began pulling at the ties while her other palm drifted further up his thigh to finally cup his bulge through the layers of cotton.

Red exhaled loudly through his flared nostrils.

Her boldness inflamed him, the last vestiges of resistance shriveling and scattering like ashes in the wind as he watched and felt her fingers flow teasingly up his thick shaft to encircle and fondle the fat tip.

“Jesus,” he groaned.

Seizing her face between his hands, he stared severely down into her piercingly blue eyes.

“All right,” he rumbled, brushing his thumbs over her lips, his touch surprisingly gentle considering how uncompromising his hold on her was. “Later.”

At last capitulating to his mounting desire—and hers—he tilted her head and captured her mouth with his.

Maybe he shouldn’t have surrendered to their carnal urges. But he was only human, after all. And far from perfect.

Liz clutched his forearms, giddy relief and impatient lust pulsating through her as he greedily plundered her lips.

Not that Red needed to steal what he wanted. She willingly gave him everything, even the very breath gasping from her lungs.

And he, virile man that he was, didn’t hesitate to masterfully take what was so freely offered.
Liquid fire seethed through her veins, elasticizing her flesh until she was an undulating and pliant flame in his grasp.

When at last he lifted his mouth from hers, and she drew into her lungs the crisp air of their surroundings rather than the moist warmth of him, she whimpered at the unexpected loss, eyes flying open.

His were like dark coals burning as they instantly locked onto hers.

“My darling girl,” he whispered raggedly, releasing her face to roughly stroke his hands down her neck.

Her dry hair crackled like silken kindling through his fingers. Urgently he wound one palm about the midnight tresses, pulling her head back so he could taste the underside of her chin.

As his teeth and lips nipped at the tender flesh, his other hand cupped the side of her neck, his thumb resting purposefully against her pulse point.

Red could feel her blood pounding fervently, proving to all his senses with every strong beat she was alive in his arms. Alive and.... Whole. Wanting. Wanton.

Feeling that thrumming evidence excited him further.

“Help me out of these,” he commanded against her delicate jaw before pulling back to shove his loosened sweats down his hips.

Breathless with desire, Elizabeth was only too happy to comply.

For a feverish moment they became an eager, gleaming tangle of limbs before the thick gray cotton finally slid off his body and crumpled to the lush carpet.

His green eyes snapped darkly with his ardent need as he suddenly loomed above her on his knees.

Before the woman could say or do anything, he grabbed her about the waist and tugged her forward, planting her imperiously on top of his muscular thighs.

“Oooh....” Liz gasped into his broad shoulder. She clamped her legs around him, wriggling in delight against his raging erection, which was still swathed behind the slick material of his boxers.

“You like feeling me, sweetling?” he asked gruffly, one palm digging into her lower back while the other hooked beneath the hem of her camisole.

“Yeah,” she breathed emphatically, lurching upright as he swiftly peeled the clingy modal from her body and tossed it over the edge of the bed.

“Good, because I love feeling you,” he growled, burying his mouth between her naked breasts, kissing her there.

Her skin was as soft and as smooth as shea butter, and she tasted like patchouli and salt and exotic spices...the sultry combination vividly reminding him of the Thar Desert after a rainstorm.

Christ, was she alluring!

“Don’t stop moving, baby....” he grated, lips trailing across one of her full mounds.
The woman grabbed his arms and arched into him, smoothly gyrating against his crotch. She felt she could hardly get close enough even though every enthusiastic movement brought him a little deeper between her legs, teasing her arousal all the more.

“Red....” she whimpered.

“Yes, honey,” he encouraged in a quiet tone, pressing her closer against him. “Like that. You exquisite creature—God...yes,” he panted before taking one of her nipples between his teeth.

Her breathy moans filled the room as he suckled.

Red closed his eyes against the building ache in his cock, finding it incredible that she could at once both ease and inflame his lust.

And suddenly he wanted nothing more than to strip her completely naked so he could explore every inch of her lithe body. He wanted to cover it fully with his bulk, skin melding on skin—not to smother her passionate fire, but to stimulate it so it would blaze even hotter.

With a low snarl, Red tightened his hold on her spine before he released her breast to raise his head.

Elizabeth’s petulant whine metamorphosed into a pleased hiss as the heat of his mouth was replaced by that of his hand.

“As if I’d leave you wanting,” he admonished sternly, though his eyes glittered with a smile as he bore her backwards.

Those bright sapphire depths of hers were huge as she gazed brazenly up at him from the nest of crinkled sheets.

A slow, mischievous grin spread across his lips as he comfortably straddled her hips, expert fingers teasing her breasts without a shred of mercy.

In his periphery, he saw her gather fistfuls of the Egyptian cotton beneath them and clench the material so tightly her veins noticeably stood out from her wrists.

“That feels so good,” she gasped as he adroitly rolled her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. “Don’t—don’t stop.”

“I have no intention of stopping,” he assured her, voice melodiously deep. “I want you hot for me, honey,” he leered down at her. “Hot...and wet.”

“I am,” she groaned defiantly, lower back arching pleadingly into him.

“Mmm,” Red agreed blithely, perceiving her intent by the way she restlessly moved. “But,” he dropped his mouth to hers, possessing it in a brief yet hungry kiss, “I want you even more so.”

Deciding to humor her desire, he shifted down her thighs while quickly sliding her tiny shorts off her hips and body as he did so. Then he leaned forward and once again probed her mouth heatedly with his.

Giving a throaty chuckle, the woman rolled until he was caught beneath her slender figure.

The dark river of her hair cascaded over her shoulders, veiling the outside world from him and drawing his avid attention to her gleaming eyes.

Her teeth flashed in her face as she beamed haughtily down at him.
“Impish minx,” Red growled fondly.

“Mnhm,” came her pert agreement. “But...you like me this way,” she murmured huskily, gently rubbing her bare sex against his hard member.

“Damn right I do. It was a compliment.” He slid his hands up her sides, delighting in the silky smoothness of her skin—and the way her intimate warmth cradled his dick even through the satin concealing it.

Sighing his satisfaction, he brushed his thumbs against the glinting jewel dangling from her navel, eyes zealously drinking her femininity in.

As she righted herself, sensually moving her pelvis, firelight shimmered over her, casting a pearlescent hue to her flesh and making the red shooting through her dark hair gleam like garnets.

What an ethereal vision she was.

“You look like an angel,” he rumbled softly.

Their eyes met for a fleeting moment before the woman blushed, ducking her head.

“An angel?” she inquired in bashful disbelief, obviously both pleased and embarrassed to receive such a high compliment.

“Mm,” he affirmed, hands possessively circling her slender waist.

She smiled, hitching a shoulder as she tilted her head demurely to the side. “I don’t know about an angel.” Then she gave a breathy laugh, gaze sparkling with flirtatious mirth when she lifted it to his once again. “Maybe you really mean...one of the seven cardinal sins?”

A half-smile played around Red’s mouth even as he frowned chidingly up at her. “Hardly.”

“No?” Her answering grin was playful as she ran her fingers through her hair, teasing and fluffing the abundant mass while arching her spine slightly backwards.

The man stared covetously up at her, shamelessly enjoying the show. “No.”

Then Elizabeth stroked her palms saucily down her curves, down her provocatively spread thighs, and finally over his wide chest to grasp his biceps.

“Not even....” she lowered her mouth to his ear, “Lust?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you,” he murmured into her tresses, closing his eyes as he breathed in her rousing scent.

“No?” she whispered, nipping at his lobe.

Rumbling his dissent, he lightly caressed his fingers up her belly to drift back and forth against the undersides of her swaying bosom.

“You are hardly impure of soul, Lizzy.”

“But....” she pushed herself upright again and dimpled impishly down at him. “I’m impure of thought.”

“That makes two of us,” he growled, reaching out to cup her breasts firmly in his grasp. “Come here,
you foxy thing."

Giggling cheekily, she obliged him.

Red propped himself on one elbow and lifted his head to meet her halfway, nimbly catching one of her nipples in his mouth while his free hand plucked and stroked the other.

Her eyes fluttered closed of their own volition as she melted, moaning, into his enticement.

When his practiced touches grew more insistent, she began to purr, vocally letting him know she was thoroughly enjoying his teasing ministrations.

When he sucked harder, the hand palming her drifting down to sneak between his cock and her pink folds with the intent to arouse her further, the woman tipped her head back, the noises escaping her lips growing louder.

When his fingers brushed and circled her swollen clit, she gasped sharply in pleasure, unconsciously rising fully up on her knees to give him better access—

Her startled hiss of pain and the feeling of her nipple slipping from his lips as her bottom came down to land on his thighs jarred Red from the moment.

Eyes flicking open, he looked concernedly up at her. Upon seeing her lower lip caught between her teeth and her brow puckered, he immediately realized what had happened.

“Let’s get you off your sore knees, hmm?” he crooned, snaking a hard arm around her waist and deftly flipping her to her back in one smooth motion.

Now they were lying lengthwise across the massive bed. Glowing firelight frisked over their bodies as Red rose on all fours to hover above her.

“Better?” he smiled, raising an expectant brow.

“Much,” she breathed appreciatively, cupping his face in her hands and bringing his mouth down to hers, desperate to drown herself in him and the passion he stoked within her.

As Red ardently plied her lips with his, he carefully inserted one knee between her thighs, gently nudging them apart.

His mouth curved against her skin when he felt her eagerly spread them even more.

“Wider,” he murmured commandingly, caressing one palm up her inner thigh and pointedly pushing that pale limb further away from him.

When she gladly complied, the man slid his bulk easily into the space created, sitting up on his knees.

The sight of Elizabeth lying before him with her white arms flung carelessly over the side of the bed, her kiss-roughened mouth slightly parted, the swell of her bosom rising and falling mesmerizingly with every heavy breath, her legs outstretched to a most advantageous extent, the folds at her apex glistening, imperiously beckoning him closer...made his throat constrict and his cock strain demandingly against his boxers.

Loosing a hissing breath, the man pressed an assuaging palm along his erection, caressing it soothingly while his other hand reached for her enticing sex.

“Red...” she pleaded as his fingers cupped her, lightly rubbing along those luscious lips.
“You're so beautiful....” he rasped, sinking an expert finger into her welcoming warmth. “So bright and flushed and alive—” his voice caught on the word as the thought once again struck his heart: he could have lost her tonight.

If events hadn’t turned out exactly as they had, he could be hunched despondently over her lifeless figure at this very moment, keening his despair.

But instead he was here with her, crouched between her naked thighs, pumping his finger...now two fingers...into her hot, tight little body...where every sound and movement she made was proof she was breathing and whole.

“I’m right here,” she affirmed in a shaky whisper, wantonly pushing herself further into his touch.

“I know, sweetheart,” he murmured gruffly, eyes intently trailing over her figure. “I know. And I thank God for it.”

Releasing his aching member, he ran his free hand up her abdomen, up her stomach, up the heaving valley between her breasts to cup her throat, his thumb coming to once again rest against her pulse.

The way it began thudding even harder against the pad of his finger as he continued to tease her arousal, as her shivering gasps trembled on the air around them, was Goddamned enthralling.

Carefully lowering himself to his forearms, he bent his head and passionately placed kiss after kiss down the path of her quivering navel.

Every time his lips met her skin, he made sure to brush his thumb against her clit even as he stroked her deep within, his mouth and fingers working harmoniously to pleasure her...until at last his lips and tongue replaced his hand entirely.

Her blood raced against his fingertip on her throat, her palms immediately clamping down on his shoulders as her lower back arched up from the bed.

“Red....” she moaned loudly.

He moved quickly, gripping her hips in both his hands to keep her relatively still. His thumbs traced pacifying lines up and down the junction of her thighs as he skillfully delved into her heated depths.

Her musk was intoxicating. It completely inundated his senses of smell and taste, drowning him in the physical proof of her life—her body’s desperate need for him.

As he inhaled her scent of titillating heat and flaring desire, his tongue sliding upwards to lap at her nub of swollen flesh, he was dimly aware of a little moisture dampening the front of his boxers.

With his free hand, the man reached down between his legs, fingers slipping through the flap to encircle the thick head of his warm cock, stroking it indulgently as he increased the pressure of his suckling.

Elizabeth gasped her delight, her legs impulsively jerking closer to him.

While he certainly appreciated her enthusiasm, the unconscious movement inhibited his access to her—and that wouldn’t fucking do.

Snarling quietly, he kept his hold on his erection while his other hand shot out and grasped one of her thighs. His fingers dug into her soft flesh, at once both stilling her movements and spreading her wider to his advances.
“Keep them open for me, honey,” he gritted, briefly lifting his head to meet her hazy eyes. “Let me love you this way.”

“Yes...yes,” she breathed fiercely, one palm cupping the base of his neck, urging him to settle back down between her legs.

He smiled warmly, yet there was an almost sharply feral edge to his expression as he apologetically rubbed the sting from the place he’d clutched too tightly in his zeal to keep tasting her.

She rolled her hips, impatiently thrusting herself closer to his mouth in a wordless command.

Red made a noise somewhere between an assenting growl and a knowing chuckle as he once again lowered himself to her hot sex, nuzzling her mons.

His lips parted and he traced his tongue along her slick flesh before sinking it, along with all his physical senses, into her body.

Liz whined her pleasure, her head thrashing to the side as she lost herself in the erotic sensations his mouth on her most secret place produced in her.

Electrifying tingles continuously zig-zagged outward from where he tongued her, spreading in a compelling rush throughout her whole body. Surreally, the throbbing of those exhilarating, icy-white sparks made her feel as if she were floating on air, weightless.

But as Red unrelentingly caressed and licked and suckled, those pinpricks of lightning no longer shot through her a ripple at a time. Rather, his sexual attentions excited so many waves of them that they completely overwhelmed her, melding with the blood surging within her veins, grounding her in her own body.

“Ah—ah—ah—”

Elizabeth’s rhythmic moans filled his ears, synchronizing with every pass his tongue made along her sensitized clit.

She was close.

He could send her over the edge this way, if he wanted—if she wanted.

The man made the quick decision that he wouldn’t stop pleasuring her orally unless she asked him to.

Suddenly he felt her hands lift from his shoulders, and she began to writhe about, her “ahs” turning into soft, mewling noises.

Then, almost as suddenly it had left, he was aware of her touch again. But this time, he felt her nails dance along the top of his head, gently scratching through his hair.

“Red,” she murmured breathily.

After tenderly swabbing her molten heat one more time with his tongue, he raised his head from between her thighs, looking up at her in query.

The woman was propped languidly on one elbow, firelight gleaming along her tousled hair and breasts. Her face was beautifully flushed, her eyes shining as she extended her hand to him.

But it wasn’t empty.
Slipped between two of her fingers was a small, gold-and-black square packet he knew very well indeed.

And she was offering it to him.

Stunned, his gaze flicked to the partly open nightstand drawer behind her. How had she known he kept those in....

Affection warmly stirred his heart as he internally answered his own question before he even finished asking it.

The little snoop.

The expression on his face was avidly gentle when their eyes met.

The question, *Are you sure?* hovered on the tip of his tongue, but in seeing the yearning glistening in her blue depths and the coy smile playing about her mouth, he didn’t voice it.

She was certain.

His own arousal surged fiercely within, clamoring loudly for her as all she sincerely implied with this significant gesture hit him full force.

Following his body’s vehement demands, Red swiftly pushed himself into a sitting position, fingers unhesitatingly plucking the packet from hers.

Once her hands were free, she rose upright as well, fingertips earnestly sneaking beneath the waistband of his boxers. Gingerly she worked the silky material down over his hips, over his ass, then gently over his turgid erection, baring it to the fire-lit air and her eager eyes.

As soon as the cloth slid entirely off his body and was abandoned to the floor, Red wasted no time in ripping the small packet open.

As he busied himself with that, she reached out with tenderness, stroking a palm appreciatively up his impressive, rampant shaft. Her thumb slid over the top, smearing the wetness beading there before she reverently traced the velvet tip’s ridge all the way around.

Then her gaze lifted to his, her expression soft and sure and wanting.

“Elizabeth,” he murmured, cupping her cheek in his palm.

As her name drifted from his lips to settle closely around her like balmy air, her eyes fluttered shut of their own will and she leaned into his firm touch.

Tilting her unresisting chin up, Red dipped his head, seeking and then catching her mouth in a passionate kiss.

As their lips hungrily melded and clung together, the man smoothly rolled the condom over his heavy cock. Then he tucked an arm securely around her before lowering her with care back down to the mattress.

Her sleek thighs parted to welcome his bulk between them.

“My beautiful girl,” he breathed against her lips.

Sensual heat seared his loving tone as it washed over her, through her, and she shivered in
anticipation beneath him.

As he suckled her lower lip, he lifted himself onto his forearms, considerately shifting his weight so that his sheathed erection could lie cradled at the junction between her thigh and mons.

Suddenly he felt her hands slide up his neck to intimately hold his face as she broke their kiss. For the briefest instant, her eyes found his and burned them, so full of light and life they were.

“Oh, my Lizzy,” he rasped with feeling, catching her low moan with his mouth as he pivoted his hips, smoothly thrusting forward and burying himself deeply inside her body.

The woman grasped his back as he began to move inside her, her fingers digging into his smooth and scarred skin.

She had thought she would be more aware of the condom’s presence, like she had when she’d dated in high school.

But she wasn’t.

Perhaps it was because of Red’s wide girth and his throbbing heat that she couldn’t really feel it. Or perhaps it was because of the torrent of erotic sensations rushing exhilaratingly through her.

Whatever the reasons, she found she was consciously glad for them as she began to rise and fall to the rhythm he set.

And it wasn’t slow, or gentle.

But neither of them wanted that. By this point, their emotions were running far too high and their lust for one another was far too intense for either of them to be satisfied with an unhurried, languid session of lovemaking.

Even though Red’s strong thrusts were relentless, and at times even rough, the touch of his hands and lips upon her body was undeniably soft.

The conflicting duality of his behavior served to heighten her arousal until she was more than half-crazed by her fervent desire for him—and for her body’s release.

Whining, Liz twined her legs over his calves, hooking her feet under his ankles to anchor herself to him as she rippled like water beneath his body, eagerly matching his unflagging movements.

Red hadn’t thought it possible before now that their bodies could be any closer.

Damn, how wrong he had been!

They were like an ouroboros, wound together and undulating as one.

And when they would come....

Groaning, the man buried his face against the sweet curve of her neck and shoulder, his lips and teeth teasing her pale skin there as one of his palms trailed up her side to hold her throat.

The thudding of her heartbeat and the vibrations of her purring moans against his hand spread up his arm to echo throughout his entire body. It was a trembling, pulsating symphony that stirred even the deepest part of his soul.

The wildly aroused darkness within him bared its teeth and writhed, keening loudly for her release—
“Do you know how dear you are to me?” Red husked in her ear, his hard cock rutting up into her.

She gasped in shocked pleasure at feeling him buried inside so very deeply, the incredible sensation amplifying as his taut sack rubbed against her sensitive folds.

Her nails reactively pierced the tight skin of his shoulders as he pinned her hips down with his...but he continued to roll them together, masterfully keeping their passionate momentum burning.

“How precious you are?” he continued, his tone deep and gravelly as he revealed his innermost thoughts to her.

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes tightly shut against the sudden tears burning behind her lashes, a lump of vulnerability growing in her throat as she felt his passion rise even higher, like a tidal wave surging from the sea during a storm.

“Do you know....” he lifted his head to look down into her face, releasing her throat to trace a fingertip gently beneath one of her closed eyes.

When her misty gaze flickered open to meet his, he held it unwaveringly even as he continued to thrust.

“Do you really...how much I love you?”

Her lips parted in aching wonder at the sincere depth of feeling in his husky voice.

Unable to resist her huge, glistening doe-eyes and her swollen, pouty mouth, Red lowered his head and took that mouth with his, swearing he could almost taste the brine of her unshed tears.

The woman curled her hands over his broad shoulders, moaning breathlessly into his mouth as he increased the rhythm of their movements once again.

She was highly cognizant of the inner workings of her body, especially those of the hot, fluttering place between her legs and how with every hard push, he stoked her arousal to flare up higher and higher.

“Oh...ohh....Red....” she whimpered, teeth scraping desperately against the side of his neck.

“Close, baby?” he breathed against the pulse pounding deliciously in the hollow of her throat.

“Don’t stop...don’t stop....” she implored shakily, sucking in a sharp breath as she felt his shaft grow even harder.

Liz hadn’t expected that, and she instinctively knew it was a sign that he had to be close too.

Her romantic heart soared at the thought—would they come together?

“Christ, love, you feel so good,” Red groaned as his thrusts became shorter, more stilted—but that didn’t make them any less powerful. “So fucking good—I don’t want to leave—”

“Don’t leave!” she rasped, embracing him tightly, feeling the muscles of his back bunch beneath her hands even as hers of far below clenched around his cock.

As her entreaty echoed in his ears, he lifted his head to gaze down at her.
Her lovely eyes were veiled from his amorous regard, her red lips parting as tremulous, moaning
gasps escaped her to slide along his skin. She was so lost in her own arousal that her fingers had
fallen from his back to flex and claw against his ass cheeks as her hips rose and fell with his.

“Red.... Oh—oh—Red....”

The tone of her voice rose and tremors ran up and down her body as she hurtled joyously toward the
very edge of her release.

She was so fucking close.

Red’s heart swelled with possessive lust and deep love as he encouraged her with his body, urging
her on with his low voice, “Yes, honey.... Yes.... Yes....”

And that was when he set her alight.

With a soft cry, she clung to him as her bones loosened and her whole body was lit with seething
fire.

“Oh yes,” he hissed, the pleasing sight of her succumbing to the ardent throes of her orgasm undoing
any self-control he still retained.

Red buried his brow against her narrow shoulder and euphorically let himself go.

Even through the pulsating waves of her intense pleasure, Elizabeth was aware of him, of his
heaving breaths, of how her whole body seemed to vibrate with his low, rumbling growl that
reverberated up from the very depths of his soul.

Then he reached for her, palm pressing against the place just above her pounding heart. His grip
-crushed her there, right on the edge of pain as he gracelessly jerked his hips once, twice, then again,
thrusting deeply into her.

And then....

Her awed breath caught in her throat at the same time as Red hoarsely released a snarling groan of
ecstasy, creamy warmth gushing from his pulsing cock to fill the condom and tease her sensitized
flesh.

“Oh my God,” she gasped in delight, wrapping her lean legs even tighter around him. His heart
hammered against her breasts and the wiry, curling hairs of his groin rubbed coarsely against her
throbbing clit as she continued to meet his waning thrusts. “Ohh....”

“Yes,” he hissed his delight, “sweetheart....it feels so good,” he rumbled sensually in her ear. “Can
you feel my heat? God....” he groaned brokenly.

His deep baritone slid through her veins, rushing through her body to stimulate the very place he was
already pleasuring. That sensation, in addition to feeling his slick warmth filling the thin sheath
buried deeply inside of her, was so alluringly intimate that before she quite knew what was
happening, she crested once more.

Utterly shocked and pleased all at once, Liz grabbed his biceps, squeezing them hard as she loosed a
fierce noise that could have been either a whine or a moan, blissfully riding out the rippling waves of
her second orgasm.

She wasn’t sure how long it lasted...seconds, minutes.... But when at last she was aware enough of
herself again, she slowly opened her eyes.

Red was propped up on his forearms, smiling down at her with a raised brow. “Well,” he crooned.

A blush suffused her cheeks as she gazed up at him. “Well, what?” she demanded, wrinkling her nose at the way his eyes glinted teasingly at her.

“That last was...delightfully unexpected, hmm?”

An assenting grin twitched at the corner of her mouth, her eyes flickering demurely away from his scrutiny.

“It was wonderful, honey,” the man told her seriously, reaching out to brush her hair away from her brow in a gentle caress. “All of it.”

Tears unexpectedly welled in her eyes as the beautiful memory of what they had just shared and the profound emotions attached to every single, precious and passionate moment flooded her mind and heart.

“Yeah,” she agreed in a strangled, breathless tone, silently cursing herself for losing her composure.

Red went still, concern lighting his gaze as he observed wetness gathering between her thick, dark lashes. “Ah, Lizzy, my girl....” he soothed. “What’s wrong, sweetheart, hmm?”

The young woman mutely rolled her head from side to side in a silent refusal to speak, the movement shaking those tears loose and causing them to trickle down her cheeks.

“You can talk to me,” he coaxed gently. “Did I say something to upset you?”

“No,” she breathed, bravely meeting his eyes as she frustratedly wiped her face. “No.”

“Did I...do something—”

“No,” she interrupted, shaking her head a little more sharply this time to emphasize her denial. “No. Everything was—it was perfect. For me. It was....” she swallowed thickly, “....beautiful.” Then she bit her lower lip, hesitating.

The man waited patiently, giving her the time she needed to put words to her ricocheting thoughts.

“I just—I just wish it had been as amazing for you,” she blurted.

He stared down at her, completely bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

Elizabeth glanced nervously away from him. “I made you wear a condom.”

“And...you think that bothers me?” he scowled incredulously.

“Well, doesn’t it?” she asked defensively, bristling at his shocked tone of voice. “For us, it’s a step backwards, isn’t it? I mean, we’ve never used them.”

Almost instantly her vexatious expression metamorphosed into something much more wistful as she chanced a hesitant look up at him. “But....I just wanted you to stay so much.....” As her voice momentarily trailed off, her liquid eyes beseeched him not to be upset with her.

Before he could open his mouth to respond, she hurriedly rushed on, “And I know you can’t...feel...me as good as you can when you don’t wear one.” She dragged in a deep, steadying
breath before clumsily plowing ahead, “So tonight—it, well...it probably wasn’t as good for you as it was for me....”

As she neared the end of her explanation, Red slowly shook his head, eventually halting her anxious flow of words. “No, Elizabeth. No.”

Her brow puckered in confusion as she frowned uncertainly up at him.

“Tonight was not a step backwards,” he told her emphatically. “In fact, I think we took a promising step forward.”

“But,” she stammered in disbelief, “you wore a condom!”

“I did indeed,” he agreed calmly. “But my wearing one didn’t lessen my enjoyment of what we shared.”

Elizabeth gaped up at him. “It didn’t?” she asked quietly, clearly wanting to believe him.

“No,” he affirmed, his attention suddenly shifting downwards as his erection began to soften.

Grasping the top of the condom, Red reluctantly slid free of her tight warmth, letting out a small, disappointed sigh as he did so. Then a rueful smile curved his mouth when his gaze briefly met hers, wordlessly letting her know that breath hadn’t been meant for her.

While he was loathe to leave the cradle of her body, he wasn’t at all disappointed with what had transpired between them tonight.

“How?” she curiously wanted to know, eyes widening as the man slowly rose to his knees, his thick fingers holding the thin latex in place.

“Tissue...if you wouldn’t mind, Lizzy,” he murmured, tilting his head toward the nightstand.

Blindly reaching for the requested item, she openly stared at what he held between his legs, unabashedly intrigued by the sight of the overfilled condom.

Although Red’s declaration went against everything she’d been told by others in her formative years...maybe he really was telling her the truth.

The man carefully eased the sheath off, depositing it into the tissue Elizabeth gave him. Leaning over, he placed it on the nightstand before dropping back down on all fours to rest closely against her warm curves.

“How, Red?” she asked again once he was settled comfortably beside her, propped easily up on one elbow. “I’ve heard other guys say it inhibits them. Makes them...less into it.”

He traced his fingers through her long hair, concealing behind his tender touches the acute irritation he now harbored against all the high school pricks and idiot frat boys who had filled her head with lies.

Various dark and sarcastic responses swiftly flashed through his mind, all of them having to do with the lazy incompetence of inconsiderate young guys who thought with their penises, and therefore put their selfish desires above all else...including the females they dated.

But any of those pithy replies would only make Lizzy feel poorly that she hadn’t really questioned what she’d heard.
Rather, he needed to reassure her of his sincerity.

“Listen to me, honey.”

Her pensive gaze lifted to his face.

“I couldn’t give a damn I wore a condom tonight,” he gravely confided, green eyes piercing hers. “In fact, I hardly noticed it was there at all. I was so focused on you....” his tone gentled as he ran the back of a finger down her temple, “and how you felt.” That finger then drifted over her kiss-roughened lips. “How I could pleasure you.” A smile ghosted over his mouth. “How you pleased me.”

Joy glimmered in her eyes as she kissed that fingertip.

Grinning, he tapped it playfully against her upper lip, chuckling as she wrinkled her nose at him. “And since I was wearing one, I was able to come inside you,” he murmured, trailing his nail down her silken throat. “That heightened the intimacy for me, Elizabeth. I enjoyed it very much.” He caught her eyes with his. “Didn’t you?”

“Yes,” she replied fiercely, nodding.

“Well,” he smiled. “No regrets, then.”

“No. No regrets,” she whispered, wrapping her slim arms around his neck to pull him down for a kiss.

“Good,” Red husked once his mouth slid off of hers.

Dimpling, Liz brushed the tip of her nose affectionately against his. “So...you would definitely do it again, right?”

“Indeed I would,” he replied, the intimacy of his gravelly tone seeping warmly over her, making her toes curl tightly into the wrinkled sheets. “If you were willing.”

She slanted him a coy look. “I am willing.”

The man regarded her in delighted surprise as understanding for what she really meant dawned in his eyes. “Are you implying what I think you are?” he asked in a low rumble.

Grinning vivaciously, she extended a hand out behind her and snatched another gold-and-black packet from the pile in the nightstand’s open drawer. Then she lowered her arm to hold the shiny plastic between them, playfully tapping one of its corners against his chest.

When their gazes met again, she flirtatiously lifted a thin brow at him, as if to ask, Well?

His approving chuckle, smoldering and exquisite, breathed along her body as he bent his head to passionately take her mouth with his.
Chapter End Notes

To those of you who have stuck with me this far, thank you so much again for your continued support :) I truly appreciate you taking the time to read what I write here and every kindness that is shown!

Thank you to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are always a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤
Chapters with Illustrations
*New* Chapter 2: The Right Thing
*New* Chapter 62: A Pastime To Indulge In
*New* Chapter 24: Involved
*New* Chapter 47: Strength And Fragility
*New* Chapter 73: The Release
*New* Chapter 23: Crossing The Line
*New* Chapter 72: The Aftermath
Chapter 1: Night Terrors
Chapter 4: I’ll Miss You
Chapter 5: Solace
Chapter 6: Worthy Of Friendship
Chapter 7: Affirmation
Chapter 8: Sweet Sixteen
Chapter 11: The Howling Maelstrom
Chapter 12: Rise Up Stronger
Chapter 16: A Disquiet In His Soul
Chapter 17: Metamorphosis
Chapter 18: Islanded In A Stream Of Stars
Chapter 19: The Give And Take
Chapter 22: Indestructible
Chapter 35: Definitive Intentions
Chapter 40: You're Safe Now
Chapter 41: The Early Signs Of Trauma
Chapter 44: An Unexpected Gift
Chapter 48: A Spirit Of Fire
Chapter 50: At Last
Chapter 51: Interlude V
Chapter 53: Building Confidence
Chapter 58: Liberation
Chapter 60: Solemn Contemplation And Grave Decisions
Chapter 61: A Night Out On The Town
Chapter 63: A Night In
Chapter 64: All Calm, As It Was Bright
Chapter 68: Surprises
Chapter 69: Of Carfuffles And Carnality
Chapter 70: Greatest Joys (congratulations to Kris for winning a Daily Deviation Award on DeviantArt for the illustration of Red and young Lizzy dancing!)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. These gorgeous pieces of artwork are by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
April 30, 2007

The sound of a dog barking excitedly outside roused Elizabeth from her deep, dreamless sleep.

Snuffling, she flopped from her side onto her back, both slim arms splaying outward. Belatedly, her drowsy mind half-expected one of them to smack into Red...but as her consciousness sharpened, she wasn’t really all that surprised to find an empty space beside her.

The man hardly slept as it was, and after last night’s harrowing incident, he obviously wasn’t one to laze about in bed.

Unlike her.

Piercing guilt knifed through her.

Shit.

Forcing her eyes open, she blinked blearily up at the unfamiliar, vaulted ceiling, listening as the nearby dog began barking loudly again.

God, if she didn’t know any better, that dog almost sounded like—

“Bronn?” she breathed in surprise.

Bolting upright, she threw her scratched and bruised legs over the side of the huge bed and stood, wincing as the thick scabs on her feet and knees pulled uncomfortably.

Liz gritted her teeth. Hopefully they would heal quickly!

Squinting against the bright, early afternoon sunlight cascading through the tall glass windows, she swiftly pulled on the pajamas Red had peeled off of her the night before. Then she grasped the handles of the balcony’s double doors and flung them open.

Splashing through the small puddles of rain water pooled along the rustic wooden beams, Liz carefully made her way to the balcony’s railing. Shading her eyes against the sun, she looked down.

It was Bronn!

The massive Sarplaninac bounded over to Evan, a hefty-looking stick clenched between his impressive jaws. Bronn dropped it at the young man’s feet, fluffy tail wagging as happily as any playful puppy’s.

Liz could hear Evan say something laughingly to the animal as he bent to retrieve it, quickly rising again to hold it aloft.

Bronn gave another demanding bark as the guard waved it tantalizingly at him. He crouched down on his forelegs, his muzzle pressing into the damp earth, his golden eyes pinned intently on his prize.

Then he whoofed imperiously.
Grinning, Evan capitulated and hurled the stick as hard as he could away from himself.

Bronn was a blur of sable and slate gray as he streaked down the grassy hill after it.

Just as the dog snatched the stick effortlessly up in his mouth and began to lope back up the dewy knoll to Evan, the wind picked up.

Carried by the air currents, one of the many, white cumulus clouds dotting the sky blew across the sun, obscuring its golden warmth from all on this side of Mercer Island.

Goosebumps rose in a swift prickle over Liz’s body at the sudden chill, for the tiny shorts and slinky camisole provided no protection whatsoever from the elements.

As she shivered, crossing her arms protectively over her breasts, she heard quiet but familiar footsteps behind her, coming up on her left.

Just as she turned her head to look at Red, the warmth of a heavy fur blanket enveloped her. The man smoothed the down over her bare shoulders, tucking it securely around her slight form before he wrapped both his arms around her, holding her closely.

“Morning,” she smiled as she leaned back into his hard chest, rubbing her nose gently against his unshaven cheek in thanks.

“Afternoon,” Red returned in a teasing rumble, lightly stressing the word.

The woman flushed at that. “I didn’t mean to sleep so late....”

“No,” he murmured in her ear, immediately halting her apology. “I’m glad you slept in. You needed to.”

Pursing her lips, she tilted her head so she could meet his eyes. “But if I needed to, then so did you, Red.”

A faint smile curved the man’s mouth in response to her chiding, but the expression in his eyes was a serious one as he shook his head.

“I needed to take care of a few things that...couldn’t wait. I also needed to check on Aaron,” he explained. “And, before you ask,” he continued, giving her a knowing squeeze, “he’s doing just fine, Lizzy.”

“Good,” she breathed, relief shining in her gaze at the news.

“He wants to see you.”

“Me?” she asked, unable to mask her surprise. “Why?”

Red was mildly amused. “I would assume it’s because he wants to thank you for the pivotal role you played in saving his life.”

The young woman bit her lower lip as a wave of unexpected self-consciousness washed over her. “It wasn’t just me, Red.”

“He knows that,” he acknowledged the truth of the matter. “But...let me try to explain.”

The man paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts. “All the guards here are a tight-knit team,” he began. “They not only watch and protect my back when necessary, but each other’s as well. They
are more than mere colleagues,” he conveyed. “They are...brothers-in-arms.”

She silently nodded her understanding. After last night, there was no denying the guards’ deep-seated loyalty and camaraderie.

“But you, Elizabeth...” His eyes gravely caught and held hers. “You are an outsider. An untrained civilian. And yet...you became one of them last night.”

Her cheeks warmed as she felt the stirrings of pride in herself swell within her heart.

“Aaron just wants to give you the same recognition the other men gave you last night,” he further elucidated. “It’s as important to him to acknowledge you as it was to them.”

Liz was moved. “I’ll see him,” she huskily assured around the lump in her throat, turning in the circle of his arms. “Soon?”

Red smiled down at her. “That can be arranged.” He allowed his hands to slowly slide down the silken fur blanket until they rested at her waist. As his large palms cupped her there, his eyes intently searched her face. “How are you feeling?”

“Sore,” she replied honestly, her dimples winking ruefully at him.

His gaze immediately sharpened in concern.

“Nothing serious, Red,” came her quick reassurance before he could voice the question she intuitively knew was coming. “I mean, nothing’s changed since last night.”

Some of the tension in his countenance eased at her words, and yet Liz couldn’t help but notice the lines of strain around his eyes and mouth didn’t disappear.

If anything, they seemed to deepen.

“You’re tired,” she observed quietly, lifting one hand to lightly touch her fingertips to his temple. It both surprised and worried her to see him uncharacteristically close his eyes and lean ever so slightly into the caress. “Maybe we should have slept more last night.”

“I wouldn’t exchange one second of last night for more sleep,” the man disdained in a soft growl, eyes slitting open as her hand fell away from him.

“But—”

“Not one second,” he interrupted firmly, lowering his mouth across hers in a hard kiss.

The unyielding pressure his lips exerted on hers was possessively fierce—at first. As memories of the torrid passion they’d shared the night before seared like a flame through his mind, his hold on her body reactively tightened.

*I love you,* his mouth and grip roughly conveyed. *So much.*

Considering all the years he’d known her and how their romantic relationship had heightened considerably over the last thirteen months, Red hadn’t thought it possible he could love her more.

But after narrowly escaping the clutches of Sakamoto’s men, after reflecting on how she’d handled herself under that intense pressure, and after the steamy hours of lust and lovemaking that had followed...he found that his feelings for her ran even deeper now than they had before.
Red could feel his body stirring, a natural, physical response to the significant emotions burgeoning within. Uttering a very soft and low noise, something ambiguous that could have been a groan or a growl, he brought her even closer to nudge his hips against hers.

To his pleasure, Elizabeth didn’t shy away from his unrestrained fervor. Instead, she fervidly gripped his biceps, her tongue sliding past his teeth to passionately deepen the kiss.

Surely she must feel the same as he did, if her response was this ardent.

As her lithe figure melded unresistingly into the hard planes of his, the man smiled. He promptly eased his rhythm to something gentler and much more languid, losing himself in how her smooth lips felt, how the tip of her tongue lightly flicked against his, how every deep breath she inhaled pushed those pert breasts of hers against him....

Suddenly the playing Sarplaninac below let loose another string of booming barks.

Red felt the woman reluctantly stir at the disruption, her lips sliding away from his. He, in turn, grudgingly loosened his fingers, slowly uncurling them from their tight hold on her waist.

Remaining tucked against his body, she shifted to press her forehead tenderly against his. “Bronn’s down there, you know,” she murmured, her uneven breath warm against his chin.

“Yes,” he sighed, the desirous heat in his blood beginning to cool as he acknowledged to himself that the time for her questions was imminent. He lifted his head to look down into her eyes, resettling the fur blanket over her slender shoulders. “I know.”

“What’s he doing here, Red? Is it because of last night?”

The man nodded, and upon seeing the confusion wrinkling her brow and more questions brimming in her gaze, he stepped back, taking her hands in his.

“Come, let’s talk inside where it’s warm,” he suggested, gently pulling her towards the master suite. “I’ve stoked the fire, and your breakfast—and coffee—are on the table.”

The orange glow of the newly-kindled flames danced across their bodies as they stepped over the threshold.

Liz sighed quietly in relief as Red pulled the doors closed behind them, blocking the chilly air from following them inside.

The firelight reached out past her to flicker along the edges of the bed, drawing her attention to the fact that the pillows had been straightened, and the sheets and comforter had been folded neatly over so that a fresh set of feminine clothes could be laid out.

Beyond the bed on the circular, mahogany table sat a wooden tray of covered dishes, two mugs, silverware, and a French press.

“What’s he doing here, Red? Is it because of last night?”

“Please,” she replied, draping the fur blanket over the back of the plush armchair before situating herself across from him. “Thank you for all this,” she began, gesturing in front of her, but he waved her gratitude aside.

Only once he finished doctoring her coffee the way she knew she liked and poured a mug for himself did he ease down into the other chair. Then he uncovered the plates to reveal generous helpings of
cut fruits, scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and crispy, golden hash browns.

His lips twitched humorously at the stunned look on her face as her eyes trailed over the heaping piles of food. “Baz doesn’t know how to make small portions when he cooks. He’s used to feeding himself—and other men,” he chuckled.

“Bottomless pits, the lot of you,” she teased lightly, grinning.

“You won’t hear one person under this roof deny it,” he airily concurred with a smile. “You don’t have to eat it all, Lizzy. This place certainly isn’t without more hungry mouths to feed! I’m sure someone around here will want what you don’t finish.”

Liz grabbed one of the bacon slices and bit off the fatty end. She hadn’t realized just how hungry she was until the salty grease touched her tongue. Glancing down at the rest she held pinched between her fingers, she chewed slowly, relishing the buttery taste and perfect texture.

“Baz is a good cook!” she declared once she swallowed.

“You sound surprised,” he remarked, tone dryly teasing her.

“I guess I shouldn’t be,” she admitted seriously after finishing the second piece, wiping her fingers on the cloth napkin. “I mean, he does have an eye for detail.” The guard had to be extremely attentive and keenly observant, after all. “Why shouldn’t that apply to when he’s cooking?”

Amused, Red leaned back in his chair. “He’ll be pleased to know you found his scrambled grub edible.”

Eyeing the full platters in front of her, she thought she might just make a considerable dent in them yet!

Silence fell between them as she ate, and as he idly sipped on his black coffee. But while it was a companionable quietude, it wasn’t quite a comfortable one any longer....for they both were aware of the necessary, heavy topics of discussion lingering just within reach.

A single word from him or a question from her would bring those looming topics veering down on them. And once they were in the throes of the serious discussion they’d put off last night, there was no pulling away from it.

Not this time.

Her eyes flicked to his profile as she chewed. The light streaming in through the windows caught on his stubble, his cheeks glinting blonde and silver and he tilted his chin up to take a drink.

_He obviously doesn’t want to be the one to start the conversation_, she thought, watching as he lowered his mug to gaze impassively out the window.

But it wasn’t as if she were chomping at the bit to begin it either.

Was she stalling because she was she afraid?

A frown crossed her face, her eyes flashing defiantly as she swallowed a forkful of eggs.

No. Not of him.

_Never_ of him.
But...she was apprehensive of what he would tell her. Of what she would learn.

And yet sitting here in prolonged silence would not change the truth of what happened last night, or their current situation.

Elizabeth decisively set her fork down on her plate. Even though she placed it with care, the light kiss of silver against ceramic clanged loudly, the harbinger of her questions.

Sensing his awareness of her sharpening even though he wasn’t looking at her, she bravely lifted her chin, clasping both hands tightly in her lap.

She may be trepidatious, but she wasn’t a coward.

The young woman was ready to hear the truth.

“Why were they trying to kill us, Red?” Elizabeth asked quietly.

It was blunt, but there wasn’t any possible way to soften a question like that.

The man’s green eyes shifted away from the window to settle on her face, his voice just as quiet as he answered, “Revenge.”

Her heart pounded as she allowed herself to finally acknowledge the staggering truth of what she had overheard last night. “Because you killed someone important to them.” It was amazing how the weighty words rolled so casually off of her tongue. But there was nothing casual at all about any of this. “I heard Baz in the car.”

His nostrils flared as he exhaled, the unconscious tick betraying his irritation with the guard’s lapse in judgement. But he didn’t hesitate to confirm the truth with a grim nod, “Yes.”

Ice ran through her veins as she dropped her gaze to stare at his hands...those large, roughly elegant hands she knew as well as her own. She was intimately familiar with every masculine line, nick, callus, and scar. They had wiped away her tears, traced her face, buried themselves in her hair, held her, caressed her...pleasured her.

And he had killed a man with them.

*Facts, Liz,* she cautioned herself, halting the swift flow of her thoughts before they could completely surround her and whirl her away. *Gather the facts.*

“Why?” She allowed herself to indulge in a fleeting yet powerful flash of pride for how steady her voice was. Then before it could fade, she mentally grasped hold of that feeling of pride. As she fiercely hung on, its assurance melted the chill in her blood, warming her, settling her.

“Because I had to.”

Her brow puckered, gaze lifting back to his.

The expression in his eyes was grave. “I’m a dangerous man, Elizabeth.”

Calmly she studied him.

His declaration didn’t shock her. Instinctively, for years, she had known he was as dangerous as any feral creature.

“I’ve had to adapt to the world I’ve become immersed in.”
The man wasn’t making excuses, she realized. He was stating a simple fact.

Her voice was soft as she asked, “And what kind of world is that, Red?”

A pensive gleam lit his eyes as he carefully leaned forward, propping his elbows on the table.

His movements were slow and deliberate. It was almost as if he thought any quick and sudden motion would startle her and give her the excuse to spring away from him and take to the skies like some wild, winged creature.

But she wasn’t about to flee from him.

Liz watched one of those strong hands curl lightly around the other, his thumb rubbing meditatively back and forth against his palm.

“A world,” he replied slowly, “that is made up of shades of gray.”

The criminal underworld? she desperately wanted him to clarify, but the question was stubbornly lodged deep down in her throat and she couldn’t force it past her lips.

The moment to ask it was gone in that split-second when he then bared his teeth in a faint, unhappy smile. “And those shades of gray can be quite...fluid, Lizzy.”

Fluid.

Tension thrummed through her. “Have you killed people before?” she murmured, unable to conceal the tremor of deep feeling in her voice this time. Like Forman?

Red stilled, regarding her ruminatively.

Liz wondered if he could sense her unspoken question beneath the one she asked aloud.

But rather than answering her immediately, he inquired in a low, gravelly tone, “Do you remember that story we saw on the news recently, Elizabeth? The one about the middle-aged man who abused—and raped—children?”

The woman visibly paled. A shudder of sorrow mingled with fury ran up her spine, causing her skin to prickle uncomfortably. Her hands curled tightly into fists, nails digging into her palms as visions of that soulless abomination and the photos of the ravaged girls and boys flashed before her unseeing eyes.

“It upset you,” he continued quietly, watching her. “It still upsets you.”

“Yeah,” she breathed, quickly blinking the crimson away from the edges of her vision and forcing herself to refocus on Red’s visage.

The look in his hard eyes was savagely fierce as they locked onto hers. “That man—that sick pedophile, that monstrous son-of-a-bitch...it is his kind, the scum of society, that I dispatch to Hell.”

A fresh wave of goosebumps rolled over her, but this time it was in reaction to the cold ferocity in his expression...to the strength and conviction in his voice.

“A vigilante,” she whispered in astonishment. “You’re a vigilante.”

“...Of sorts,” he soberly acknowledged her shock as a faint, humorless smile momentarily blurred the severe line of his mouth.
Elizabeth stared silently at the man she loved, who she knew so well...and yet at the same time, who she didn’t really know well at all.

Jesus, how long had he been leading this kind of...double-life?

As she thought back on his visits when she’d been just a girl, she realized it wouldn’t surprise her if it had been for her entire lifetime. Perhaps for even longer.

There was not one shred of doubt in her mind now that Red had killed her attacker, Grady Forman. He would never admit it out loud to her, but he must have committed the act. And he had killed others like Forman...like that pedophile rapist on the news.

The darkness in her soul gave a low, crooning growl of satisfaction.

Just like she had craved Forman’s death, hadn’t she just been viciously wishing for that horrific man on the news to be put down like a rabid animal?

Nevermind the proper channels. The brute didn’t deserve a trial. Didn’t deserve prison. Didn’t deserve the hardworking taxpayers giving up part of their hard-earned wages to prolong his miserable existence.

The bastard deserved to die a long and slow, horrible death for what he’d done to those innocent children.

And her lover could make that happen.

The knowledge was dizzyingly heady.

Liz lowered her gaze, all of a sudden terribly conflicted.

As a young woman aspiring to work for the FBI, she shouldn’t ever want to bypass the system to exact her own brand of justice on anyone. The federal structure of complex checks and balances was there for a reason, after all.

She wasn’t naive—she knew the system was far from perfect. But the civilized world would turn to chaotic anarchy if people took the law into their own hands and did what they willed with it.

However, in knowing that some of those barbaric fiends out there really were reaping what they sowed...and that Red was a part of the underground system ensuring that the reaping transpired....

God.

She had to admit it to herself—even despite the significant reservations she felt—it was all...gratifying.

“Elizabeth.”

His deep rasp abruptly shook her from her confused and discordant thoughts, and she looked up into his face.

His fierce eyes snatched and held hers, beseeching her to believe his next words. “I would never hurt you.”

Liz gazed back at him, tongue-tied and perplexed. Of course he wouldn’t. She knew that!

Then it hit her—he thought her lengthy, heavy silence was due to fear of him.
And despite these grave revelations coming to light, she found she still truly wasn’t afraid of him.

Was she feeling...wary, though? Yes.

But only as any person would naturally feel wary of a panther, or a wolf...a predator that wouldn't harm another unless it had been threatened or harmed first.

And feeling wariness wasn’t the same as feeling fear.

“No,” she told him firmly, finally finding her voice. “I know you wouldn't.”

“Do you?” he challenged quietly, searching her face for not just what he wanted to see, but for the truth.

Affronted, the young woman lifted her chin. “I've *never* been afraid of you,” she growled, irritated that he would question her sincerity. “And I'm not afraid of you now.”

At her stout reassurance, gentle warmth briefly flared in his eyes, some of the tension in his shoulders easing. And while he was more than just merely grateful for it, he was intuitively intelligent enough to understand that even though she didn’t fear him, she certainly wasn’t at ease with him either.

It was painful to see such caution in those beautiful eyes, but he couldn't blame her for that. In fact, he would be much more concerned about her if she wasn’t expressing some kind disquiet because of what he had revealed.

Considering the gravity of their talk and her own unsettled feelings, she was handling all of it with admirable composure. Not every young woman would conduct herself with such aplomb in the wake of a disconcerting admission like this.

But then, Elizabeth Scott wasn’t like most young women.

Red expected she would be guarded for some time while she digested what he had confided to her. And he would give her that time, and, ultimately, that emotional distance he knew she needed in order to come to terms with everything...with him.

Unfortunately for her, he couldn't be as generous with the desired amount of physical distance between them while she came to terms with everything.

“Those Japanese men are still hunting for me, Elizabeth,” he said, swiftly changing the course of their discussion to the direction it needed to head. “And for you.”

“Because we're involved,” she murmured softly.

He nodded grimly, grateful she understood why she was a target without him having to explain. “We need to lie low for a while here.”

Anxious concern glittered in her eyes. “For how long?”

“Until the immediate danger has passed,” he stoically informed her. “It could be days, Lizzy. Even weeks.”

“Weeks!” she exclaimed, startled, the word compounding the extreme severity of their situation.

“Weeks,” he affirmed with a perfunctory nod.

“Jesus,” she breathed, leaning back in her chair. “So that's why Bronn's here.”
“As well as your most important educational and personal effects.”

Desperation flooded her pale face. “Oh, shit, Red...school—”

“You won’t be able to go,” he confirmed gently.

Distressed, she began to protest. But when he calmly held up a hand, his silent request for her to hear him out, she pressed her lips into a thin, frustrated line.

“I know you have important seminars and deadlines coming up. Your laptop is here, and we have WiFi, so you’ll be able to communicate with your professors and turn in your assignments on time.”

“I’m in the advanced courses, Red. My profs just won’t let me work from home,” she disagreed worriedly, shaking her head.

“They will when you email them a doctor’s note explaining you have the shingles.”

“The shingles?” Elizabeth frowned at him. “I don’t have the shingles.”

“According to your new doctor, who just so happens to be Aaron’s doctor....you do. You were diagnosed this morning.”

She stared at him, understanding dawning on her. “You can do that?” The question popped out of her mouth before she could even consider the intelligence of it. Dragging her bottom lip between her teeth, she winced for her lapse.

Considering all that she had just learned...of course he could.

Red’s sardonic smile was self-deprecating. “With enough connections and money, Elizabeth...you can do almost anything.”

“Apparently,” she murmured in an undertone, shooting a significant look at him that was at once both wry and troubled.

“I know none of this is...easy...to hear, or even accept, Elizabeth. And I’m sorry for that,” Red apologized, his sincere expression strained. “I’m sorry for what you went through last night, and for the repercussions you have to deal with now because of it.”

Horribly conflicted and at a loss for words, she looked down. “Red....”

But he saved her from having to respond by quickly interjecting, “There is one more thing you must do while you’re here.”

“What?” she quietly wanted to know.

“You need to change your appearance.”

“What?” Bemused, she glanced up.

Red’s eyes traced down the wealth of dark hair shot through with red that drifted over her breasts. “Your hair,” he clarified regretfully. “You’ll need to dye it another color.”

She lifted a hand, fingers twining possessively around one of the long, glossy locks. “But...I thought I can’t leave the house.”

“For your safety...you can’t leave the property;” he made sure to voice the distinction. “But if we are
forced to evacuate this place, you can’t look like the young woman who came through the front door last night.”

“But, I thought....” Her voice trailed off, stress creasing her brow as a second later the question burst from her, “Red, aren’t we safe here?”

He wouldn’t lie to her, and he held too much respect for her to downplay the seriousness of their situation. “We are for now. The odds of the Japanese finding this place are slim, but we need to plan for every possibility that may arise. Evacuation is one.”

It was so much to take in. Almost too much. In one night, her entire life had been turned upside down and inside out.

Feeling suddenly drained, she closed her eyes. “All right.”

“One of the staff here helping the doctors downstairs is a plastic surgeon. But he also has training as a cosmetologist. He’ll help you.” Slowly the man rose to his feet. “I’ll send him to find you in a few hours. Around three?”

“Where are you going?” she inquired softly, watching numbly as he made a show of looking down at his watch.

“I need to meet with Baz so he can inform me of any new developments about our...situation.” He patted his pocket reassuringly. “I have my phone. If you need me....”

Liz stood uncertainly. “Will I see you later?”

A span of a heartbeat passed. Then two. Then, “Do you want to see me later?”

The woman hesitated.

A pained but knowing half-smile ghosted at the corners of his mouth when she didn’t answer immediately.

“How about this, Lizzy....” He waited until she bravely met his eyes before continuing, “If you want to see me, call me. Or text me. I’ll come to you then. All right?”

“....Okay,” she whispered.

The man feigned ignorance of the valiant attempt she was making in blinking back the wet sheen welling in her stricken eyes.

“Red....”

He shook his head understandingly as he reached out. Gently he pressed the tips of his fingers to the soft place just beneath her jaw, thumb brushing against her chin in a light caress.

“It’s all right, honey,” he husked, trying to absolve her of her guilt. She was the very last person under this roof who should be feeling any kind of self-reproach. “Really.” His touch fell away from her as he stepped back.

Elizabeth needed time to herself. Time away from him. Red knew that. And it was that intuitive awareness of what she really needed that forced him to ignore the quiet, feminine sound of distress that could have been a sigh, or a sob, as he slipped soundlessly from the bedroom.
Chapter End Notes
It feels so good to be back after a much-needed four-month hiatus :)

There are a few new illustrations that were added to *Sine Qua Non* during my break (listed below). I hope you enjoy looking at them!

An illustration for this chapter will be added next week. If you’re interested in seeing how Kris brought a particular scene to life, watch this space :)

To those of you who have stuck with me for two years, and to those of you who are new readers, thank you *so much* for your support!

I truly appreciate you all taking the time to read what I write here. Please know that every kindness shown, whether it’s a kudos or a treasured comment, means the world to this hobbyist writer.

Thank you always to my supportive betas, Daniel and Jami, who are a source of constant encouragement and inspiration ❤

**Chapters with Illustrations**

*New* Chapter 74: The Discussion
*New* Chapter 2: The Right Thing
*New* Chapter 62: A Pastime To Indulge In
*New* Chapter 24: Involved
*New* Chapter 47: Strength And Fragility
*New* Chapter 73: The Release
*New* Chapter 23: Crossing The Line
*New* Chapter 72: The Aftermath
Chapter 1: Night Terrors
Chapter 4: I’ll Miss You
Chapter 5: Solace
Chapter 6: Worthy Of Friendship
Chapter 7: Affirmation
Chapter 8: Sweet Sixteen
Chapter 11: The Howling Maelstrom
Chapter 12: Rise Up Stronger
Chapter 16: A Disquiet In His Soul
Chapter 17: Metamorphosis
Chapter 18: Islanded In A Stream Of Stars
Chapter 19: The Give And Take
Chapter 22: Indestructible
Chapter 35: Definitive Intentions
Chapter 40: You're Safe Now
Chapter 41: The Early Signs Of Trauma
Chapter 44: An Unexpected Gift
Chapter 48: A Spirit Of Fire
Chapter 50: At Last
Chapter 51: Interlude V
Chapter 53: Building Confidence
Chapter 58: Liberation
Chapter 60: Solemn Contemplation And Grave Decisions
Chapter 61: A Night Out On The Town
Chapter 63: A Night In
Chapter 64: All Calm, As It Was Bright
Chapter 68: Surprises
Chapter 69: Of Carfuffles And Carnality
Chapter 70: Greatest Joys (congratulations to Kris for winning a Daily Deviation Award on DeviantArt for the illustration of Red and young Lizzy dancing!)

UPDATE: I have commissioned an artist team to illustrate scenes from this story. These gorgeous pieces of artwork are by jen-and-kris. Do not use/repost without my permission. Thank you!
April 30, 2007

It was about five o’clock in the evening when Elizabeth finally found herself alone in the east wing of the house—her designated wing—staring in disbelief at herself in the wide mirror above the distressed wooden dresser.

She could hardly believe it was her own reflection gazing back at her...she looked so different!

And it wasn’t necessarily a bad different, but it would take some time for her to get used to the new platinum blonde locks framing her face and flowing down her back in icy waves.

Ultimately it didn’t matter if her vanity was uncertain about whether or not she could pull this bold, silvery look off. Her white-gold style would aid in concealing who she really was if she and Red had to evacuate this place...and that’s all that really mattered.

“Jesus,” she breathed, shaking her head as she braced her slim palms on the dresser’s top, fingers curling tightly over the edges.

Evacuation.

What a frighteningly surreal thought!

In fact, the last eighteen hours had been a surreally unparalleled fusion of the bloody violence she’d expect to see in a spy thriller, and the cold, hard facts of her actual reality.

And now that she was all alone in this room, with nothing and no one around to distract her from thinking, she was highly conscious of the agitation pulsing deep within born from her wariness of Red, which in itself was foreign and discomfiting, and feelings of anxiety for the dangerous situation they were in.

Inhaling deeply, Liz squeezed her eyes tightly shut and mentally attempted to cut the seeking, spiraling tendrils of fear back down to the festering root.

Silently she bared her teeth in something akin to a grimace as she lashed out at those questing vines. She couldn’t uproot that putrid weed, but she could suppress it.

And she would, especially while she began to think things through.

The entire day had whizzed by so swiftly she’d barely had time to dwell on anything she learned this morning during her conversation with Red.

What with inquisitively exploring the sprawling mansion, reconnecting with Bronn and Evan when she finally made it outside, visiting Aaron like she’d promised, and emailing the deceptive doctor’s note to all her professors just before being bundled up into a chair to have her appearance changed, she could barely draw in an even breath, let alone think clearly.

But the truth Red had revealed about himself and the dangerous situation they faced had hovered just outside the inner barriers of her mind all afternoon. It had slowly and sinuously unfurled, brushing
her consciousness, insistently prodding her to not just acknowledge its existence, but to focus her complete attention on it.

All so she could come to some definitive decisions about how she really felt about her lover...and what he’d told her.

And now that she was in here alone, she could.

A loud knock sounded on her bedroom door, jarring her from her grave musings.

The young woman started, eyes flying open as a masculine voice dryly bellowed, “Are you decent?”

Rolling her eyes skyward, Liz snorted despite herself, dryly amused, relieved, and irritated all at once with the interruption. “Yeah!”

A second later Baz let himself into her suite, a wolfish grin on his face.

“Thanks for actually, you know, knocking this time,” she said wryly, her tone caught somewhere between levity and embarrassment as she recalled the last time the guard had walked in on her without making his presence known first.

She had been half-naked and sensually straddling Red’s lap, both of them locked in a deeply passionate kiss and near wild with sexual arousal.

“Hey, I learned my lesson,” Baz soothed seriously, holding up both his hands in a pacifying gesture.

However, the good-natured, teasing glint in his eyes belied his remark.

“And hopefully forgot everything you saw,” she growled warningly.

“As if I was temporarily struck blind,” the man gravely promised, meeting her in the sitting area of the femininely rustic suite.

Liz didn’t believe the lie for a second, but it still made her feel a little better to hear it.

As he moved closer, she watched the mirth fade from his expression, keen gaze taking in her new style. “You look good, Liz.”

“Thanks.” A self-conscious smile tugged at the corner of her mouth as she reached up to run uncertain fingers through her hair. “Not sure if I like it, but....” she hitched a shoulder, sitting down on the sofa. “That doesn’t really matter in the grand scheme of it all.”

“No,” Baz agreed seriously, easing down into the armchair across from her. “It doesn’t. But trust me...you look good.” Then he suddenly scowled. “Almost too good,” he admonished sternly. “You’re supposed to blend in with the crowd—not stand out!”

Her lips twitched again as she shrugged, unable to deny that she found both his sincere compliment and almost familial protectiveness comforting.

“Apparently more women are dyeing their hair this color than any other blonde color this year,” Liz informed him.

At his raised eyebrow, she wrinkled her nose, explaining, “I got the full rundown on how that little tidbit of information was discovered ‘through hours of research.’”

Baz snorted at her exaggerated tone, recognizing the feigned lilt of an Italian accent. “Antony told
“He also told me it’s his job to know everything about the country’s current feminine and masculine fashion trends—and plastic surgery procedures.”

“He does get paid a pretty penny for knowing things,” the man confirmed, leaning back in his chair. “And for performing such procedures.”

“Who’s had plastic surgery?” Liz curiously wanted to know. Then her eyes widened as she exclaimed, “Not—not Red!”

He cocked an eyebrow at her. “You’d have to ask him, Liz.”

The woman nervously bit her lip, looking away. “I think I’ve asked him enough questions for one day.”

“Ah.” The guard’s expression was knowing. “I figured you were hiding in here because of all that.”

**All that.**

Piqued, her eyes immediately darted back to his face. “I’m not *hiding,*” she frowned defensively. “I’m...thinking.” Or had been right before he’d barged in here.

“All right,” he nodded affably. “You’re thinking. Want to talk about it?”

“Talk about it?” she repeated uncertainly.

“Or not,” Baz shrugged, deciding to speak frankly. She knew what he was referring to, after all. “But I know you well enough to know that sometimes you need to vent when you feel muddled up inside.”

“You think I feel muddled?”

“Well,” he eyed her candidly, “you have been upstairs for a while...thinking.”

Liz pursed her lips when he lightly but pointedly emphasized the word, her fingers absently playing with the ties on her yoga shorts as she wavered indecisively.

She was feeling so conflicted, and her thoughts were now chasing each other so quickly around in her mind, she was almost afraid that she wouldn’t be able to speak coherently.

Not to mention she was already feeling vulnerable. Revealing her most private thoughts about Red to Baz would make her feel even more so.

But...God, the guard was right about her. Venting aloud had helped her in the past. Why would this instance be the exception?

Maybe she really could wade through her confusion and find some clarity if she talked to someone. And Baz was the only person here she knew well enough to feel even a shred of comfort with while talking about Red.

And he knew it. It was why he was here with her now.

Liz shifted nervously on the suede cushion. It wouldn’t be easy to discuss any of this...but she would try. “How much did Red tell you?”
“Enough.” At the questioning look she slanted his way, he clarified gently, “Enough to know this hasn’t been an easy day for you.”

Silence, heavy and absolute, filled the room.

After a pregnant span, her soft murmur broke it, “I love him.”

The guard could hear the sincere depth of her feelings trembling in those three words.

“I know you do,” he murmured back, watching her brow pucker, the intense, conflicting emotions shadowing her eyes.

“That’s what makes this so...” her low voice thickened, “so hard.”

“Makes what hard?”

Liz cleared her throat, her tone becoming stronger than it had been the longer she spoke, “Knowing that Red...that he killed a man. That he’s killed other men.”

“And women.” At her shocked look, the guard bared his teeth in a hard smile. “Red doesn’t discriminate because of gender, Liz. Doesn’t matter to him if the cunt in question has balls or tits. If they’re a blight on the world....” he let the words hang, the meaning behind them as clear as a bell.

She exhaled a sharp breath at that.

Bemused, Baz shook his head. “You’re a smart girl. Clever. Highly observant. And I don’t mean to sound like an ass when I say this, but...considering how long you’ve known him, the thought that he’s capable of killing must have crossed your mind before, right?”

Flushing, she looked down at the scabs on her bruised knees. “Deep down, I always knew he was...dangerous.”

Patiently he waited for her explanation.

Her expression grew pensive as she thought back over the years. “There was a time in high school when I got caught up with the wrong sort of guy....” she trailed off, rubbing the side of her neck as if she could scour away the shame she felt in falling for such a pathetic loser.

“What happened?” Baz encouraged quietly.

She chanced a glance over at him. Slightly bolstered by the fact that there wasn’t any censure darkening his eyes, she lowered her hand to absently rub it against her thigh as she continued, “He got...abusive. And Red.... Well, he beat the shit out of him. Scared him off.”

The guard nodded grimly. He certainly wasn't surprised by his employer's actions, but he was surprised Red hadn’t completely done away with the bastard, especially if the prick had laid hands on Liz.

Red must have had his reasons for letting the asshole live.

“And then last year....” her tone became quieter, “after the attack, after I came to stay with him...he suddenly had to leave one night. Wouldn’t tell me why. I fell asleep waiting for him. And then...later...I woke up to the sound of running water and him cursing in the bathroom.”

Liz could vividly see Red how he had been that night as if he were standing directly in front of her now, wearing nothing but his boxers, uncharacteristically vulnerable in more ways than just one, a
tired, wary gleam in his eyes as she approached.

“The way he was standing....” she shared slowly, “I could tell he was exhausted. Not just physically, but...in his heart, too. And his hands were really swollen. There were deep, bleeding gashes on his knuckles...here.”

The woman rubbed a thumb across her own knuckles in remembrance. Then she blinked, glancing up at the guard.

“I thought then that maybe...maybe he killed Forman.”

Baz wisely remained impassive at the onslaught of her intently searching gaze. “And does that bother you?” he asked carefully.

“No!” she snapped with fierce surety. However, the moment the word left her mouth, confusion once again clouded the clarity the man had momentarily seen in her eyes. “But...it should, shouldn’t it?”

“Why?” he seriously wanted to know. “Forman was a depraved fucker. A rapist. A cold-blooded murderer. Do you really want him to be alive, still prowling the streets, still preying on women like you?”

The blood drained from her face at the thought. “No!” she snarled.

“Then I don’t understand why you’re troubled by the idea of Red wiping scum like him off the face of the Earth.”

“Because it's—it's murder.”

“You say tomayto,” he shrugged. “Red says tomahto.”

Appalled, Liz stared at him. “How can you be so flippant about this?” she demanded hotly.

“Not flippant, per se,” Baz calmly countered, thoughtfully stroking his fingers down his goatee. “Maybe blasé is a better word.”

The woman shook her head incredulously.

“I’ll tell you something, Liz,” the man said into the brief lull, leaning forward to rest his forearms on his knees, fingers lacing together. “I’m glad Red does what he does, when he needs to do it. You should be too. The world can be a sinister, horrifying place. But it becomes just that much safer when he takes one of the monsters down.”

Elizabeth’s desperate expression beseeched him. “Then he should work for the police, or the FBI, or the CIA, or—”

Baz cut her off with a rough bark of laughter at the absurdity of the notion. “Red would never allow the law to limit his freedom.”

He could see a ruddy, self-conscious flush creeping up her neck to color her cheeks, and he immediately regretted his reactive response.

She didn't understand that he wasn't really laughing at her.

But the very idea of his employer working for any agency was utterly ludicrous.
Red held the law and those hypocritical, political animals enforcing it in sneering contempt. Over the years, he and his seasoned men, including Baz himself, had observed countless atrocities committed by members of those agencies sworn to protect the victims they actually created.

Red and his people could never respect a broken and corrupted system that couldn't—and wouldn't—uphold true justice.

“The law isn’t limiting,” she protested. “It would give him the freedom to go after these bad people—but on the right side!”

“And by ‘the right side’ you mean ‘the good side,’ right? The side criminals—”

She flinched at the word.

“—certainly can’t be on.”

He took her pained, indignant glare for assent.

“All right,” he nodded his understanding. “So by your logic, Red would be doing the right thing only if he had an official badge of some government agency on his person?”

“You’re mocking me,” she bristled.

“No, Liz,” Baz returned firmly. “I’m not. I’m trying to understand where your head’s at.”

“It would make what he’s doing legal!” the words burst from her.

“Oh, honey....” The guard’s smile was sad. Sometimes he forgot just how young she was, and how naive she could be. “Having a badge doesn’t automatically legalize your actions. There are plenty of fuckers out there who have one, and they’re as corrupt as they come.”

Embarrassed, she looked away. “I know the system isn’t perfect,” she replied after a moment. “And I know not all cops or agents are good people. I watch the news. I know that.” Her blue eyes pierced his. “But then that means there are good people working in the ranks, too. And Red could be one of those. If he had a badge—all badge—”

“It wouldn’t mean a damn thing,” Baz interrupted bluntly. “Because badges don’t give you freedom, and they definitely don’t give you an identity. They don’t make you a good person, or a bad person. Your actions make you who you are.”

Disconcerted, Elizabeth dragged the corner of her lower lip between her teeth.

What he said was a truth she knew well, for she had grown up being taught that very lesson. She could almost hear Sam’s warm, fatherly voice murmuring in her ear: Actions always speak louder than words, Lizzy. Remember that.

Not only she had she been raised on those words, but throughout the years, she had seen the truth of the sentiment in others, and in herself.

“Don’t you agree?” the man prodded quietly.

“Yeah,” she whispered. Yet when her eyes finally flicked to his, they were still full of doubt. “But...it's still murder, Baz.”

“Of sadistic cunts who deserve what's coming to them.”
“People like Forman...they deserve to die,” she agreed, eyes snapping fiercely. “But the law should find them guilty and sentence them to death...not Red.”

“The system has let him down too many fucking times for him to put his trust in it. It’s why he does what he does.”

“It makes him a criminal,” she said, distressed.

“We all are, Liz,” the man asserted quietly. “Every person under this roof, in his employ, is technically considered a criminal in the eyes of the law.”

As she wordlessly stared, it occurred to him that perhaps she hadn’t fully realized it until just now.

“Does that make us terrible people?” He shrugged an indifferent shoulder. “Maybe to some it would. But what about to you?”

“The...actions are terrible,” she replied in an undertone. “The murders.”

“But we established earlier that actions make you who you are. Does Red deserve to be labeled terrible for doing away with the perverted degenerates of society?” He intently searched her face. “You don't really believe that, do you? Not after all the years you've known him. Not after everything he's done for you. Not after seeing for yourself what true evil is.”

Slowly she shook her head, and Baz wondered if she were disagreeing with him or silently answering his question. “Murder is serious.”

“Yeah, it is,” he readily admitted. “But the world isn't black and white, Liz. People aren't black and white.”

He straightened to slowly lean back in his chair once more. "Some of us are lighter or darker than others, but really, we're all just shades of gray. Me, you, Red.... The sooner you accept that, the easier it'll be to live in the word. To really understand people.” He held her eyes with his. "To really understand Red.”

“I feel like I don't know him at all anymore,” she confided quietly. “Maybe I never really knew him. Not like I thought I did.”

“No,” Baz shook his head emphatically. “Don't you even think about going there.”

Affronted, Liz shot an icy glare his way. “It's how I feel!” she bit out.

“Red's the same man he's always been,” the guard was adamant. “All that's different is now you know more about his...professional life.”

“And we're literally being hunted by a pack of Japanese thugs,” she muttered dryly. “That's different, too.”

He gave a surprised, wryly appreciative snort for her quick, if sarcastic, wit.

“...It changes the dynamic of our relationship,” she murmured, tone suddenly much more solemnly contemplative.

He regarded her steadily. “Only if you let it.”

“He should have told me a long time ago,” she muttered in frustration, anger glinting in her eyes.
“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Are you really asking me that?”

“Do you know the answer?” she parried back, watching him closely.

“I could tell you what I think,” the man slowly replied, fishing his suddenly buzzing phone out of his pocket and glancing down at the summons onscreen, “but...I really think you need to ask him that question yourself, Liz. And I’d ask him sooner rather than later.” He rose to his feet. “I have to go.”

“Why? What do you mean?” she asked quickly, referring to his previous statement, as she stood to follow him to her suite’s door.

“I know you’re trying to process everything, and that you need some time to do it.” His expression was understanding as he turned toward her. “We all expect that. Especially him. But...” his tone lowered, “don’t wait too long to see him.”

Don’t let a rift form.

The young woman folded her slim arms over her chest, looking anywhere but at him as she lifted her foot to restlessly dig the tip of her big toe into the lush carpet beneath them.

“I can tell you, Liz, he would’ve given his life to ensure this danger never touched yours.”

Instantly her edgy movements stilled as the weight of his grave words settled over her, and her sapphire gaze lifted to his face.

“But now that it has, he’s doing everything in his power to protect you.”

For the second time that day, Elizabeth fought against the sudden tears threatening to spill from her. She slowly tightened her jaw, willing herself to be strong.

Baz paused consideringly, taking silent note of the sheen of various emotions gleaming in her eyes.

Then, choosing his words with care, he continued, “Your feelings for him might be...in flux...right now, but his for you....” a faint smile ghosted over his mouth. “Well, they’re not.”

She curled her arms even tighter around herself at that. “You said earlier that I need time. You’re right...I do,” she told him softly. “But my feelings for him...they’re the one thing I’m still sure about.”

The look he gave her was appraising, his steady expression warmer than it had been.

“You should tell him that,” he advised before taking his leave, closing the door quietly behind him.

He hoped she would.

Chapter End Notes

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*New* Chapter 74: The Discussion
*New* Chapter 2: The Right Thing
*New* Chapter 62: A Pastime To Indulge In
*New* Chapter 24: Involved
*New* Chapter 47: Strength And Fragility
*New* Chapter 73: The Release
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Chapter 70: Greatest Joys (congratulations to Kris for winning a Daily Deviation Award on DeviantArt for the illustration of Red and young Lizzy dancing!)

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Thank you!
April 30, 2007

“Your feelings for him might be...in flux...right now, but his for you.... Well, they’re not.”

“You said earlier that I need time. You're right...I do. But my feelings for him...they're the one thing I’m still sure about.”

“You should tell him that.”

Try as she could to think about anything else, Baz’s parting suggestion continued to echo in Elizabeth’s mind long after he left.

Even her desperate escape into the flowing stream of her daily yoga routine...into the concentrated effort and comforting familiarity of the fluid movements...wasn’t enough to completely drown out the guard’s quiet advice or grave assertions.

....Or the relentless conflict all his arguments compounded within her.

Her conversation with Baz hadn’t helped clear her mind. If anything, she was now even more uncertain of how to smoothly reconcile what her conscience demanded was right with the compelling standpoint the guard shared with Red.

The very foundations of her moral compass were wavering unsteadily, and that left her shaken and clinging tightly to the loosened blocks of her ethics as they swayed to and fro.

But while her emotions were in upheaval, she wasn’t cringing in fear, and her eyes weren’t squeezed shut in despair or revulsion.

Instead, she was braced firmly against the edges of her morality, and her eyes were wide open to actually see the shadowy facets that made up her small corner of the world...tinted facets she couldn’t claim ignorance of any longer.

As Liz rose once again from child’s pose to downward-facing dog, carefully stretching out her sore legs, she admitted to herself the ringing truth of Baz’s statement: all people were complicated shades of gray.

And Red especially.

She frowned reflectively, walking forward to safely hang in the rag doll position, hoping the tension in her spine would bleed from her the longer she stayed there, staring down at where her mat met the lush carpet.

Like she’d told Baz, she had started to sense the feral darkness residing in Red a long time ago. And like she’d declared to Red himself this morning, she wasn’t frightened of him—had never been frightened of him.

She had always known he loved her.

Just like she knew it now.
The young woman slowly rolled her body until she was standing upright, then she extended a toned leg in a precise lunge, palms pressing together and raising to the ceiling to complete the warrior pose.

Over the years, as the curling vines of her friendship with Red intertwined and strengthened, the buds of intimate trust and heady passion unfurling into romance, that sleek, predatory savagery of his had incrementally revealed itself to her.

....Until the violent events of last night had forced Red to abruptly and fully unmask it this morning.

It had been poised starkly there in the depths of his sober, green eyes, proud and stiff-legged and virilely naked in all its aggressive, feral glory.

And now Liz had to make a choice: she could either wheel and run blindly away from that snarling, dangerous ferocity as fast as she could and never look back.

Or...she could approach it, shedding the layers of her wary distress until she was as bare and as vulnerable as he, and then bury her hands in its bristling ruff, closely embracing that severe part of him she didn’t know if she could ever fully understand but instinctively knew she could trust.

The woman brought her feet parallel and straightened fluidly, keeping her arms lifted high and her slim hands pinned together.

Now that the dark, grim ruthlessness in Red had been fully revealed to her, would she be able to embrace it...to accept it?

Liz squeezed her eyes shut at the question.

She was honest enough with herself to gravely admit she didn’t know if she could.

But she did know she could never run from him.

After dragging in a deep, controlled breath, she curved her spine slightly backward in upward salute, baring her slender throat to the lurid rays of the sunset streaming in through the tall windows.

Memories flashed before her closed eyes as she did so, snippets of moments she’d shared with Red over the long years that had aided in forging who exactly he was to her: her friend, her confidant, her lover.

The woman could almost feel his strong hands lifting her six-year-old self onto the rope swing dangling from the old bur oak tree, safely positioning her so she wouldn’t fall.

The tender look on his face as he affectionately tweaked her nose.

His wildly joyful shout ringing on the wind as they galloped Conny and the stud together across verdant fields.

His teasing laugh booming throughout the house as she frenziedly attempted to take control of one of her many kitchen mishaps.

The cold, cold rage burning in his fierce eyes when he saw what Derek had done to her.

The way he held her hand in his bloodied one on the night she opened up to him about how she got the cigarette burns above her breast.

How through his tight, sympathetic grip, he lent her the strength to speak.
The searing jolt of secret pleasure she felt during those first couple years of college when his searching looks and warm embraces began to linger longer than was deemed merely friendly.

The sincere depth of his empathy when Sam died.

That raw, passionate first kiss they shared in the loft.

The intimate heat gleaming in his eyes when they made love together under the vibrant river of Nebraskan stars.

Their heated arguments.

Their emotional pain.

Their incandescent joy.

When he cupped her cheek in his palm, hungry eyes soft in the night as he told her he loved her for the first time.

How he took care of her after Forman’s assault.

His limitless patience and gentleness.

His long fingers stroking away her tears, carding through her hair, cradling her face.

The practical advice he imparted to her during their many sleepless nights.

His unwavering support.

The way his hard body felt beneath hers as she rolled to confidently take him inside herself for the first time since the attack.

How he husked encouragement and endearments in her ear as she thrust over him, bringing them both to an aching release.

His white teeth flashing in his smiling face as they danced together under the glowing, iridescent lights of the nightclub.

That knowing grin suddenly twisting into a ferocious snarl as he hunched protectively over her, shielding her from the dangerous hail of shattered glass—and stream of deadly bullets attempting to kill them.

How his hand bruisingly clutchted hers as they fled for their lives.

His gentleness as he picked shards of glass from her matted hair, as he gripped her shoulders to keep her from swaying with exhaustion, as he held her in his lap, deep voice coaxing and reassuring.

The way he brought her back into the silken sheets of his bed, his lips latching fervently onto hers, kissing her breathless as if it were their last night in this world.

His gravelly voice rippling over her like a wave curling upon the shore: “Do you know how dear you are to me?”

The way his hot breath rasped harshly in her ear as he moved so deeply inside of her.

“How precious you are?”
His rough fingertip gently tracing the skin beneath her eye, a silent request for her to look at him as he murmured, “Do you know... Do you really know... how much I love you?”

How their moans sensually mingled together when they both finally crested the peaks of their desire.

When he tenderly wrapped the fur blanket around her this morning, lightly and companionably resting his unshaven chin on her shoulder.

How it felt to be surrounded by his warm bulk... his unyielding strength.

When she turned around in his arms and saw his pride in her softening the deep lines of stress etching his features.

The pained smile shadowing his countenance as he husked, “It’s all right, honey. Really.”

His discerning regard as he lingeringly caressed her chin before stepping back from her, an uneasy silence straining between them.

As that particular, difficult moment flooded Liz’s consciousness, she found herself reflecting for the first time that even though this morning had been distressing for her, it had to have been just as hard on him.

Countless days of her life were wound with Red’s. In fact, she couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t been there.

He was her polestar, the one constant she knew she could always depend on.

Even when they’d gone through the rough patches at the beginning of their involvement, those particular lengths of time when she’d been so furious with him and had punished him by isolating herself and refusing to speak to him... she had known he was still there, an omniscient presence pacing tirelessly beside her, just out of sight.

Despite her vexed disappointment in him, she had known that when she finally wanted to, she could whirl defiantly around and confront him, thus effectively entering into his sphere once again.

And while that past discord between them had been disquieting, it hadn’t disturbed her as deeply as his reveal this morning had.

Before dawn had set the sky alight, she had known herself. But now, the very foundations of her morality were breached, and that rush left her smarting and vulnerable.

So for him to have observed her troubled uncertainty, her wary hesitation, while knowing he was the cause of it....

God.

Even though he must have expected such a reaction from her, it couldn’t have been easy for him to see it.

Not after being intimately close to her for so long.

Guilt pierced Liz, its jagged edges cutting into the turmoil of emotions surging within her as she straightened her back, eyes finally flickering open to stare straight ahead.

She was justified in needing distance from Red, so she felt she shouldn’t harbor such aching regret... but she did.
Because in spite of the shocking revelation that he was a dangerous criminal who had the blood of other murderers on his hands, and in spite of the apprehensive conflict gnawing at her heart, she loved him.

It was more than somewhat bewildering that she could be so unnerved by—and be so angry at—the man while simultaneously loving him so much.

But like she had confided to Baz earlier, the swell of her deep-seated feelings for Red was the one thing she was certain of in this convoluted web of vacillation.

And Red wouldn't know that unless she told him herself.

Guilt once again lanced through the young woman’s troubled heart as she pivoted around, indecisive gaze locking onto the closed door of her suite.

There was a large part of her that wanted to stay enclosed within the rustic elegance of this room—to be alone. However, she couldn't deny it to herself anymore: there was an even larger part of her that wanted to see Red, wanted to talk to him...wanted to ask him the questions burning uncomfortably inside of her, wanted to firmly establish that even though she still needed time, she also desired to keep the line of communication open between them.

*Don’t let a rift form.*

Before the sudden impulse could flee from her consciousness, Elizabeth steeled herself and moved decisively toward the door.
My apologies for the incredibly short length of this chapter. The plan was for it to be much longer, but I’ll be leaving soon for a couple weeks and I didn’t want any more time to go by without giving you guys something to read :) The illustration for this chapter is almost complete. I will post it here once I’m able to. Both Kris and I are so excited about it :D It’s really different than anything you’ve seen here before!

EDIT: I have now added the illustration :) Kris and I worked closely together to show how Liz visualizes Red’s inner, dangerous, feral side. It’s difficult to take an abstract concept and turn it into something tangible, but I think Kris did an amazing job here. It kinda gives off some Beauty and the Beast vibes, huh? Something Lizzingtons have compared Liz and Red to before...

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Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!