Lost in the Forest of This Heart

Summary

Lizzie and Red on the run. Excruciatingly slow burn, to fix them without going OOC. "She thinks he’s perfect, in a fucked up and beautiful way that she’s not capable of dealing with right now."

Notes

Content Disclaimer: No sex to be found in this story. I'm mainly sticking to canon-levels of physicality. (However, Liz is a bit nicer than canon because the PTBs should treat her better in season 3!)

Legal Disclaimer: I do not own the characters...or any events leading up to this story...or the ability to make the PTBs bend to my will. It's a tragedy. I don't like to talk about it, really. Don't sue me.

Also, my first Lizzington fanmix works well as a sort of companion to this story. You can check that out here.

See the end of the work for more notes.
When It All Falls Down

Chapter Summary

Picks up immediately after the final scene of season 2. "But I'm not alone," she corrects him. “I have you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

* * * *

Lizzie drops into sleep almost instantly, her weight pressed lightly against his side as the road rumbles beneath them.

Red is still. Perfectly still, for the entire length of the car ride, because he knows that she needs the rest, and this new peace between them is fragile. It is as delicate as she is in this moment, worn down by fear and sorrow. He won’t risk disturbing either.

On the inside, though, there is no stillness for him, no peace. He does not deserve it.

He has failed.

All those years, all the pain he has inflicted--wasted now. Useless. After everything he did, she sleeps with her head on his shoulder, a broken girl.

He understands broken. He has recognized her all along, like looking in a fractured mirror, especially during her downward spiral this year...but he knows nothing about repair. How can he possibly help her when he’s never managed to piece himself back together? Truth be told, he has never really tried. He has always known that he is a lost cause; he became irreparable decades ago.

He wants better for her. She should not have to lose everything she was. He cannot bear the thought of it.

All he can do now is keep her safe. Try to help her live with the memories. Teach her to run. Give her what she needs, so that one day she won’t need him anymore.

She deserves her own future, a fresh start somewhere with her new identity. A settled life. Once they clear up unfinished business, after they wait out the worst of the manhunt, he can make that possible for her.

Once they have completely eradicated the Cabal, he could make it possible for himself, too, in theory, but he won’t. He has been running too long. He is no longer the kind of man who could own a house and a dog and go grocery shopping in the afternoon.

But, for Lizzie. That life is all she ever wanted, the life she already thought she had--until he shattered it. A new life without him, he can provide. Even if it breaks his heart.

It would serve him right.
The car rolls gently to a stop, but Liz jolts awake as though they’ve hit a speed bump. The adrenaline of the day, paired with disorientation—she hadn’t actually meant to fall asleep—leads to her fumbling for the gun she no longer carries, without even opening her eyes first.

All she knows in that half-conscious moment is that she could be in danger. It is Red’s voice that pulls her back to the present. “You’re unarmed,” he says mildly, and then she remembers. She is in danger, but also safe. Safe now.

“Sorry,” she mutters when she sits up, shifting her weight away from Red’s shoulder and eyeing their new location. Her face is flushed with awkward embarrassment, but if she examines her behavior, using him as a pillow, she has to examine his, too. Letting her.

So she chooses to ignore it. “How long was I out?”

“Not long,” Red replies. “We’re just switching cars for the next stretch.”

He is exactly where she left him in sleep, still as a statue, looking out at the approaching world but perceiving none of it. The discipline is Navy-trained, she realizes, still at the core of the notorious criminal. How had she overlooked that until now?

She wants to ask him where he goes, when he is in his head that way. What does he see? Is she destined to find that same faraway expression in the mirror someday?

Of course, she can’t ask him that. He won’t answer. He’ll just reply with that silent, focused stare. Like she won’t deserve his response until she learns to decipher the language of his eyes. The last thing they need is more unanswered questions, bricks building a wall between them, so she lets the silence lie. But she wonders.

Lizzie doesn’t rest against him again, keeping out of his personal space as much as is possible in the same backseat. He can’t tell if it’s embarrassment on her part, or aversion. She was vulnerable before, excessively so. Maybe she regrets the lapse. If it is embarrassment, he could reassure her...but this is better, Red decides, this sets things back to their natural state.

After all, they only touch under the worst of circumstances. Her world collapses around her, and he gives her what she needs because he knows she will accept it. She is locked in her own mind, heading straight toward the exact trauma he wants to shield her from. He is bleeding, open on a gurney, her bloody hand on his heart. They are playing their parts undercover, navigating a waltz, watching a tango, tricking nefarious sorts. These are the moments when he allows the weakness.

He wanted so much more for her, better than he had. The promising career, a life in the light. No defining moment when she had to choose between protecting the people she cared about and doing the right thing. This life, his life, is not worthy of her. She is extraordinary.

His weakness is her. He should have shifted the balance somehow, found another way, as soon as that fact became common knowledge. She should never have been leverage, doubly entangled because of her FBI ties. All of this is because of him, at the root, and it started before she was even born. She never had a chance.

She no longer possesses the frantic feeling that followed her from the Post Office—Red’s escape plan is almost leisurely, as carefully managed as everything else he does. She doesn’t ask about it,
unable to muster the energy to be concerned with their destination, but he still informs her of each leg of the journey before it begins. His voice is measured and cautious, with the type of tone one uses to approach a wounded animal. *That’s probably appropriate.*

“Is this what it was like?” Liz asks him as they switch vehicles.

“Hmm?” He is settling into his seat, arranging the seatbelt precisely. She would think that his mind is elsewhere, except she knows better. He misses nothing.

“Is this what it was like for you, the first time you disappeared?”

He tilts his head, acknowledging her need to ask the question. That was lifetimes ago, for him, but this is her first time. “Not exactly,” he replies, weighing his words before speaking. “I was on my own, so the procedure was quite different.”

“Oh.” She thinks about this, staring at the dry landscape as it passes by.

“But the fear, the inner turmoil,” he continues, pausing until she turns to face him again. “I imagine that is very much the same.” His gaze is as gentle as his tone, though he doesn’t quite meet her eyes.

“It was less complicated when you did it, wasn’t it.” She can’t lift her voice up to denote the question, but he hears it anyway.

“It’s got to be,” she adds, with that Quantico expression on her face. *Being able to see the gears turning when she engages that part of her brain is exquisite.* “Two people going underground together would be a lot more conspicuous. Harder to hide. If we split up, there wouldn’t be the need for so many transfers.”

“That’s true,” he agrees, turning away to peer out his own window.

“You didn’t have to run,” she concludes. *You’re Raymond Reddington.* You can disappear instantly, and never risk getting caught. You could have given me my new life, sent me on my way.” She stares at his profile, unmoving and emotionless. “It would have been easier.”

He doesn’t look at her. He continues to watch the desert fly by, as though there is anything of interest to be observed in the desert. But he reaches for her hand, finds it by instinct. “Not for me.”

*Lizzie is in shock. He knows the signs, has even witnessed them in relationship to her before, but now it is all he can see.*

That spark that surprised him when they met is dulled, dormant. She doesn’t argue, doesn’t question. She is...pliant. If he told her that their next stop was going to be an open hut in the middle of battle-ravaged Nigeria, she would simply nod and go back to staring out the window.

He feels the absence of her barbs fiercely. *He enjoys her a little sour.* Her combative tendencies make things interesting. Perhaps he is a tad masochistic, but being hurt by her never stung nearly as much as the prospect of losing her. Becoming irrelevant.

She has been so important to his life for so long that it is difficult to pinpoint when that significance transformed, deepened. Took on a different tenor. But the Fulcrum is now a relic of the past; she is no longer crucial to his survival.
Except that she is, of course she is—in a tremendously different way. It would almost be funny, the depths that he would go to for her, even now, to spare her suffering. In actuality, however, it is completely humorless, because two years in her company has proven that he is capable of nothing but making things worse.

Since Red cannot unbreak her facade of a marriage, unshoot Tom Connolly, or rebury the memory of her sin, helping to bring her back to herself is the most he can do for her. He will try harder, saving recriminations and despair for a more opportune time; he will revive his lively pretense of a career criminal for her. If anyone can pull her out of this stupor by inducing strong emotion, even if only the irritation she seems so prone to in his company, it is Raymond Reddington. At least he knows that to be true, if the past is prologue.

* * * *

Five different vehicles since Red had hugged Dembe goodbye, three different safe houses. She estimates a dozen burner phones, but can’t be sure, as he holds conversations while she sleeps and showers and tosses the phones immediately after. The detached part of her mind that thinks like a profiler is keeping track of their movements. That aspect of her, which she is trying to ignore, keeps thinking how valuable this is, firsthand knowledge of the way a man like Raymond Reddington goes about the business of disappearing.

Someday, the voice in her head muses thoughtfully, when you go back... Liz is too exhausted to argue with herself, but she wants that voice to shut up. There is no going back. She knows that. People like Red--people like her, now--can’t undo their mistakes. There are moments that change things forever. Abandoned car on a silent winter night; holding a gun in shaking hands. All you can do is keep moving forward.

“That last phone call,” she ventures as the darkened interstate rolls along, “did you learn anything? Is there any news, about the Task Force?”

“Nothing yet. As far as I know, they have no leads. Obviously they’re watching my known associates,” he adds, “but I utilized associates of the unknown variety, so they’re not going to have much luck there.”

She nods, twining her fingers together in her lap.

“You’re worried for them.” He is watching her now, and she freezes uncomfortably. Too much history here, too many contradictory emotions. She can’t possibly explain.

“I know they’re coming after us,” she begins apologetically. “It’s just--”

He raises his hand, stopping her. She should have known she wouldn’t need to explain. This is Red. “I understand,” he tells her seriously. “They were your family, after Sam. And now you’re alone again. You need to know that they’re all right.”

“Yes,” she agrees, relieved. “I need to know that they’ll be safe, even when they’re searching for us. But I’m not alone,” she corrects him. “I have you.”

He flinches, so minutely that she thinks she may have imagined it. But his silence afterward, face closed and eyes lowered, causes her to realize something important. He hasn’t looked at her since they got in the car, not once, not really looking. That essential Red thing, his unblinking stare and guarded eyes...she misses it already.

* * * *
“We’ll have to rough it a little, but we'll be here less than 24 hours anyhow,” Red says as he unlocks the side door of the latest safe house and leads the way inside. “I’ve got clothes for you, there is food in the fridge and pantry...” He trails off as he locks the door behind her. She hears four separate mechanisms click into place and almost smiles. Red puts the “safe” in safe house.

He drops their pair of travel bags on the foyer floor, leaves his shoes near the door. “Are you hungry?”

She follows suit, sliding her shoes off next to his. “Not really. Just tired.”

Red nods. “There’s a room ready for you.” He guides her down a tiny hallway, his hand hovering at the small of her back. “The bed should be decently comfortable.”

As she opens a door, she can barely make out the pale shape of a bed in the dark room. That’s all she needs to identify; all she wants is oblivion. She steps into the darkness, then turns back before the shadows engulf her completely.

“What will you be?”

He smiles as though he grasps her unspoken meaning, his eyes landing everywhere but directly on hers. “I’ll be in the living room if you need me.”

When he turns to leave, her voice stops him. “Red?”

She cannot see his face go through quick convulsions before he composes himself. When he turns back the mask is fully in place. Now more than ever, it is essential that he exercise restraint. It is vital.

“Yes?”

“Thank you.” Her tired eyes meet his, still filled with all the regret and uncertainty of her day. “I never...I forgot to thank you.”

He can actually hear the crack in his resolve as it fractures. It sounds like a tree being struck by lightning: he heard it happen once on a trip to Borneo. The tree was never the same.

Red pauses before answering, but his voice still drops to the low tone that gives him away. “You’re welcome, Lizzie.”

He finally, fully meets her eyes with his in that moment, and she can’t tell if it’s the fatigue making her dizzy, or something else.

* * * *

When she wakes, the bedside clock tells her it’s almost four a.m., but she gets up anyway. She has slept enough; surely Red knows something by now about the movements of the Task Force. Maybe he’ll fill her in.

He is in the living room as promised, jacket tossed over a chair, papers spread out on the coffee table. But he’s not peering over them, connecting dots, or on a call to another time zone. Red is stretched out on the couch, asleep.

It’s rude to stare, she knows. She has never witnessed him sleeping. He’s so very much the same, but different. Liz can see him murmuring something, too low to be audible words, and shifting restlessly, still unconscious. She recognizes the signs of a nightmare and crosses the room to stand...
close by. Then she freezes, not sure what to do.

This is already crossing a line, though it’s not as though she expected to find him asleep. For that matter, why is he asleep here? She turns carefully back from the couch and retraces her steps through the hall, this time actually examining the rest of the house. Her room...tiny bathroom...some sort of office space the size of a closet. Her suspicions are confirmed. There’s only one bedroom. He had nowhere else to sleep.

Mentally calling him names, “stubborn” and “unnecessarily self-sacrificing” among them, Liz returns to the living room. There she finds him awake, sitting up, staring at her as she approaches.

“Red,” she says quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me I was taking the only bed?”

He shakes his head, the distance fading from his eyes as he focuses on her. “No need to. I’m fine.” His voice is rough from sleep, lacking the smoothed edges she’s grown so used to.

“You’re clearly not. You’re sleeping on a couch. And poorly, from what I saw.”

“What did you see?” His voice regains its severity, but his right hand is twitching a little, betraying him. Control not fully back in place, she notes thoughtfully. She wouldn’t have thought that was even possible.

“You. Having a nightmare, it seemed like.”

He watches her, as though he expects something more, but she stares back, and waits. He looks away first.

“Yes. Well, it’s not unexpected. I hope I didn’t disturb you.”

“No,” she replies, “I was already awake. Are you okay?”

He doesn’t turn his face toward her, but she swears she can detect just a hint of him rolling his eyes. “I’m fine, Lizzie.”

She moves his jacket off the armchair and sits facing him, feeling tired of absolutely everything. “Red.”

He looks up. The years behind him are showing, and the stress of trying to keep her alive. She acknowledges her newly Red-directed guilt from a distance, like an anthropologist of her own life. Well, this is curious. What does it signify?

“You have to talk to me,” she tells him firmly. “Not about everything, but something. Sometimes. It’s just us now.”

Red raises an eyebrow at her, but appears to be considering the idea.

“Please,” she adds softly. Most people would miss the slight quirk of his lips as the hint of a smile flashes and then disappears, but she doesn’t. For once, she knows what his decision will be before he speaks. Has she grown more perceptive, or has he become more transparent?

He rubs a hand over his face, sitting up straighter. The visible fatigue that he’s been carrying fades with his movement, and in an instant he is Reddington again, the imposing criminal with the genteel manners. The man she met in a box.

“This process is all new for you,” he says slowly. “I still remember what that was like. They stay
with you, life’s big, terrible moments. But it isn’t new for me, this time. All of this...movement, and chaos, and caution. It is necessary, Lizzie, and I would not want to be anywhere but keeping you safe. But sometimes, it brings me back to the first time.”

“Oh.” She realizes she is holding her breath and exhales, the sudden moment of clarity making her feel guilty for asking. “Christmas Eve.”

“Yes.” Red nods, eyes shuttered. “Thus the nightmares.”

“Okay.” She wants to ask. To help. She’s afraid to try. He solves her mental paralysis by standing up and shrugging back into his jacket, moving on.

“Sunrise soon,” he declares after a survey of the sky through the kitchen window. “Feel like breakfast?”

Liz shakes her head ruefully as she rises from the chair. She’s never been able to keep up with his shifting moods and inexplicable cheerfulness, but she follows him into the kitchen, and gives him a smile. The least she can do is try. “I’m starving.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "When It All Falls Down," by Dig the Kid.
See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * *

After the first forty-eight hours of nearly constant motion, their pace begins to slow a little. They spend an entire day in a safe house in Wisconsin, then two in Chicago. Liz keeps expecting to board a private jet, fly across an ocean or two–become needles in the haystack of the world. Instead, it’s highways and tinted windows, zigzagging through America.

“Shouldn’t we be running, I don’t know, further?” she finally ventures on day five.

Red grins as though her question pleases him. “That’s exactly what I’d rather be doing right now. Amsterdam, maybe Vienna.” He leans over a little, his tone conspiratorial. “Lizzie, there’s this adorable little town in Madagascar with a completely unpronounceable name. I’d love to show you the cathedral.”

Liz decides she must still be a little out of it, because she’s actually trying to picture the town for a moment before she realizes what he’s really saying. “We’re not going to fly, because that’s what they expect us to do.”

“And with good reason. It’s so much more convenient! That is, until you board your friend’s unregistered plane and realize that he’s sold you out to the authorities. Then comes the restraints and the interrogations, sometimes there’s shooting…it can be terribly messy.”

He smirks at her, and she wants to roll her eyes, but doesn’t. There’s something comforting now about the way he puts on that grandiose Reddington style, like an in-joke he’s reserving just for her. It warms the bone-deep chill that’s been with her since she dropped the gun and ran. Only a little…but it helps.
“We’ll probably stay in the States for months,” he adds thoughtfully. “There are a lot of places in this haphazard country where people aren’t easy to find.”

Later that morning, when they carry their bags into the latest safe house—nestled in a tiny Georgia town that shares the name of Liz’s first college roommate—the heat is already oppressive. She vaguely remembers a trip to Disney World as a child, with Sam, but beyond that her experience with the southern US is slim. Do houses here usually have central air? Please let there be air conditioning.

“We’ll be here three days,” Red informs her as he locks the door behind them. “You can settle in a little.”

“That long?”

“I have some things to tend to while we’re here.”

She nods, scanning the first floor of the house. It’s surprisingly ordinary, for the sheltering of wanted fugitives…there are afghans spread over the furniture and baby pictures on the walls. Liz gives into the curiosity. “Whose house is this?”

“For the next three days, it’s ours.”

She lifts an eyebrow, the question still awaiting an answer.

Red smiles apologetically. “Old habits. I met this man about twelve years ago in Dubai, very odd duck, likes to make—” He stops himself abruptly. “Anyhow, this is his grandmother’s house. She’s in Boca Raton for the next few weeks.”

If she had to wager a guess, Liz would say that he’s waiting for her to snap at him about the shadiness of it all, punishment for his honesty. He has that look, like a puppy bracing for a kick. She’s not sure which one of them is more astonished by the laugh that bubbles up from her instead.

“Something’s funny?” Red leans a little to one side, watching her. Probably trying to figure out what percentage of this moment is hysteria. Fair question.

When she replies, the sentence is punctuated with pauses while she seeks oxygen. “We’re staying…in the house of the grandmother…of some weird guy…you met a dozen years ago. She probably doesn’t even…know we’re here.” She gestures vaguely between them as she tries to compose herself. “It’s pretty funny, Red.”

He chuckles a little. “I suppose it is. Lizzie, you never cease to surprise me.”

* * * *

For reasons only known to her subconscious, it’s not until she settles in for the evening—into a bed she’ll get to use more than one night in a row—that Liz begins to have nightmares too.

There’s so much death. The fire…she can smell things that must be memories; her imagination isn’t that vivid, or that cruel. Her father, his face still hidden from her. Her mother crying out when his touch bruises.

She shoots him.

When he falls, he isn’t unconscious yet. That’s when she realizes that she’s dreaming—when he
gets back up, and he’s not her father at all. He’s Tom. He’s her nonexistent husband and she’s just put multiple bullets in his abdomen.

Like some sort of monster movie villain, he just keeps coming as he bleeds, reaching for her, and Liz remembers how much she’s always hated zombies. *It was Tom who cajoled her into watching *Dawn of the Dead. *There’s irony in that now.*

A bullet in the brain, dream-logic tells her, that’s what will do the trick. When she fires, her body jerking back with the recoil, the bullet hits Tom Connolly instead of Tom Keen. The man falls and this time doesn’t get up.

Liz wakes shivering in the sultry heat of a Georgia night, shaking violently. She can smell fire that isn’t really there. Sitting up against the headboard of the bed, she wraps her arms around her knees and waits for the shaking to pass.

She doesn’t go to Red for consolation, for solace, even though he’s only two doors down the hall. It never even occurs to her.

She sleeps fitfully until morning.

* * * *

He was not **prepared** for this.

Obviously, he had contingencies upon contingencies–a go bag for Elizabeth Keen was waiting in a secured lockbox before he walked into that building on her first day and raised his hands above his head–but he had not met her yet. He had no idea. *For a man who survives by always being ten moves ahead, this is disconcerting to admit.*

In the days since their escape, he has learned the difference between procuring tools and contacts for creating new lives, and actually being ready for the changes that new lives require when they still carry ties to the old ones. That difference, measurable and sharp, stares at him from across the breakfast table in Camilla as he eats.

He is… **unsettled**, with her here. With the occasional exception of Dembe, who is the most deserving of exceptions, Raymond Reddington lives a solitary life. He dines without the solace of company, he sleeps alone unless he is in someone else’s bed, and he arranges everything in his personal domain to be exactly as he wishes it. That is both necessary and preferable.

She is making things harder just by being this new version of herself. She regards him silently as they cohabitate, rarely chatting as they share dinner, studying his movements as they navigate around each other. Despite his best efforts, he cannot move them back onto the familiar footing of one-sided banter and wary trust.

Lizzie trusts him fully now; she just doesn’t seem to know how to live with that. With him. This is fair, he thinks. He no longer remembers how to live with anyone. Even Dembe keeps his own apartment and a respectful distance, knowing Raymond’s limits.

He hasn’t spoken to Dembe in six days. *It will be weeks before they can risk any contact.* No one knows him better than the brother of his heart. Not having him close is an ache he cannot ease. Waking each morning to find Lizzie still there, her scrutiny following him from room to room, is a different sort of ache…but just as constant.

He is not sure he can survive her unwavering attention. He can’t always control what she sees. He
can’t know how she feels about what she’s observing.

The young woman with her heart on her sleeve that he held, and aided, and advised—she’s no longer so open. The world has made of her what it makes of everyone given enough time: a guarded soul. She watches. She waits. She gives very little away.

*She reminds him of someone.*

* * * *

With little to do most days, unable to explore their shifting locations, Liz is spending her time getting to know Reddington. Not in any deep and lasting way, of course—she doubts he would allow that even if she expressed an interest. He still gives away nothing about his past, his vulnerabilities; he speaks only of her, or things of little consequence.

But sharing space with someone negates boundaries, at least a few. She has learned how he likes his eggs at breakfast; she knows his brand of toothpaste. She tries to compile these sterile facts into a more significant picture, if only to make all the waiting worth something. Profiling is what she does, it comes easily.

The frustration of how little she can claim to know eventually gives way to clarity. She knows as much as anyone else, more even, about Raymond Reddington the criminal, from his hat selections to where the bodies are buried. *Often literally, for that second part.* But Red the *person*, the man who fixes music boxes and once led a normal life, what does she know about him? What has she gleaned from conversation about who he really is, what he wants?

For that matter, when have they ever had a conversation that wasn’t focused on business, one that was even a little bit about him? She has never really considered, until right now, just how much of their time she’s spent battling him. *A tango, not a waltz.* In the last two years, she can count the number of civilized conversations they’ve had on one hand. And none of those were substantive.

Liz can name his favorite ice cream flavor now, and exactly how long he spends reading a paperback before he takes a break to get up and move. The truth is, though, that she doesn’t really know this man at all.

* * * *

A stranger named Celia whom he pays generously, a woman with wary, dark eyes and no ties to his organization, comes to the house that night and follows his instructions without question.

She cuts Elizabeth’s hair almost entirely away and dyes it a severe blue-black. This new style suits her no-longer-secret Russian heritage, exposing her cheekbones—which are slightly sharper now, Red notes with concern. Liz appears instantly fiercer, a force to be reckoned with. She is also provided with a new wardrobe, a mix of expensive formal and casual clothes, things she would never have worn in her previous life. She thanks Celia for the trouble, despite her obvious discomfort.

Red’s hair, of course, is a lost cause, seeing as he has so little of it. But Celia furnishes him with prescription eyeglasses to replace the contacts Liz had no idea he wore—Raymond Reddington has never been seen in glasses, that’s likely the point—and replaces his wardrobe as well. He complains about this to Liz, but the protests are perfunctory. He is well aware that even something as simple as a necktie can be used to track those who live their lives in hiding…and the reputation that has served him well for decades is now his biggest liability.
He has been provided one suit jacket and one tuxedo, for special occasions, but the rest of his new clothing is startlingly alien for Liz to observe. Jeans, actual denim, the material stiff even when he’s wearing them, as though he irons them between uses. She wouldn’t put it past him, except she’s found no sign of an iron. Long-sleeved shirts under sweaters, v-necks and pressed slacks as the weather warms.

She is secretly disappointed that he hasn’t been forced to make even more extreme changes. Red in a garish Hawaiian shirt, open at the neck, or Red in cargo pants and a tank top. The ridiculousness of the idea makes her smile; his newly casual wardrobe is still designer, the sweaters cashmere, the slacks pressed with discreet labels declaring their value. There are only so many concessions he is willing to make.

After five days of travel, Liz has still never witnessed him wearing pajamas. He bids her goodnight fully clothed and reappears fresh the next morning. Personally, she can’t bring herself to care and wears what she likes; he’s seen her drugged, emotionally devastated and nearly dead–surely the sight of her in pajama shorts is comparatively underwhelming.

Considering the fact that she’s likewise seen him bloody, unconscious and on his knees, she doesn’t understand why he maintains the formality…but she doesn’t bring it up.

* * * *

When Liz comes downstairs to make breakfast, Red is already up, and there’s a dish sitting on her side of the table. She squints until she’s close enough to make it out. Strawberries, with a birthday candle sticking out of the clouds of whipped cream that top them.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for you,” he replies. His eyes are actually twinkling.

Bemused, she sits in her usual chair, facing the decadent excuse for breakfast that he apparently prepared.

“Happy anniversary,” he declares as he joins her at the table.

He watches her expression transform from confusion to anger and then smooth out. Her voice is leached of inflection when she speaks. “I no longer have an anniversary.” She pushes the dish back in his direction. “What the hell is this, Red?”

He lets his words tumble out quickly as he shakes his head, hoping to fend off the fight–or flight–that she’s so prone to. “Lizzie! Not that anniversary. Which wasn’t today, anyhow.” Then he tilts his head, a little bewildered by the very idea she’s latched onto. “I don’t know why you even think—I would never—”

He takes a deep breath. “You’ve been a fugitive for one week today.”

Already tensed on the edge of her seat, her response is about what he expected. “And you think that is something to celebrate? You think I want to have a party?” The disgust on her face wounds him as she turns away, but he keeps his demeanor calm. These small injuries have become almost comfortably familiar. The blows that you see coming, they never sting as much.

Red opens his mouth to explain, then closes it, drops the upbeat demeanor. He can’t do it, not like this. She won’t look at him. She won’t even look at him. He knows this is more about everything that’s happened in the last week–the last year, the last thirty–than him, but it still hurts. Rising
from his chair, he moves to her side and crouches down until he can meet her gaze with his own.

“Lizzie,” he begins, spacing his words out carefully. “I know how hard this is for you. If there is
one person on Earth who can possibly understand, you are talking to him right now.”

She nods, and she doesn’t push him away, but there’s a sort of crumpled quality to her presence. Even after everything that has happened, sometimes she still seems so very young. His heart breaks for her, all over again.

“One week ago today, you ran for your life. You were forced to make a terrible choice.” His voice is low and soft; she closes her eyes, lets it soothe. This, at least, is familiar ground for both of them. “You have lost a lot, and it is a hard road that you’ll be walking for some time, but I need you to know something. I need you to look at me and know that what I am saying is true.”

Liz opens her eyes again, waits. He moves his jaw for a moment, as though he’s struggling with the words.

“Today, you have been a wanted criminal for one week. No one could expect you to be happy about that. I’m not happy about that.” There is a bitter taste on his tongue, but he continues.

“For one week, you have also been alive. Free. And as much as I wish that things had gone differently—you have no idea how much—I would rather see you here, restless and cross, than hidden away in some blacksite indefinitely. Or worse, based on what we know about the Cabal.”

He reaches for her hand. “You’re alive, Lizzie. I want to celebrate that. Just that.”

She nods to herself, squeezes his hand, then releases it to face the kitchen table again. As she pulls the plate back over, he lets out the breath he was holding and returns to his own chair.

“So, strawberries.” Liz dips her finger into the cream, making him wince. He stops himself from reminding her that there are perfectly good utensils right in front of her. When she touches it to her tongue, her brow furrows.

“Homemade?”

“It’s a special occasion.”

“Thanks.” She regards the airy offering in front of her for a moment too long. To her horror, she begins to cry.

Red is back beside her in an instant, but she stands before he can attempt to comfort her. “No. No, I’m fine,” she says, waving him off. “I just need some air.”

He steps back, gives her distance, puts his hands in his pockets. “Elizabeth, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” He isn’t sure how to finish that sentence, so he doesn’t try.

“It’s not that.” The smile she gives him wobbles, but he gives her points for effort. “This was really nice of you.”

“What is it, then?”

“I’d really…if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk about it.” Red nods, concern etched into his features. He’ll always give her what she asks for, if he has the power to give it.

“I just need to step out for a minute. I’ll be right back.”
Liz walks out onto the covered porch, leans against the wall. Four deep breaths. In and out. The air is sticky, and doesn’t help.

*She is a horrible person.*

When was the last time she did something nice for him? Has she ever? Not in the context of protecting an asset—not even trying to save his life, which is really more a matter of common decency, at least in her opinion. In the small ways, rather than the life-or-death “I care about you” ways, has she ever been nice to him?

He made her an anniversary breakfast. Dessert. She’s not sure what to call it, but he left his empire behind to keep her from starting over alone and he’s the one giving her gifts to ease the pain. He’s still trying to rescue her. *That’s all he’s ever done.*

And she stabbed him in the neck with a pen.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the comments and kudos! They make my day.

Chapter title from "When It All Falls Down," by Dig the Kid.
The Sacred Simplicity of You at My Side

Chapter Summary

Games, secrets, omelettes. “It’s surprising that they’re able to sleep at all.”

Chapter Notes

Credits: This chapter was rescued from almost not existing by the real-life Clue master that is broken_hearted_bard.

Disclaimer: I just want to play with them for a while. I promise to return them in slightly better condition.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* * * *

Their newest safe house will be home for a week, tucked away in a quiet part of Colorado. Well, tucked may be the wrong word. After all, it’s practically palatial, this abandoned multifamily home. Their voices bounce off the lofty ceilings and they could each have a floor to themselves if they wished.

Instead, by unspoken consensus, they’re two rooms apart, down the same hall. Close enough to feel safe, distant enough to maintain boundaries.

With a designer kitchen at his disposal, Red proves to be a surprisingly good cook. Which is convenient for her survival, now that placing a phone order no longer counts as “cooking.” She considers asking him where he picked up his repertoire--and knife skills--but she can’t know whether she’ll get the story from him, or the Concierge of Crime.

As charming as his larger-than-life tales can be, Liz fears she might break under the force of his bravado. That measured tone he employs when he’s being sincere is her lifeline now, something to hold tight to while everything else is in motion.

When did he become someone to move towards, instead of run from? During a sleepless night, when one sunrise reminds her of another, she acknowledges that maybe he has been gravity all along. Keeping him at arm’s length wouldn’t have required so much effort otherwise.

* * * *

Lizzie has been having nightmares.

The first time, he woke out of a vivid dream--he remembers a jazz club at night, hazed with smoke--and ran to her. Of course, he ran to her. That was in Georgia, which already feels like a lifetime ago, back when he had his impeccable suits as armor and she didn’t yet look like a warrior queen.

She never woke. At least not while he was there. Red took her hand, cautiously, and the crying
stopped. He left as soon as he realized that she was sleeping soundly again, and he was, at that point, just watching her do so. Still holding her hand.

_The lines in the sand are important, for as long as they last._

That was only the first time; the nightmares have followed her to Colorado. She hasn’t mentioned them, which worries him. Certainly in this instance they would be on equally vulnerable ground—there’s no reason he can imagine for her to avoid bringing them up. But she joins him for breakfast with tired bruises under her eyes and says nothing.

She must not know herself as well as he expected, thinking her secrets remain her own. After all, he would have guessed long ago that she was not a quiet sleeper. _She’s not a quiet anything._ Pacing the floor at midday, grumbling at jars that won’t open, laughing out loud when she’s lost in a novel and reaches a funny part—this new arrangement of theirs is never dull.

Now, most nights she shouts in her sleep, proving his assumption correct. Drowsy concern and chilling fear can no longer be considered a valid excuse for invading her privacy while she’s defenseless, so Red doesn’t rush in again. He doesn’t touch her. _The terrifying part of him that wants to makes it all the more crucial to stay away._

He sits in the hallway instead, up against the wall to the left of her door, just in case he’s needed. Just to be near. Because he can’t sleep through her nightmares anyway.

Red listens to her unconscious protests, her pleas, and spends that time thinking about what brought them to this place. Fire, and bullets, and families lost. It’s not surprising that she’s haunted in her sleep.

It’s surprising that they’re able to sleep at all.

***

“Does no one own a television anymore?”

Liz enters the living room, interrupting his examination of their newest temporary library.

“You had one,” he reminds her.

“Yeah, with Tom. But I barely had free time then.” She drops into the closest chair with no grace whatsoever, radiating boredom.

“Most abandoned homes don’t exactly require HBO.” Red stifles a smile. He remembers his first years on the run so clearly, still. Sometimes the parallels are almost painfully soothing. “You could read a book.”

She glances at the shelves behind him, then goes back to glowering at the floor. “All I’ve been doing is reading. I’ve done so much reading my brain is starting to invent new words.”

“Like what?”

“Mopeful, for that feeling when you’re both melancholy and hopeful. Pawdle, for that adorably weird walk that penguins have. And sprew, for that part of the year when things have just begun to thaw. When the bite of winter stays with you...but you also know, you just know deep down that spring is on its way.”

They roll off her tongue as though she has been saving them up—which he decides is likely when
heat colors her cheeks immediately after she stops speaking and sees him staring at her.

“Actually, there is already a name for the penguin walk. They just call it waddling.” He chooses not mention that “mopeful” is also a word unto itself.

“Yeah, I know,” she agrees with a smile. “But I think they deserve their own word.”

He is charmed by her. That is the only possible explanation for the next words that come out of his mouth.

“Want to play Scrabble?”

Her mouth drops open before she recovers. “My brain is overdosing on words...and you want to play Scrabble?”

“You seem in need of a diversion.” He dips his chin. “We also have Monopoly.”

Her answering laugh warms every part of him. How long has it been? Months? Feels like years. “I am not playing Monopoly with you,” she declares. “In case you haven’t noticed, you’ve already landed on top in the class wars. I have no trouble believing that you would kick my ass.”

Shrugging good-naturedly, he walks out of the room and leaves her sitting alone. She hears rummaging sounds just around the corner before he comes back, eyebrows raised hopefully.

“Clue?”

* * * *

“You’re cheating,” he declares.

“That’s ridiculous,” Liz argues. “Why on Earth would I want to cheat? It’s a game of Clue. A game that we had to make up rules for anyway, because there’s only two of us. You’re just upset because you’re not as good at it as you think.”

Red straightens up indignantly on the couch. “I’ll have you know that I am a master of Clue. I beat Dembe on a regular basis.”

“Dembe lets you win,” she mutters under her breath.

Refusing to be distracted, he returns to his point. “And you are cheating, Lizzie, shame on you. I saw you palm a card. I believe it was the wrench.”

His forceful stare is met by her perfectly blank expression, until the latter gives way to a smirk. With a flick of her right hand, the wrench card reappears.

Red opens his mouth to speak, obviously flustered, then closes it again when she snaps the fingers of her left hand and tosses a second card his way. Mrs. Peacock. Of course.

“What fun could winning possibly be, if it requires cheating?” He is genuinely baffled.

“I don’t care about winning,” Liz replies. “I’m just enjoying the diversion. That was the point of all this, remember?”

“But why?” Head tilted, he regards her silently until a realization curves his lips ever so slightly. “It was a test. You’re testing me.”
She shrugs. “Not testing, exactly. Just...curious. I wanted to see what you’d see.”

Red shakes his head. He understands, even if she doesn’t. “You were testing me.” *He can’t help being a little delighted by that.*

* * * *

By the time they switch to poker, it’s after midnight. They’re betting with pretzel sticks and sipping wine that Red proclaimed not at all a good compliment. “Perhaps a white would pair better with pretzels.”

She’s curled up on the floor wishing for the comfort of her pajamas, but if she pauses the game, there’s a chance that he might realize how late it is. He might decide to turn in instead. She doesn’t want to ruin the moment--as strange as it is to acknowledge, she’s having fun.

He seems oddly at ease, cotton sleeves rolled up to his forearms, playing the dealer with a flourish. She knows some pretty impressive tricks, but she isn’t surprised that his cards skills are better than hers. *He has clever hands.*

“Raise you two,” Red decides, regarding the pot.

“See it, and raise you three.”

He lifts an eyebrow at her, adds three more pretzels. “Call.”

“Full house,” Liz declares, splaying her cards out on the coffee table.

Red peers at her hand. “Queen of hearts is wild?”

She blinks. “Oh, god, I’m sorry! It’s a holdover from my childhood, I just forgot. Two pair, ace high.”

“No, Lizzie, it’s fine,” he reassures her. After a moment, he asks more quietly, “Sam taught you to play?”

“Yeah.” Try as she might, the smile won’t reach her eyes. Despite all that’s happened since, everything that should have propelled her forward, the grief remains too raw. A wound that won’t stop bleeding.

“She always said, ‘Queen of Hearts is wild because the queen of hearts is wild.’” She chuckles. “Even once I was old enough to understand what he meant, he still wouldn’t tell me who he meant.”

“He taught me to play, too.”

Liz is startled into meeting his gaze, and for a few moments she can read him perfectly. So much sadness on his end, more than she thinks he has any right to claim. But it’s there--it’s undeniable.

They understand each other.

She wants to ask him so many questions. She wants him to fill the holes in her past with his stories, make her foundation solid again.

And she could, Liz thinks, as his mouth softens along with his eyes, as he regards her with a fond sort of sorrow. If she asked him now, in this fragile moment, he might actually be inclined to tell
her the truth.

But at what cost?

Her voice shakes when she breaks eye contact. “So, house rules. Queen of hearts is wild, then?”

“Always.”

“Okay.” She smiles, and gestures to her hand. “Full house, aces high.”

It goes without saying that Red’s poker face is flawless. He purses his lips, watches her as lays his own cards on the table. “Royal flush.”

He wins.

* * * *

During the day, Red spends most of his time in the den, or the open kitchen, with its cheerful skylights. He has had better accommodations over the years—how powerfully he longs for Egyptian cotton and room service some nights—but also much, much worse. This house is clean. He appreciates the small comforts.

Liz spends her time wandering, then settling, then wandering again. He is surprised by how often he sees her, when there are so many rooms to explore. So many places to hide. She could easily keep herself entertained without encountering him at all.

Instead, she joins him while he takes notes on the information he was given during the last transfer. She forages for snacks in the afternoon as he reads in the natural light. He never expects the privilege of her company; they’re both still tending private wounds.

Somehow, though, she always seems to find him.

He can’t fully relax around her, weighed down by history and secrets he isn’t ready to share. Yet the silence between them has become less fraught, more comfortable. She leaves him be when he expects her persistence, and he tries not to tear apart the gift of this new peace to examine how it works.

Acceptance does not come easy to either of them, but they try.

* * * *

“Are you busy?”

Red turns from the papers spread across the island to find Liz standing under the archway.

“No, not especially. Just reviewing the latest news. Nothing pertinent to the task force yet, but I’m expecting something soon.”

“Okay.” She moves toward the kitchen bar, pauses to stare out the window. “The mountains here are really beautiful.”

His eyes remain on her, but he nods. “They are. You know, Lizzie, if this is a place you feel comfortable, you could come back. When things settle down.”

Her stance shifts just a little. Even with her back to him, he can see tension shape her into someone different, more fracturable. This is not the first time; whenever he tries to bring up her options
down the road, Liz bristles.

“If you like it here,” he starts over more gently, “you should keep that in mind. For the future.”

She spins around to face him, eyes heated, but the blow he awaits never arrives. Lizzie breathes deeply, and...settles into herself. That’s the only way he can describe it. The fire that makes her so volatile doesn’t disappear--it just sinks in, adding a flush to her skin.

She seems calm again, when she crosses the room to him. “I was wondering if you would show me how to make that French omelette of yours.”

“If you’re hungry, I can fix one now. It won’t take long at all.” He steps toward the pantry, but her hand on his arm stops him. Red freezes where he stands.

“I don’t mean I want you to make it for me. I thought it might be nice if you didn’t always have to do the cooking, but I’m terrible at it. I’d rather not poison us, so...”

Her smile is an olive branch, a wrapped present. A ray of light. “Teach me?”

“Of course.” He can barely get the words past the tight feeling in his throat; they have a gruff quality to them when he manages it.

She doesn’t seem to notice. “I’ll pull the ingredients together, then.”

Sprew.

He watches Lizzie walk to the fridge and get out the eggs.

A thawing.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the feedback! You all rock.

Chapter title from "Eric’s Song," by Vienna Teng.
Who We Are, and What We Were

Chapter Summary

Dinner, news, changes. “She wants to call him a hypocrite, because he tells her not to save him—even as he saves her, every time.”

Chapter Notes

I’m so sorry that this update took me a month! Life happened. To make up for that a little, this chapter is longer and more fun.

Disclaimer: I still have no money. And you’re not using them anyway! Let me play with them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

*****

Lizzie’s nightmares don’t appear to be ebbing, but she still hasn’t mentioned them. With only two days left in Colorado, Red has stopped keeping vigil outside her door. It hurts him too much, to listen without going in. To not wake her, to not soothe. Rescuing her is his default response to her misery.

But they’ve gotten settled in this temporary home, undisturbed and together. In some ways, the five days they’ve spent here feel like lifetimes. She’s working on her culinary skills—or lack thereof—and he’s been making long-term plans, as best he can while he awaits more information. She asks him about the books he’s reading. Sometimes she reads them too.

The last thing this delicate balance needs is Lizzie realizing that her secret hasn’t truly been secret. He may worry, perhaps even resent it a little when she is so desperate to reveal his secrets, but he isn’t willing to risk what they seem to be building.

If her nightmares get worse, then maybe he’ll bring it up. She grins at him while she’s cooking, and the happiness actually reaches her eyes. She learns which spices he hates and leaves them out of recipes without mentioning it. Perhaps it’s cowardice on his part.

Red can certainly concede to himself that he’s being selfish. She says goodnight now, instead of just heading to bed. She says good morning, as well. Of course he’d rather keep things the way that they are, for just a little longer.

They’ll be moving on soon, anyhow. It’s really for the best. What good could it possibly do her, waking from bad dreams to find Red holding her hand? Wouldn’t it just make things worse, him murmuring in the darkness to a half-awake Lizzie, trying to console her?

He has always understood her, always been prepared for even her most hateful reactions. But now she shines at him in the kitchen, or yawns over the pages of a book, and Red concludes that their
relationship, such as it is, has irreversibly changed. Funny how such a subtle shift could knock everything off-balance.

When he considers letting himself into her room—despite the danger, Lizzie leaves the door unlocked—he doesn’t know what to expect. He sees himself at her side while she protests in her sleep, waking her…and then he can’t imagine it at all. Would she yell at him, lock him out? Would she pull him closer, take solace as he offers it?

There are other versions of the scenario that he won’t allow himself to play out to the end, because they are too painful, in ways exquisite and horrible. He stays with her by choice, and likes to think that some of the time she welcomes his company. That’s already more than he deserves.

If she needs him, even in her sleep, he’ll be there. The rest would be indulgence—courting his flaws rather than assuaging hers. Instead, Red stays in his room, pretending that he can sleep. He tells himself that Lizzie doesn’t need him, since she apparently believes that to be true.

*****

Red mentions over breakfast that they’ll be having a guest for dinner. She would be less startled if he told her to prepare for an alien abduction after lunch. A guest in this safe house, where they haven’t seen anyone but the delivery guy for six days? Just the idea makes her anxious.

In response, all Liz says is, “What do you think you’ll make for dinner?” She’s trying not to be the mess that he feels the need to clean up so often. It’s really the least she can do.

He smiles at her anyway, gently, and answers her unspoken questions. She’s never been able to keep him from reading her as effortlessly as he reads a paperback novel.

“The information I’ve been counting on will be brought in person tonight. It’s safer. And it will only be Mr. Kaplan, Lizzie, you don’t have to worry. Except about the menu, because I’m not the one who’ll be making dinner. It’s your turn, remember?”

He takes his plate to the sink, leaving her with a new and different form of panic to breathe through. She’s barely managed to make edible food so far, even with his lessons, and now they’re having company? Someone she barely knows. A person she trusts, especially when it comes to Red, but not someone she ever imagined having over for chicken.

“This is a terrible idea,” she mutters as she wipes down the table.

“Nonsense,” Red replies jovially. Damn his amazingly good hearing. “I’ll walk you through your meal prep this evening, I promise. And won’t it be wonderful to have a friend over for dinner?”

She rolls her eyes at him; he’s ridiculous. But there’s something so comfortably domestic about the way he says it that she feels a little better, too.

*****

Cooking isn’t that hard, Liz tells herself as afternoon slides into evening and Red heats up the olive oil. She can cut up carrots and onions. She knows how to do this.

It’s his proximity, she decides, that makes the kitchen feel like it’s closing in on her. He’s just so much sometimes. He hums as he moves around the island, or makes cheerful comments while all her attention should be focused on not burning the mushrooms. He’s distracting.

Of course nothing burns, or even overcooks. He is there to help, after all, and he’s been a good
teacher all along—even if his lessons used to come with dangerous side effects and loopholes that usually benefited him. It’s better not to dwell on the way they used to be, now that everything has changed so much.

Except Red. He stays remarkably himself—even as Liz isn’t sure who she is anymore. She’s clinging desperately to the familiar, what she knows to be true, and more and more that list begins and ends with him. With them. They have…something. Something that remains constant, though it feels different now.

She can’t put her finger on it, but she thinks it involves him demonstrating how to chop garlic. Borrowing her toothpaste when he runs out of his own. The way he laughs when she rants about the villains in *Cat and Mouse*, after they’ve both read it.

She’s nervous about Mr. Kaplan joining them for dinner, but as they prepare it, she knows it’s not really about the food. It never was.

*****

Mr. Kaplan presses her lips to each of Red’s cheeks in turn. “How’s Colorado treating you, dearie?” She steps back and nods at Liz in greeting.

“Colorado loves me, Kate. How could they not?” He grins, the fondness all over his face, and Liz feels the dull pangs of guilt again.

*He has a family.* Maybe not the traditional kind, maybe his blood is scattered to the wind and wounded, but he’s got more people than she does at this point, and she’s the reason he’s separated from them.

“Business or pleasure?” Mr. Kaplan asks Red as they stand in the foyer.

“Both, of course,” he replies easily. “But dinner first, if you don’t mind.” He offers Mr. Kaplan his arm, the model of the mannered gentleman.

“Fine by me,” she agrees, taking it as they head to the table. Liz follows them, wondering how often they’ve shared a meal before. *Maybe their easy affection just travels with them.*

“So how have you been?” he asks as they sit down to dinner.

“Well enough.”

“And how is Baxter?”

Liz quirks an eyebrow in his direction, and he tilts his head. “Her dog.”

She nods, surprised. She wouldn’t have pegged Mr. Kaplan as a dog person.

Mr. Kaplan answers his question before taking her first bite. “He’s fine, as lazy as ever.”

Feeling out of place as Kate and Raymond chat, Liz shifts her attention to her food.

She knows that it’s absurd to feel left out of a relationship that’s probably older than she is. But the brusque woman regards her over salad and chicken cordon bleu, and she can tell she’s being measured and judged, by someone who matters.

It’s hard to make small talk after weeks with only Red as company. They were finally settling into
a rhythm that didn’t require company manners. The silences were simpler, the communication more authentic.

Then Red grins at her, perfectly at ease. *The only one feeling the loss of their routine is her.*

“She’s not kidding,” Red says conspiratorially, trying to draw Liz back into the conversation. “Baxter is basically a giant sloth in canine form. He doesn’t fetch, he doesn’t run up to greet you. The best he can manage at mealtime is a casual saunter to his bowl.”

He laughs, shaking his head as he remembers, and Liz smiles in return.

“What kind of dog is he?”

“The ugly kind.” Mr. Kaplan softens her dry humor with half a smirk. “A bit of terrier, some spaniel. Your basic mutt.”

Beaming in the hush that descends as they eat, Red makes a humming sound of appreciation and looks at Kate.

“What do you think of your entree?”

“It’s very good. You’ve always had a way with food.”

“I didn’t make it, Kate. Lizzie did.”

“He’s trying to teach me to cook,” Liz chimes in, a little embarrassed.

“Ah.” If Mr. Kaplan is surprised by this, she can’t spot any evidence of it. Then again, she gets the feeling that nothing surprises Mr. Kaplan at all.

“Well, it tastes almost as good as Raymond’s, so I’d say he’s succeeding.”

Red’s face is lit with contentment as he glances at her, and Liz recognizes that this is what’s left of the Raymond Reddington who wasn’t meant to become a criminal. Here is the man who needs his loved ones close. *When did she become a member of that select group, someone who rates a place at the table?*

She’s still uncomfortable. Mr. Kaplan maintains a deliberate distance with her—out of caution or disapproval, she isn’t sure—but the Red that’s been reunited with part of his family delights her, so she wishes that Mr. Kaplan wasn’t leaving in the morning.

When they finish dinner, Red insists on clearing the table, leaving them sitting in the quiet together.

“Are you holding up alright?” Mr. Kaplan doesn’t sound entirely happy to be asking the question, but her eyes are kind.

“I’m fine,” she replies.

Mr. Kaplan just continues to regard her, as though she insists on a more honest response. *It’s not like we’re friends. Are we?*

Liz shrugs, then glances back to make sure Red is out of earshot.

“I’m better,” she admits. “He’s helping.”
Mr. Kaplan nods, then stands abruptly as Red approaches. Just like that, the moment ends. “Shall we begin the business then, Raymond?”

“I think we must.” He seems disappointed, though, and Liz privately agrees. There was something reassuring about dinner, despite how awkward she felt...as though they were testing their altered dynamic, making it more real. *We’re still ourselves.*

****

“Becca Hart.” Liz tests the name out, holds it on her tongue. It feels wrong—but not more peculiar than Masha Rostova, when she thinks about it. The photo in her passport was taken after her makeover, and her severe appearance continues to startle her. She’s stopped bothering to look in the mirror, most days.

At least this feels like a step forward, rather than the tedium of standing still. She turns to Red, mildly pleased with her new name.

“So who are you, now?”

He holds up his passport, where—without his suit and hat—he seems deceptively like an ordinary man. “Anthony Hart.”

Liz’s mind stutters for an instant over his words. Somehow she comprehends the implications before she’s really processed them.

Her eyes snap to his, and he thinks—*not for the first time, of course*—that if looks could kill he would be flayed alive.

“Is this some kind of joke?”

He sighs. “No, these are our identities for the next few weeks.”

“Why would you—what the hell is—” She is incoherent with rage; she starts over. “Red, after everything that’s happened in the last two years, why would you *ever* think that this would be okay with me?”

*Enough.* His eyes cool, harden, as though she flipped a switch in him without meaning to. *They can’t keep doing this.* Liz sees a muscle in his jaw twitch before he replies.

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion.” He steps closer to her, dropping his voice as he invades her personal space just enough to put her off-balance. To make the point.

“Obviously, I knew you weren’t going to be thrilled with the arrangement. But your feelings aren’t important right now.”

She watches as his eyes flick over her face, refusing to settle. Her mouth, her forehead, her ear. She almost thinks she can see something there, something he’s let slip out from under his usual mask of control. But he looks away before she can identify it, and steps back.

Red struggles to remain calm. “This isn’t *about* your feelings, Elizabeth. *Or* mine. You’re not the only one who’s been married before.”

The words hit her like a slap, stealing some of her anger. His past is still a mystery, but it’s obvious that it wounded him long before her.
“This is about survival. We need to be forgettable, not what the Task Force expects.” Red’s stare is edgy and frustrated. “They’re looking for two individually formidable fugitives. By now, even Donald has likely guessed that we’re traveling together—but not with this type of cover.”

He scrutinizes her, gauging how well his explanation has been received. “Think about it, Lizzie. If this is your reaction to the idea of us posing as a married couple, how implausible and outrageous will it sound to your former coworkers?”

With the metallic taste of her outrage still on her tongue and his rebuke ringing in her ears, Liz reluctantly concedes his point with a nod.

“It’s just a cover,” Red finishes wearily. “We’re going to have a lot of them.”

*****

When the air between them has calmed, Mr. Kaplan joins them for a nightcap. The conversation flows around Liz as though there was never a storm.

She does manage to tune back in when Kate changes the subject from international brandy to a more sensitive topic.

“Dembe has been taken,” the older woman informs Red, choosing her words carefully.

Red’s stricken reaction is the only thing that Liz can see. His mask slides back into place immediately, and he nods as though this news is no big deal, but his expression in that moment stays with her. Reminds her of something else entirely.

*His bodyguard kneels, fiercely brave, while he speaks helplessly in a foreign tongue.*

“When did it happen?” Red asks, back to business.

“Two days after you left.”

“All right. Monitor the situation, as we discussed.”

Mr. Kaplan doesn’t bother to respond. There’s no one that he trusts more; her agreement is implied.

Red glances at Liz without really seeing her, then moves on with the meeting. His hand is trembling when he reaches for a pen to take notes.

“What about the other movements of the task force?”

Mr. Kaplan nods. “They’ve locked down all the usual places, of course. Your most trusted associates are under constant surveillance. They did miss a couple of prominent ones. It’s not clear why at this point. Truman is moving freely, and so is Charlotte Kane.”

Liz stops listening as they discuss who is approachable and how they can help. None of this is within her control, none of it is relevant. Red will do what needs to be done and explain later. *Or not.* She will be taken care of, guarded.

It’s sickening, really, what will be done on her behalf. She can no longer stomach it.

Liz excuses herself politely, her mind spinning as she heads to bed early.

Mr. Kaplan and Red watch her go, low murmurs of concern following her across the room.
She can’t actually sleep, of course, but she notes Mr. Kaplan entering one of the empty guest rooms in their wing some time later. Red goes to his own room a couple of hours after that; Liz listens to his particular stride pause outside her door first.

It isn’t intentional, not really. She only wants to give herself some breathing room, shut away from the casual chat about horrible events. Events that are her fault. But her mind won’t stop working, turning over contingencies and likely outcomes. In a way, it’s all Red’s fault. She’s been taught by the best for years.

Before she’s fully decided that she needs one, Liz comes up with a plan.

*****

Red thinks that he hears her leave, as implausible as that is. He was sleeping deeply, and this house is huge—his room is yards away from any of the doors to the outside.

It could be that he feels it, instead. The sudden absence of her. No matter the explanation, he knows immediately that she is gone. His instincts wake before he does, pushing him towards a single goal: getting her back.

Driving would make her an easy target, and he can’t imagine that Lizzie would steal Mr. Kaplan’s car anyhow. What happened while she was sleeping? Therefore, he should be able to find her on foot, which allows him the time to get dressed.

After he’s pulled on slacks and a sweater, he wishes foolishly for a hat that he no longer owns. Whatever he’s about to encounter next, he would feel less exposed with his hat on. He knows that makes him silly; he doesn’t care. What the hell is she thinking?

Turning over what he knows about their location in his mind, Red decides on Lizzie’s most likely path and makes his way toward the back of the property, where the dense trees eventually give way to a neglected road. He has to swallow the worry, focus on tracking her. Before it’s too late.

What did he do wrong?

*****

She’s not fast enough in the dark, didn’t pay enough attention to their surroundings when they arrived. Of course he finds her.

Liz picks up on his footsteps falling long before he speaks and knows that it’s only Red following her through the trees. She has no reason to be afraid. Yet when he practically growls her name from inches away, a chill glides down her spine. She freezes, letting him catch up to her with his methodical pace.

“Lizzie,” he repeats when she doesn’t turn around. “Come back inside.”

She should have known it wouldn’t be that easy. He may be slightly softer around the edges, but he’s still the FBI’s most wanted. And since they met, she has yet to successfully leave him.

Liz follows him back to the house.

When he shuts the door behind them, when they’re safely locked inside again, she is prepared for his anger. He turns to face her so slowly that she even expects, a little, that his perfect control might fracture into genuine rage. But when Red stares at her, directly at her, right into her defiant eyes—he’s shaking. And all she sees is his fear.
“What on earth were you thinking?” His voice is barely there, almost a whisper. “How could you be so reckless?” He adds more carefully, “Is this about the new identities?”

Liz shakes her head. “No, it’s not about that. I get that they don’t mean anything.” She chooses to overlook the flicker of emotion in his eyes when she says that. There are bigger issues at stake right now.

She shifts away from him, can’t maintain eye contact—begins gesturing with her hands. “I need to go, Red. I need to do something. Dembe’s in the Post Office because of me.” She can’t stop moving around the living room, can’t repress the caged feeling. “I know what they could be doing to him right now, what they probably are doing…what I’ve done.”

She almost doesn’t hear him when he replies. “This isn’t your fault.”

“Are you kidding?” She paces back to Red, resists the urge to jab at him out of sheer frustration. Would feel damn satisfying; wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“This is all my fault. They think you’re involved!” Liz isn’t able to keep the hysteria out of her voice as she strides away once more. “If they see me, get word of me, publicly alone, maybe they’ll know you had nothing to do with the shooting of Tom Connolly, or with the senator.”

She faces him again, moving closer as her eyes beg him to understand. “Red, Dembe isn’t to blame for any of this, we can’t let them just—”

“Lizzie. Stop.” Not a request. He takes her by the shoulders, gripping firmly until she obeys.

Her body practically vibrates with anger and guilt. “What do we do, then?” The warmth from his hands seeps into her.

His smile is rueful, apologetic. Pained. “We wait. We hide.”

“But Dembe…”

“Dembe will take care of himself. He learned to do so at a much younger age than most. I know it’s hard,” he adds. “It’s excruciating to stand by while those we care about are moving freely in the world, at risk because of us.”

His voice breaks, and she wonders who he’s thinking of. His daughter? His ex-wife?

“But this can be the worst part of being wanted. If we’re exposed, we die. It’s that simple. And Dembe knows that too. He chooses to stay, Lizzie. He chooses to help.”

“You didn’t ask him to stay, to look after your affairs?”

“I didn’t have to.” The love bleeds through his businesslike tone. She hurts for him, and buries that feeling under her anger. At least anger she knows how to live with.

Red continues, eyes sympathetic. “This plan has been in place for years, in one form or another. If I go underground, Dembe stays. Until it’s safe for me to resurface.”

“To keep things going in your absence?”

He nods. “And to be visible. To be my loyal compatriot, in the eyes of all who seek me out.”

Liz pales. The sudden understanding makes her feel ill. “He wanted to get caught. He’s…he’s just
playing his part, isn’t he? You’re still ten steps ahead.”

Red’s expression is the Cheshire Cat, the smirk of a wanted man who walked himself into the FBI—and walked himself back out.

Then he is serious again, the man who unfailingly rescues her, and she isn’t sure which she finds more compelling. “I’m sorry I didn’t explain this sooner, Lizzie. I didn’t anticipate the news affecting you this much.” Or at all.

She shrugs, deflated, and moves to the couch to sit down. The frantic urgency that was churning inside her is gone, along with her anger. There’s no way to fix it; the damage is already done. “Not your fault. I just…I don’t want anyone else to pay for my sins. Not anymore.”

He wants to reassure her, but opts for honesty because anything else is dangerous. She can’t keep making life-or-death decisions impulsively. She can’t play hero without the superpowers.

He can’t lose her.

“That’s a noble goal, sweetheart, but unfortunately it’s not a choice that you get to make for anyone else. If I hadn’t stopped you, do you think Dembe would be grateful for your exposure?”

She frowns at him. He holds up a hand before she replies, takes a seat in the chair across from her.

“He would remain in custody, and you would be invalidating his choice. His decision.”

Red’s voice softens, warms. “He is there right now because he loves me, Lizzie, because I am his kin. And because he knows—”

Shaking his head, Red looks briefly astonished at himself. He begins again. “I would never disrespect the bond we share by taking his right to protect me away. It would be helpful if you would grant similar respect to those who wish to protect you.”

He isn’t talking about Dembe now, not really. She wants to call him a hypocrite, because he tells her not to save him—as he saves her, every time.

But if he’s only willing to speak in code, they’re not ready to have this discussion. This argument. They can’t meet on common ground with a gun to his head, and hers.

So Liz simply nods, and tries to hide the sadness behind a smile. “I’ll think about it.”

“And you’ll stay here? No more trying to run on your own?” He asks lightly, but the concern underlying the question is impossible to miss, and she studies him for a minute before replying.

He can go anytime he wants to. He could leave her with this new life, the option is there for him, but he doesn’t. He won’t. She knows this as surely as she knows his favorite cereal and his favorite author. Cinnamon Life, William Faulkner.

So it’s really not that strange, Liz tells herself, for her to take his hand when she replies. Even though she’s never done it before. Even though it’s always been him doing the reaching. The comforting.

Red stays because she needs him. They both know it, though she has never said the words.

His hand is motionless in hers. Somehow, she understands that he’s afraid. Not just of losing her, but of depending on her, at all. Of hope and vulnerability.
“I’ll stay here. With you.”

Liz laces her fingers through his, waits until he looks back at her and responds to the contact. Palm to palm. Heat and solace.

“I promise.”

Maybe it’s possible that Red still needs her, a little, too.

Chapter End Notes

Feedback is the best, thank you all.

Chapter title from "Josh McBride" by The Head and the Heart.
They stop in Oregon for less than twelve hours, just long enough to get some supplies and some sleep before heading to the next safe house.

This is the first time since they left DC that Liz will get to choose some things for herself. They’ve been getting groceries delivered, occasionally having personal items purchased by the drivers that Red hires...trying to minimize their exposure whenever possible. She doesn’t really miss shopping--she was never that sort of girl--but she misses the freedom of choice that went out the window when they got in that first van.

Because Red is still the expert on caution, they take turns shopping--at different stores, at different times. In cash.

“Less than ten minutes, Lizzie.”

Being seen together is an avoidable risk, and their new appearances aren’t exactly foolproof protection, so Liz heads into the superstore without comment. It’s not clear what makes this day or this leg of the journey less dangerous, allows her to select her own deodorant, but she’s happy to go with it. There is heartening familiarity in the florescent hum of the lights and the slide of the automatic doors.

Besides looking for the items on her own short list, she also sees their shopping arrangement as an opportunity. There will be no clothing stores in their future since their wardrobe was furnished privately and without their input. This makes sense; it keeps them from being tracked according to their sartorial tastes...but it also limits her options. Liz silently thanks whoever made it possible for her to pick up a surprise for Red in between grabbing shampoo and granola bars.
She buries the item under the rest of her purchases, concealed in an extra bag just to be safe. Back at their home-for-the-night, Red leaves her things alone, doesn’t even try to carry them in for her. He was shot not long ago--though they avoid discussing that, or the events leading up to it--so more often than not, she emphasizes her equality and he sets aside his chivalry.

He has been following through with his physical therapy, mildly, without Dembe there to insist. She saw it in the expansive home back in Colorado, when he meandered down the corridors. He seemed lonely walking on his own. She wishes that she felt comfortable assisting him, sliding into the space left by Dembe, but she doesn’t--and she expects she never will. There’s too much history between them, the painful and bleak kind.

Bringing up his therapeutic walking means referencing the shooting, which means analyzing her behavior before he got shot...and her behavior that led to him being shot. It’s a knot in her stomach made up of all the moments when she was ungrateful and suspicious; she doesn’t know how to begin untangling it.

Liz remembers everything. She hasn’t forgotten any of it. How could she, when the nightmares return every night? The shootings, all of them; the secrets that Red kept--and the ones that she did; the things that she still doesn’t understand.

They’ll have to talk about it, eventually. Her curiosity wants to burn right through her skin and scald him with her need to know. They share a history of heat and fire; is it any wonder that all her metaphors revolve around the same?

Who was her mother, and to him? What brought him to her house that night, for the Fulcrum? How did he know about her, to bury her memories? None of it makes sense with the sparse information she has pieced together. None of it can makes sense, she thinks, without learning the things he still isn’t willing to tell her.

So of course she’ll have to press the point; of course she’ll have to push him past his boundaries to get them. She needs her life to make sense...she needs their lives to make sense--because it’s obvious that hers has been entwined with his for almost as long as she’s been alive, if not longer.

But rebuilding can only happen after destruction, it’s in the very definition of the word. She wants to reconstruct her history, her life, herself...she just doesn’t want to destroy this new companionship to do it. So she waits.

She pushes the memories back down, buries them deep. She survives the terrible dreams one night at a time. Liz focuses on the aspects of this new life that are comfortable, comforting. The things that make her happy, despite the running and the subterfuge and the lack of privacy.

She is happy now, when she doesn’t examine what came before. She is happy with him. Just living.

A month ago, a year ago, she never would have believed it.

Things can change so quickly.

The new house is tucked away in Cashmere, a town that Liz believes has the most Red-appropriate name she’s ever heard. Of course he would hide in Cashmere. It seemed small and ordinary when
they arrived; she couldn’t identify much in the dark.

“A friend of an enemy,” is all that Red tells her about this house, and she’s not that interested in the details. It's tucked close among other houses and just big enough for the two of them. One bathroom to share, but two bedrooms, and for that she is always grateful. She chooses not to examine why.

Liz waits until after they’re settled in that night to give him the gift. It’s silly, sure, and she can’t be certain he’ll like it...but it’s also the first present she’s picked out in a while so she’s probably more excited about it than she should be. *He’s her only real family now. It’s important to value that.*

“Shouldn’t be too bad,” he tosses over his shoulder when she approaches the living room. Apparently she walks really loudly, or he can just sense when she enters a room now. *Maybe both.*

Red is organizing his notes as she approaches. “We’ll be here for three days, Lizzie...and at least it has a full kitchen. I was expecting something much more dismal for such a small town.”

“It’s a house,” she agrees, bemused. “Small homes usually have kitchens. I mean, it’s no mansion...” She emphasizes that word in a way that makes him laugh. “But it’s also not a cheap motel.”

“True.” He purses his lips when she comes to stand in front of him and the antique desk, holding the creatively covered package.

“What have you done with my New York Times?” Red tilts his head in bewilderment, stares at it and then at her.

“I didn’t have a lot of options for wrapping.” She shrugs, beginning to worry. “It’s not even your favorite newspaper, so I thought...I didn’t think you would mind.”

“I don’t mind. I’m just incredibly curious. I meant, what have you done with it?”

“Oh.” Feeling self-conscious, she places the present on top of his papers, leaving it sitting in front of him on the desk, where he still doesn’t reach for it. He continues watching her.

“Lizzie, what’s going on?”

“I got you something.” She smiles. “You have to keep in mind that my shopping options were very limited, almost as much as my gift-wrapping options--”

He reaches a hand out, touches her wrist. Stops her babbling.

“Are you saying...that this is a gift? For me?”

She bites back the sarcasm that is her first instinctive reply. It can’t be that rare an occurrence, right? Surely Dembe, if no one else, surprises him from time to time, or celebrates his birthday. *She’s never gotten him a gift before. This is the first happy surprise he’s ever gotten from her.*

“Yes,” she answers him simply. She reminds herself that she’s trying to be nicer. Less guarded.

He looks...scared. Like he can’t trust the idea. Like it may be some sort of trick. Liz can’t tell if she has made him this paranoid, or if it’s all related to his general inability to be cared about.

But he reaches out, touches the terrible wrapping, smiles a little. Lets himself believe. And when
he opens the present, he laughs.

_He hasn’t been this delighted with a gift in a very long time. Terrible wrapping and all._

“Lizzie, it’s wonderful.”

“I know it’s not up to your usual standards,” she explains. “But that should also keep it from tripping any alarms. You would never buy this for yourself.”

“No,” he agrees with a grin. “That’s certainly true. I would not.”

He takes the inexpensive fedora out of the torn newspaper pages, turns it over in his hands. Then he looks up at her, where she still stands nervously. He pins her with his gaze—happy, but no less intense.

“Why did you do this?” His tone turns the question into something important. Vital. She chooses her words carefully.

“You’re not...**you,** without your hats. I know that you can’t wear them publicly, or even where anyone else could see them. But at home, and with me, it’s safe.”

She gestures helplessly, knowing she isn’t explaining things well enough. “I wanted to give you a little piece of your life back. Something happy.” _Since you gave it all up for me._

He nods, unable to reply for a moment. Even if he could, the words caught in his throat are better left unspoken. Instead, he dons the hat with a flourish. His smile is just for her.

“What do you think?”

She thinks he looks like the Red who ordered drinks for her and took her to fancy restaurants. The man who was excited to share every new adventure.

She thinks he looks like pure joy again, the kind that was contagious even when she didn’t truly know him yet. Now she knows exactly who he is—**sin-eater mastermind murderer knight**—and that knowledge is overwhelming.

“I think it’s perfect.”

She thinks he’s perfect, in a fucked up and beautiful way that she’s not capable of dealing with right now. If there’s anything she’s learned well from Raymond Reddington, however, it’s distraction techniques. So she plucks the hat off his head and situates it on her own.

Glancing at her reflection in the darkened window, she tips the hat down over one eye, then chuckles and hands it back to Red.

“Looks better on you.”

He settles it back on his own head, adjusting the brim and pretending not to notice that it doesn’t quite fit.

He has never loved a hat so much in his life.

*****

They share breakfast in the new house, maintaining the best of their routines in the smaller space. Red cooks—still faster and better than she’ll ever be capable of while half-awake. Liz regards him
across the table while she eats her crepes.

She still can’t stomach pancakes. Red never asks why.

“What’s your favorite movie?” she asks, out of the blue.

He answers slowly, as though he’s searching for the trap buried in her question. “I don’t know that I have just one. I like the classics.”

“So, like Casablanca?”

She startles a laugh out of him between bites. “God, no! That movie is awful. Will she or won’t she get on the plane? Play it, Sam...” A shadow passes over his face and vanishes just as quickly. “I had the best nap of my life the first time I tried to watch that film.”

She frowns, trying to come up with a better guess. “Okay, then, Roman Holiday. Audrey Hepburn?”

He smiles, an appreciative curve of his lips that’s almost feline. “Yes, now, she is a classic. Love in the Afternoon has always been a favorite of mine.”

Nodding, Liz continues to turn the puzzle of him over in her mind. “What about movies that aren’t fifty years old?”

“What about them?”

“What do you like?”

The look Red gives her in reply is almost entirely blank, just a tad teasing. She frowns again, stymied.

“What about the James Bond films, at least? I mean, you must have seen those. Do you have a favorite Bond?” When he is silent, she persists. “Daniel Craig, Pierce Brosnan...Sean Connery?”

“Oh, Lizzie,” he replies with a sigh. “The Bond films are just so unbelievable. Preposterous antics--hard for a respectable criminal to enjoy.” But the hesitation before his answer gives him away.

“You haven’t even seen the new ones, have you?” She narrows her eyes. “What movies have you seen in the last decade?”

When Red opens his mouth to reply, she stops him. “More specifically, what movies have you seen that were made in the last decade?”

His face falls, and whatever reply he was about to give is discarded.

Liz laughs, a lighthearted and rolling sound. “I knew it!” She points a finger at him, leaning back in her chair. “You are a movie snob, Raymond Reddington!”

He shakes his head, but doesn’t bother to offer a defense. He could be considered a snob in all manner of ways. He can afford to be, after all. And besides, her declaration was a fond one.

She used his name. And not in the formal, Concierge of Crime way. His name.

*****
They are lounging in the living room that afternoon when the knock sounds on the door. He drops his crossword puzzle and she rises from where her feet were kicked up on the arm of couch. They were hoping to escape detection entirely, but there is a plan in place for this. Red has a plan in place for everything.

This neighborhood is so busy that they probably should have been expecting company, Liz decides as she gets out the bread and cheese from the fridge. The windows are covered and they live quietly, but that only highlights the noises from outside. Lawns being mowed, children chattering on sidewalks. It’s eerie after so many isolated safe houses, so much silence.

While she begins making an unnecessarily early lunch, he checks the gun holstered behind his hip and heads to the front door.

From her position at the stove, Liz is able to witness him shifting from wanted fugitive to friendly houseguest in the instant he opens the door and confirms that the couple standing on the porch mean no harm. She has to stifle a laugh when she sees that the woman is carrying something homemade. How neighborly. This experience is so bizarre.

“Hi there,” the solid man greets Red, while the woman at his side waves to Liz from the doorway. “I’m Felix Carroway and this is Jenna. We saw you pull in last night. You’re house-sitting for Max?”

“That’s right,” Red agrees easily. He steps back, gives them room to enter. “I’m Tony, and that’s Becca in the kitchen. Nice to meet you both.” He smiles at Jenna. “What have you got there?”

“Just a little treat,” she replies, handing him the dish. “A brownie casserole, my own invention.”

“It looks delicious. Thank you.” He gestures toward the couch. “I’m afraid you’ve caught us just before we eat, but I’d love to chat for a moment. Why don’t you have a seat?”

Liz keeps an eye on the grilled cheese as Red sets the dish on the counter behind her. She knows without looking that he has returned to the living room, allowing her to stay with the cooking and avoid most of the small talk.

“So,” she hears Red continue jovially, “which of these lovely houses is yours?”

“Three houses down,” Felix replies.

“With the butterflies near the door,” Jenna adds.

“Of course,” Red agrees, as though he actually spotted that detail when they drove through the night before. Who knows, he probably did.

“You have a lovely home,” he tells them as Liz flips the sandwiches. “What do you think of the area? Do you have children in school?”

She tunes out the conversation, idly observing the butter brown in the pan. She doesn’t hear the pause in their chatting, doesn’t note that he has excused himself from the living room and returned.

Red is suddenly in her space. Very in her space. His mouth is at her ear before her reflexes can kick in—reflexes that likely would have left him groaning on the floor, as she has never dealt well with being snuck up on.

“We’re being scrutinized, Lizzie,” he murmurs, his words now hidden from the Carroways’ view by her face. “It’s casual interest on their end, probably because of the age difference. But we don’t
want to arouse their suspicions, so look married.”

She makes a frustrated sound low enough in her throat that only he can hear it, and turns to face him. Her smile is kicked up a few notches for the benefit of their onlookers, and she talks through it. “I’ve never been someone’s wife undercover, you know that. I wasn’t the half of my marriage that was perpetuating a fraud.”

“Well, you can start by not thinking ‘fraud,’ or ‘undercover,’” Red advises her, his eyes warm and tilted slightly toward the neighbors. “We have new identities, and as those people we are legally married. Also,” he adds with a smirk, “you could start by putting the spatula down.”

“Oh.” She forgot she was holding it. Turning away to set it down gives Liz a chance to pull herself together. This is about survival--isn’t that how he phrased it? She’s worked in situations much more fraught than this. It shouldn’t be difficult.

She can try to believe that it’s because they live together, see each other constantly, and she doesn’t want things to be awkward again. But she knows it’s because having a cover on the job was just business--it wouldn’t bleed into her life. Once the job was done, it didn’t matter. This matters.

She’s also clearly overthinking it. He’s inches from her face, gazing at her exactly like a devoted husband, and still perfectly at ease. She’ll never be able to slip into roles like he can, she doesn’t have his impeccable composure. But she can hold her own undercover, she proved it on the task force--and there’s a challenge behind Red’s grin.

Lifting her chin in response, flashing back to all sorts of dares as a teenager, Liz entwines her left hand with his. Something simple, familiar, just in a different context. This she can handle. Then she leans in, stopping just shy of pressing her chest into his--she can feel the warmth he radiates in the space between them--and lifts her right hand up.

His face would be too much; there are lines she won’t cross even on a dare, especially when he’s looking at her so smugly. But his hair has been slowly growing out over the last two weeks and in truth, she’s been curious about the fuzzy look of it. As she smooths her hand over his head, leaves it resting just behind his ear, Red keeps his gaze fixed on hers. The smugness is gone.

She is close enough to see his eyes darken, nearly changing color entirely. They’ve grown watchful, almost wary. Then his nose twitches.

“Lunch, Lizzie,” he murmurs.

“Crap!” She spins back to the stove, turns off the burner and rescues the overcooked sandwiches. Not burned, thank god. Way to almost ruin the whole domestic couple thing, Liz. Red grins at her and returns to the living room.

“Unfortunately, Felix, Jenna, it’s time for us to sit down to lunch, but we greatly appreciate your visit.” His voice is sincere, effusive. Liz almost believes it herself. She plates the rest of their food as he shows the Carroways out.

“Perhaps Becca and I could pay you a visit in a couple of days, return your kindness. I make a mean zucchini bread.”

“That would be lovely.” Jenna waves again, smiling at Liz as they exit. Red shuts the door and his entire posture changes, turning him from a relaxed retiree to a man on alert. It’s strange how his relaxation is the cover, the act he has to put on deliberately, and his natural state is almost painfully tense.
He grins at Liz as she brings the plates to the table.

“Well, that was fun.”

“Fun?” All hints of their distracting closeness in the kitchen are gone; he seems completely the same as before. She breathes out her worry. *Maybe they’ll be fine.*

“Yes, a bit of a kick. Something to test our sharpness, keep us on our toes. What did you think of them?”

Liz takes his question seriously. “I think...she's lonely. He’s a little loud. I’m glad we’ll be gone before they expect that visit.”

“I agree.” He sits, after she does. “Though it is a shame.”

“Well?”

“I wasn’t kidding about that zucchini bread, Lizzie. It’s delicious.”

She smiles at him before she bites into her grilled cheese.

“Maybe you could make it for us someday.”

*****

*Has the word ‘someday’ ever been so full of promise?*

Red is fighting harder every day to keep hope at arm’s length. She talks like someone who expects to wake up each morning and find him still there. *It’s terrifying.*

They’re doing well for individuals who were accustomed to living alone, he muses. Thus far, they’ve survived cohabitation with no casualties and only a few mild injuries of the emotional sort.

*And one of the literal sort, when she opened a door into him by accident while he was walking through the hall. It was just his toe; he heals quickly.*

However, his plan still centers on leaving her someday. They have to return to their lives once this holding pattern ends...and as interesting as the last two weeks have been, this situation is more a diversion than a life. Not sustainable.

But the side of himself that he’s never been able to fully shut down, the foolish, optimistic side, is basking in her presence. Thinking about the days ahead as though they don’t have an end approaching. He has only himself to blame; he’ll suffer when it’s time for her to go and he isn’t ready. *He’ll never be ready. He’s pathetic. He’ll miss her.*

Red knows that she can’t have a satisfying life until she moves on from the rootless travel, and from him. It’s obvious that she isn’t willing to confront that yet--if she’s even thought about her life, after. He’s not entirely sure she grasps that things can’t go on like this.

Her obliviousness worries him almost as much as her shift from furious and questioning to friendly and almost...cheerful. The woman that follows his directives without argument and shares her toothpaste while rolling her eyes at him isn’t the Lizzie he knows.

He is savoring the calm, even though he’s simultaneously braced for the storm. More than anyone, he is aware that the latter follows the former. *Especially where Lizzie is concerned.*
Liz has gotten so used to abandoned, book-filled homes that she doesn’t even notice they have a television until after the Carroways leave. When she sees the microwave popcorn in a cupboard and realizes what it signifies, she finds him in his bedroom.

“Red,” she tells him solemnly, “there is a television here.”

He looks up from his book. “All right.”

She nudges his shoulder when he goes back to reading. “Red, there’s a television!”

“I heard you, Lizzie. I’m not a big television fan, but feel free to enjoy.”

“You’re not excited at all?” She almost appears disappointed. “It’s something different. A change in the routine.”

“I wasn’t feeling restless with the routine,” he reminds her. “But if you want me to join you, of course I will. I’ve read this book before...” He pauses, glances at the cover. “About five times, if I remember correctly.”

“See, so come watch TV.”

“Sure.” He walks the few steps with her to the living room, situates himself on the sofa, then looks at her expectantly. “Was there something in particular you wanted to put on?”

“Well,” she says, pretending to consider it, “we could spend the day fighting over the remote--or we could go with movies. You choose one, I choose one?”

“I reiterate, I have no need to fight with you over vaguely differentiated hours of programming.” But he stands back up, and moves to the DVD cabinet, peering at their host’s collection.

“So is that a yes?” She sounds suspicious, as though he’s trying to beat her to the best movies.

“Not sure yet.” He flashes her a smile over his shoulder. “Needed to find out first if they have any movies that were made more than fifty years ago.”

“Ha, ha. You’re hilarious.” She gets up to join him, elbows him lightly. “Move over.”

He complies and starts tugging out DVDs, stacking them neatly atop the DVD cabinet.

“I said we each pick one.”

“I heard you,” he counters. “I’ll narrow my choices down when I’m done.”

“Okay. Weird.” Liz shrugs. In five seconds, she finds and chooses a single DVD.

“That’s it?” Red keeps on perusing as he asks.

“Yep, easy. It’s a modern classic. Have you seen it?”

He squints at the case.

“I think not.”

“Well, prepare for greatness.”
They begin with Red’s movie, because he declares it a surprise and puts it in while she’s still working on the popcorn.

After everything that’s happened over the last two weeks--and during this one day--it seems dumb to sit separately for no reason that either of them will articulate, so they share the couch. There’s still a reassuring amount of distance between them, but at least they both have a good view of the screen this way.

“Turns out Max has decent taste after all,” Red tells her as the opening titles commence.

Liz almost chokes on a laugh when she realizes they’re viewing North by Northwest. She doesn’t know exactly when it was released, but it’s a Hitchcock film so it has to be more than fifty years old. *She thought he was kidding about that.*

“Have you seen it before?” He views her curiously after the oddly strangled noise she made, and she shakes her head.

“I’ve seen some of his others. Psycho, The Birds, you know.”

“The classics.” He nods sagely. “Our host has Psycho too, I noticed, but this one is more appropriate.”

Watching a movie with Red is a fascinating experience, like a lot of other things since they began living together. His expressive features shift with each scene, as though he’s seeing this story play out for the first time.

It’s not a bad movie. *She wouldn’t have actually expected him to choose a bad movie.* It does appear to be an eerily fitting choice, though. As ordinary guy Roger Thornhill tries to evade the police and the spies that are all hunting him, she wonders if Red is capable of doing anything without metaphor and subtext.

“She thought he was kidding about that.”

He doesn’t talk over the movie, except to respond when she does. And to complain halfheartedly when she steals a handful of popcorn out of his bowl. *He eats it like it’s a delicacy, rather than junk food from the nearest supermarket that she almost scorched in the microwave.* When she’s finished her bowlful and he’s still nibbling on his, he shares without further objection.

There is a part of her that wishes they were genuinely friends, familiar and true friends, the kind that could cuddle up on the couch without complications and enjoy feeling less alone while they talked about an old movie. She misses having someone to do that with, someone that doesn’t carry the tension they both do now--an electric charge that pushes them apart. *Body counts and words flung in hatred.*
The cynical, angry side of her is well aware of why that can never be the case for them, and how unbelievably ridiculous Liz is to even imagine it. She should be getting the answers she needs from him. She shouldn’t be letting him tell her about his favorite classic film actors; she shouldn’t be telling him about the best movie snacks she’s ever had. *He was there. He carries her past around with him, so close yet so closely guarded.*

But she **wants** this. She wants silly, uncomplicated moments with this man who is shades away from Red the criminal. She wants to forget. To escape. Who wouldn’t?

There will be time for that, she tells herself. There will be time for all of that, later. They’re fugitives. *All they’ve got is time.*

*****

“So...they’re staying in borrowed houses. And having adventures?”

Liz nods, looks as though she’s trying hard to avoid rolling her eyes. She’s been answering his questions since the film began.

“Mostly romantic adventures; it’s not like they’re running from spies or anything. But yes.”

He waves his hand towards the screen. “**Now that** would be a good movie. Just throw in some spies, you’d have a blockbuster.”

“Not everything is about spies and subterfuge,” she points out, curling up into her side of the couch. When he raises an eyebrow at her, she grins. “**In movies,** Red. Not everything is all cloak and dagger in movies.”

She turns back to the screen, murmurs along with Iris. “I enjoyed our meet-cute.”

He can’t claim to enjoy Lizzie’s selection. Frankly, it’s farcical and Red isn’t sure he sees the appeal. But he does enjoy watching her watch the movie. With the lights off, the blue glow from the television highlights the angles of her face, and he sneaks glances at her while the comedy plays on.

“I always thought this seemed like fun,” she admits over the quiet piano music coming from the TV.

“Hmm?”

“Trading houses, getting to try on someone else’s life for a while.” Her smile is a little uneven as she directs it his way. “I was in college...ready for a big adventure. I’d never been anywhere.”

Red nods, understanding. He’s not the only one who can choose a film with meaning, even if she selected hers impulsively.

“Not exactly what you expected, is it?” He tries to be gentle; he knows this peculiar life they’re living can’t be easy, but he also can’t avoid asking. If he’s all she has for now, he has to be someone she can talk to. **He’s always** been someone she can talk to. **He’s just never been so involved before, in the things she might talk to him about.**

“Of course not,” she replies with amusement, shaking her head as she turns back to the screen. “I never could have expected any of this.”

“Red,” she continues quietly, “I was going to be a profiler in the FBI. An agent with a desk job and
a settled life. **Nothing** has turned out the way I thought it would.”

He wants to take her hand, but he doesn’t. *Not this time.* He’s the one she trusted when her life was destroyed, because he shattered all those plans. *He’s the last person she should have ever found soothing.*

While he’s berating himself inwardly, she reaches for his hand instead—keeping her eyes on him as though he might stop her.

“**It’s not all bad,**” she tells him. *And means it.* He can see the sincerity all over her face, but he cannot fathom it.

During Amanda's run back to the cottage, Liz glances over and catches him looking at her. She doesn't protest or get angry. She stares back at him thoughtfully, and then she returns to watching the film.

*[He doesn’t recognize this woman.]* She isn’t the Elizabeth Keen that he secretly thought of as **his** Lizzie, the one he consoled and protected—**with** her life in pieces, she is both more lively and more cautious than he is used to.

When the credits roll, she sings along to the music in the background before she notices him grinning at her.

“**It’s perfect in December,**” Liz informs him, slightly mortified. “I know, the ending’s cheesy. I probably should have outgrown it a long time ago, but it’s just so…”

“**Happy,**” he agrees with a nod.

*She glows at him. Where did that come from? What on earth does it mean?*

Red sends her a bemused smile as he heads to the kitchen to consider their dinner options. He may be developing an unexpected appreciation for modern movies.

*He may be developing an unexpected appreciation for this Lizzie.*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as always, for the love! You make me want to write faster.

Claiming Love in the Afternoon as a favorite of Red's was a romantic tip of the hat/author indulgence based on the plot description.

Chapter title from "This Is the New Year" by A Great Big World.
Lost Souls and Reverie

Chapter Summary

Cheetos, freeways, confessions. “Somewhere in there, the girl whose softness and need he couldn’t resist still lives—but this is the terrifying woman who takes his breath away.”

Chapter Notes

I’m finally back to this epic story. I hope to do justice to this beautiful ship of ours, with all the potential it held.

I owe a debt of gratitude to broken_hearted_bard, who never stopped waiting for the next chapter.

P.S. This chapter was already in the editing stage by the time 3x18 aired. All the painful parallels are pure, sad coincidence.

Disclaimer: They don’t belong to me. All I have is my existential despair and a desperate need to fix things.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They have been on the freeway for hours since their departure from Cashmere, tucked inside the back of a reinforced van. Liz sleeps through the morning, but the warmth of their cargo space grows oppressive in the afternoon.

Red apologizes for her discomfort when she awakes; Liz brushes it off with a shrug. Their safety is more important, and it’s not like she expected being a fugitive to always be pleasant.

“It’s bulletproof,” he informs her reassuringly as they rocket along at a high speed. “We have an hour before we switch drivers.”

“Again?” She looks at her watch, a demure Bulgari that came with her new wardrobe. “I swear we just changed drivers.”

He nods. “We did.”

She raises her eyebrows, waiting for him to continue.

“This trip is important,” he says, as though that clears everything up. “We need to reach our destination without anyone being aware of where they’re taking us.”

“But how is that possible? How could they not—I mean, at least the last driver would have to know where we’re going…to get us there.”

Red unfolds his newspaper instead of answering, a smirk ghosting around his lips. She bites back
her frustration. He’s clearly done answering questions, however unhelpful his answers have been so far.

Their third driver brings them lunch, fast food from a drive-through. They stay tucked inside the van while they eat, but at least the door is open. She’s grateful for the fresh air, and a view of the sky. It looks like rain.

Her best guess as to where they’ve stopped is Idaho, but there’s no way to check her theory. She uses the restroom at a different fast food place—less surveillance than a gas station, Red explains—and is then ushered straight back into the van.

Compared to the shopping she did before Cashmere, this trip’s security measures are much stricter, bordering on obsessive, and she doesn’t know why.

****

“Did you go on road trips as a kid?”

The rhythm of the rain hitting the van as they travel through another state is making her feel lethargic, but Red seems as alert as ever, so she attempts conversation to pass the time.

“Hmm?” He returns from wherever his thoughts had taken him and blinks at her. “Road trips? I suppose I did, a few. My father was a very busy man…we had the occasional vacation as a family.”

“Sam took me somewhere every summer,” she tells him in exchange, and then she freezes. “But you would know that,” she adds dully. It’s easy to forget sometimes that though she met him two years ago, he’s known about her her whole life.

Red is quietly watching her now, knowing how volatile she is when it comes to her past. He won’t even tell her where they’re headed—there’s no chance he’s currently willing to spill his secrets. Not wanting to argue while they’re trapped together in the tiny space, she shakes her head and moves on.

“What was your father like?”

He smiles. “Very firm. He taught me a lot of valuable lessons…he was big on lessons, my father. But at Christmas he always got down on the floor with me, to play with all my toys.”

His remembering smile is bittersweet. “I was sixteen when he died.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” He closes his eyes, looking lost for a moment. “Me too.”

“I became the man of the house then, as they say—do they say that anymore? I don’t think so,” he answers his own question. “Took care of my mother right up until she…”

Red blinks hard then, and Liz looks away, uncomfortable. She is trying to stave off boredom during their windowless travels, not make America’s Most Wanted cry.

“Anyway,” he continues, his voice lined with gravel after he swallows hard, “my father was a bit like me, I suppose, if you leave off the crime.”

She smiles at him cautiously. “And if you leave off the crime, exactly what’s left?”

His answering smile is just as cautious, but also heartbreakingly sad. “Good question.”
They stop for the night in Utah, which Red claims is halfway to their destination. He waits inside the vehicle, holding up a hand so she stays put as well, while their driver secures them a room in a motel. She covers her shock when Red shows her into their room with a flourish of his arm.

It has two beds. In one room.

“For some reason, I thought we would have separate rooms.”

Red’s mouth twitches. “They don’t have adjoining ones, and the alternative wouldn’t be safe.” He seems more uncomfortable than she is. She’s mostly just surprised, given how carefully they’ve maintained their boundaries so far.

As Liz claims the bed near the bathroom and Red sets his duffel bag on the bed closest to the door, she realizes that he’s finally going to have to sleep in her company. I wonder if he wears pajamas. I wonder if he doesn’t.

Then he smiles at her, and she sweeps that thought aside. Mind out of the gutter, Liz. You’re running for your life, remember?

“Well, what do you think?”

“It’ll be fine. It’s nice to get out of the van.”

“Agreed.” He sits at the motel’s tiny desk and runs a hand over his head, relaxing. As much as Red relaxes. “We’re in for the night. Tomorrow our car will be dropped off and then we’ll finish out the second half of the trip.”

She nods. “Wait—a car? Not a van?”

“No.” He’s smirking again; she follows the breadcrumb trail.

“And it’s being dropped off. Will we not have a driver?”

“Well, of course we’ll have a driver, as someone has to drive the car. It just so happens that our driver will be me.”

“You.” She stares at him, considering.

“Yes.”

“When was the last time you drove a car?”

“Recently.”

“As in, during my lifetime, or…”

“Oh, be quiet.” He makes a face at her and she grins, finding their road trip more fun than the tedium of endless safe houses now that they’ll be sleeping in actual beds for the night. And Red will be driving tomorrow. She’ll be able to look at the world as it passes by, rather than being stuffed in a box like smuggled goods.

Liz pauses, realizes that wasn’t actually mentioned. “I get to sit up front with you tomorrow, right? I’m not going to be on the floor of the back seat, or, I don’t know, in the trunk with an oxygen tank?”
His reply is droll, just this side of sarcastic. *Clearly she’s rubbing off on him.* “I think we can forgo the oxygen tank just this once.”

“That’s not an answer to my question.”

“Yes, Lizzie, you will riding shotgun, seatbelt secured, right next to me for the rest of our trip.”

She doesn’t think before tossing her arms around his neck in delight. “Thank god. I’ll get to breathe fresh air and everything.”

Red is motionless, shocked by the casual affection. Not wanting things between them to get more awkward, Liz stage whispers gently, “This is the part where you hug back.” He isn’t able to muster up a chuckle, to match her playful humor, but he does hug back, lightly. *Waiting to wake up from what must be a lovely dream.*

He’s tempted to pinch himself when she kisses his cheek before letting go. Stepping away, she returns her attention to the room. “You know we need snacks, right? What good is a tiny, dim motel room without vending machine junk?”

Her wildly shifting moods are making it hard for him to keep up. “You want snacks?” he asks faintly, still feeling the warm press of her lips against his skin.

“Not want, need. It’s a requirement for any good road trip.”

“But we could have food delivered. Actual food.”

“Or we can stick with the reclusive fugitive theme and live on Cheetos for a night.”

He winces, mildly queasy at the thought. “Not Cheetos. Anything but that.”

“Cheetah fear?”

“I don’t like eating anything fluorescent.”

“Got it, no neon orange.” She roots around in the bag she’s been carrying for the cash tucked inside, and Red stops her with an emphatic shake of his head.

“Elizabeth, that’s for an emergency—if we get separated, if our identities are compromised.”

“It’s a vending machine. It’ll cost three dollars.”

He shakes his head again, digging into his own bag and pulling out some small bills. “Here. Keep the rest.”

She nods, tucking it into the pocket of her designer jeans. “Snickers?”

Red softens, unable to resist her enthusiasm. “Kit Kat, if they have one. Or Twix.” He watches her pull the hood of her jacket up to cover most of her face before leaving. “The closest vending machine,” he adds when it occurs to him. “The one around the corner that we saw on our way in.”

“Deal.” And then she is gone, and he is left alone in a room with two queen beds, wondering why this seemed like a workable idea before they left Cashmere. *Was he insane?*

Liz returns quickly with an armful of junk food, beaming at him triumphantly.

*Probably,* he decides. Temporary insanity is the only explanation he has for deciding he can spend
the night with her sleeping a few feet away.

****

He’s bleeding. *He won’t stop bleeding.* She’s pressing her hands against the bullet wound, cursing her temper, her need to know everything…the loaded gun she carries every waking moment.

“Red, damn it.” She’s still pressing her jacket to the blood—**so much blood**—with one hand, but the other is cradling his head now, lifting him up so that she can feel him breathe against her face. “Red, you can’t die. You’re not allowed to die. You hear me? Wake up.”

“Wake up.” This echoing voice isn’t hers. Somehow it’s Red, even though she’s looking at Red. His breath is faint on her skin. She’s losing him.

“Lizzie, sweetheart. It’s just a dream.” She can feel his fingers in hers, and that’s when she wakes up.

“He’s running his hands over her face, her hair, down her bare arms, trying to soothe. He murmurs empty words of comfort, telling her things will be okay, telling her she’s not alone. But all Liz sees is him bleeding out in her arms, and she thinks that nothing will ever really be okay. He’ll never give her answers, and she can’t stop prodding, and they’re destined for tragedy.

*They’re already a tragedy. Two ruined souls at the center of a hurricane.*

When his hands rest in hers again, she holds tight to them reassuringly. “I’m okay,” she says, calming her breathing. “It’s nothing.” *I have never lied to you, he told her once.*

He doesn’t contradict her. Instead Red reaches up and brushes his thumb over her cheek. “You were crying,” he says quietly.

“Well, nightmare.” She’s able to manage a shrug, but not looking at him. Not now. *Has she really been spending days hanging out with him like they could be friends? Has she really been spending nights wishing they were?*

“Tell me about it?” His concern makes her want to cry. She’s too raw. She thought he was dead. *It hurts her to remember; it hurts more to understand.*

“There’s nothing to tell.” She drags a hand through her short hair, trying to move past the images that have been burned into her brain. *Blood on her hands. His chest struggling to pull in air.* This is the last place she ever wanted to be, nightmares still shivering through her body with him there to see it. “It was just a bad dream.”

Red backs away, leaning against the wall. His silence weighs heavily on her; she could shatter under the guilt of it. Liz looks at him, his profile, face tilted down, and admits, “I haven’t been sleeping so well lately.”

“I know,” he answers, without looking at her in return.

Something about his reply puts her back up, though his voice is as mild and understanding as it always is. It’s ridiculous to care about this when he’s witnessed her terror. *And yet.*

“What do you mean, you know?”
He almost smiles at the fighting sound in her voice; he can sense her tensing up without looking over, and he has missed her ridiculously-easy-to-anger temperament.

_Clearly masochistic then._

“I mean that I’m aware you haven’t been sleeping well. What else do you think I could have meant? We shared a house, Lizzie, and breakfast every morning.” His reasonable tone makes her sound like an idiot, which only makes her feel even more irrationally angry.

“So we shared a house…and what does breakfast have to do with anything? That doesn’t mean you can know everything about me, what’s going on with me. I want to know what you’re talking about, Red.”

She faces him, waiting—**demanding**—until he turns toward her again. “You act omniscient, but I’ve been on the run with you for weeks, and I know that you’re just a person. A smart, attentive, very intuitive person, but you don’t have magical powers. What gave you the impression that I’m not sleeping well?”

He sighs, and she can feel it against her skin as they regard each other. Now he seems annoyed as well, though she isn’t sure why. It’s much harder to raise his temper than hers, with that high level of control.

“The first night, when your screams woke me in Camilla,” he tells her flatly, “I thought maybe someone had gotten in. I feared that they had found us, so I was at your side before I had the chance to consider the alternative.”

Angry now—at himself, at her, at the events that have left them both so scarred and sleepless—Red looks away again, then leaves her bed to sit on his own instead. “I’ve heard every one of your nightmares, Lizzie. The walls are thin.”

He has to ignore the shock on her face, her trembling chin. She can be surprised, even upset, but he can’t give her what she wants every time, what she needs and won’t admit. _She looked at him and lied._

When she whispers, “You were there,” he’s steadily staring at the bedspread. He’s unable to make sense of her, even when he knows exactly what she’ll do next. _She was laughing and stealing his popcorn only a couple of days ago—how did they find themselves here?_

“You were there,” she repeats more firmly. “In Camilla, that first night. I—I couldn’t get out of the nightmare, I couldn’t fight my way out. I didn’t wake up like I did the other times…but it stopped. It stopped, and in my sleep I knew I was okay, I was safe—I just didn’t know why. I didn’t understand why that night was different, and I guess I should have. It was you.”

He hears the rustle of her sheets but doesn’t watch her cross the room to him. “It’s always you saving me,” she says quietly, and then she sits on his bed, only inches away.

“Thank you.”

“I didn’t do anything,” he replies evenly. His eyes meeting hers are broken glass, sharp regret and the absence of hope. _A self-loathing hero who thinks himself a beast._

“You chased the monsters away,” she counters with a half-smile. “Even when I’m asleep, you protect me.” He can see her sway toward him a little, then back, as though she isn’t sure what to do with herself. He relents. With Lizzie, he always does.
“Come on,” he says, patting the bed next to him, where she’ll be able to rest against the wall. He’s still worried about how fragile she looks.

She scoots back, relaxing against the cold plaster with her shoulder just meeting his. His pajamas are soft cotton, and cover him from ankles to wrists. She was asleep long before he tuck himself in bed, so she missed that detail.

“When did you finally sleep?” She poses the question idly, enjoying the feeling of her heartbeat slowing down, of everything settling back into place now that he’s right here next to her. His breathing is measured and deep. *He’s alive.*

“A few hours ago.” He reaches over to graze her hand with his fingers. “Lizzie, tell me about your nightmares. We have to talk sometimes. Remember?”

She does remember, and it almost makes her smile. Liz slides her hand out from under his, toying with the edge of his sleeve. “All of my dreams are about death. Okay? I don’t want to talk about them. I just want them to stop.”

He nods. “I understand that. But avoiding them clearly isn’t helping.”

She exhales, then acquiesces, watching him from under her eyelashes. There are storms flashing in her eyes.

“I’m a murderer,” Liz begins. When he opens his mouth to protest, she narrows her eyes. Receiving the admonishment, Red closes it again, lets her continue. *Despite how wrong she is.*

“I killed Tom Connolly. I killed my father. I pulled that trigger both times.” She lets go of his sleeve and shifts her attention to her hands. Her fingers turn white as she links them together and presses hard. “And I shot Tom. I almost killed him.”

He is pinned by her gaze when she looks back up. Somewhere in there, the girl whose softness and need he couldn’t resist still lives—but this is the terrifying woman who takes his breath away. “I could have,” she admits, her voice rough. “I knew I could. Just do what you told me to do and never look back. It would have been easy.”

The defiant lift of her chin relaxes, and sorrow overtakes the cold in her stare. “That scared me. So I didn’t.”

He nods, carefully motionless, holding himself back from doing something stupid in the name of soothing her. He wants to tell her that as long as she’s still scared of herself, she’ll be okay. *Once you can do what needs to be done without feeling anything, then you become the monster.* Instead he lets her continue.

“I know why I’m having the nightmares. It’s Psych 101. But understanding them doesn’t…make it better.”

She shifts closer to him, seeking his hand with hers for comfort. To ground her, to lend her courage. Maybe she doesn’t want to give him the last of her secrets, maybe she’s just petty enough to resent the imbalance between them, but it’s hurting him. **She is hurting him. And she’s tired of putting that devastated look on his face.**

“I kill them,” she explains, her voice faraway in recollection. “I kill them over and over. Tom Connolly…Tom my-whatever-he-was…my father…”

He nearly whispers, trying not to disturb her thoughts. “It’s okay, Lizzie.”
Liz squeezes his hand. “And now you.”

She acknowledges the surprise on his face with a nod. “We argue and I shoot you. Or I mistake you for someone else and I shoot you. You’re bleeding out, and I’m apologizing, and I’m trying to save you, but I never do. I never can. It’s all my fault…and I lose you.” She shakes her head as though she can banish the feelings.

“Then I wake up screaming.”

Red is silent for a long time. When he speaks, it sounds like he has to drag each word out from a terrible place. “I can’t…make the nightmares stop. I can’t take away the pain, or honestly promise you that it will get better.”

His eyes search her face, trying to impart something that she can’t fathom, staying on hers for longer than they have since before she became a fugitive. It reminds her of other moments, other crises. 

“Darker nightmares.”

“But I promise you…Lizzie, I swear to you that you will never lose me if I still have breath left in my lungs…unless you ask me to go.”

He doesn’t say what he knows to be true, that it’s not ‘unless’ but ‘until.’ He swallows the other things he wants to offer her, curses his own foolish heart for having the thoughts in the first place, and lets go of her hand.

Liz is the one who blinks, who breaks eye contact first. She believes him, even while it feels like there’s an undercurrent of something in his words that’s not quite the truth. Something more, something else. But it’s almost irrelevant—it’s the things outside both their control that keep her up at night.

“If you die,” she confesses quietly, “I don’t know if I could do this on my own.”

“You’ll never have to worry about that,” he reassures her. “I would never leave you without resources. And you can always trust Dembe, and Mr. Kaplan, in my stead. They would see you through this world…which I promise you will not last forever.”

_That wasn’t what she meant_. He misunderstands, and she can’t blame him. Red’s still looking ahead to a future that she’s not sure she even wants anymore. Some of the things that have changed about her, about them…she actually likes.

But she knows he may never be able to accept that. He’s fighting so hard to give her back what she lost, it has become part of who he is…this quest to fix her life. To fix her.

As much guilt as he carries over everything that’s happened since that first day—_I speak only with Elizabeth Keen_—Liz knows she has turned his world upside down in return. And she can’t feel guilty about that, because she no longer wants to imagine a world without him in it. Or a life where she never knew him, the way she knows him now.

She shifts a little closer, just enough to lay her head on his shoulder. It’s a mirror image of their escape from D.C., except that she’s become less shattered and he’s not quite as rigid. When Red lets his own head drift over, resting his cheek against her hair, Liz smiles.

She can’t define why, but it feels like a tiny victory.

_She’ll take it._
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for coming back to this long-abandoned story. I'm grateful for every one of you.

Chapter title from "Renegades" by X Ambassadors.
Speak the Thing You Could Not Utter

Chapter Summary

Reunions, fear, arguments. “In all the years since the fire, he hasn't allowed himself to think about what he wants to do. Maybe he should.”

Chapter Notes

This chapter is officially dedicated to broken_hearted_bard for Day 2 of birthday week. Sorry it's so angsty! That doesn't seem very festive, but it couldn't be helped. :)

P.S. More painful parallels this week, because the ghost reference was written months ago, making this publication post-3x19 another heartbreaking coincidence.

P.P.S. This story is officially AU/canon-divergent from here on. I'll be using my own plotted backstory for the night of the fire, and almost nothing from S3 will be happening here, including and most especially pregnancy or character death.

Disclaimer: You broke them. They're mine now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liz isn’t surprised when their previous driver doesn’t return the next morning. They leave after an unfamiliar woman shows them to a gray sedan, takes their room key and stays behind to check out on their behalf.

“For some reason I was expecting a convertible,” she tells him with a quick smile before getting in.

He shakes his head in that happy way of his, chuckling. “If only, Lizzie. If only.”

For breakfast, Red stops at a diner two towns over, a bit of a dive where the customers look tired and disinterested in them. The food is modest after their days of gourmet cooking lessons, but she enjoys it. Red is just as pleased with his omelette, not the finicky snob she’s grown to expect--and once again, she finds herself fascinated by how many different sides there are to him.

Sure, she told him in a mock profile over drinks that he was comfortable in all kinds of settings, but it’s different seeing it. He’s a true chameleon.

Learning firsthand how easily a person’s life can be taken away has made Liz think more about who Red was before he became the Concierge of Crime. He’s mentioned his past in vague terms, but she didn’t want to listen then. It would be cruel if she asked now.

She wonders if he enjoys playing the roles he uses to survive, or if he’s simply gotten used to them. He always looks so well-suited to his smooth criminal persona--when he’s not busy trying to protect her, that is. Then he’s fierce and terrible. A force of nature, with a starched collar and a shotgun.
As their waitress comes over to their table, Liz has to hold back an eyeroll. The woman has a lean, no-nonsense look about her and serves them without issue…but for Red she boosts her smile and her cleavage up a notch. They get checked on half a dozen times, and each return includes an inviting smile directed at Red, occasionally with a question tossed at Liz as an afterthought.

Marie, according to her nametag, leans over to top off their water glasses for the third time, giving Red a more than adequate view of her assets, and Liz can’t take it anymore.

She shifts herself over, almost leaning across Red, close enough to touch the waitress, though she doesn’t. Instead she reaches for his left hand with hers, showing off their faux wedding bands to the best advantage, and gives Marie a sharp, nearly feral smile. “We’re good here, thanks. You’ve been so attentive. Hasn’t she, honey?”

Red hums in the back of his throat for a moment, so briefly that only Liz will hear it, before he plays along. “Yes, sweetheart, she’s given us excellent service. We’ll make sure to recommend your establishment back home.”

Marie narrows her eyes at Liz, then brushes off their encounter and moves on to another table.

“Thank goodness she’s gone,” Liz mutters, sitting back against her own seat and sipping her water. Then she notices Red watching her over his own glass. “What?”

“There was no need to make a scene,” he says mildly. “We want people not to remember us, Lizzie.”

“It wasn’t a scene,” she argues. “It was a totally justifiable reaction for our alter egos here.”

“And your actual reaction?”

“She was just bugging me.” Liz rolls her shoulders as though she can shake the annoyance off. “I was sitting right here, and she was acting like…”

“Like what?” A smile ghosts around the edges of his mouth.

“Like we weren’t together. Sitting here eating. You know?”

His eyes are merry, but he nods in agreement and doesn’t voice his thoughts. “Oh, yes. I know.”

****

Red’s burner phone buzzes not long after they pass the Welcome to New Mexico sign. She can hear it vibrating inside his jacket pocket, but he ignores the incoming call and pulls over to the first rest stop they approach. Then he waits, gesturing for Liz to stay in the car with him.

A second call comes a few minutes later, during which Liz sits silently, tired of guessing and being rebuffed.

“Agent Navabi,” Red says cheerfully when he answers the phone. Despite his tone, all Liz can hear is Samar’s name. They’ve been found. The task force has made contact. She freezes; all of her just...stops.

It isn’t until her vision starts to grey that she realizes she’s about to pass out, and then she registers that she is gripping Red’s arm with her fingers hard enough to bruise. He’s still chatting on the phone with that same pleasant voice, as though they aren’t about to be arrested and he isn’t being injured. When he pats her hand reassuringly, Liz lets go, eyes trained on his face.
“Yes, yes, she’s with me and she’s just fine,” she watches him say next. After he turns in his seat to face her, Red has the gall to actually wink.

*Is he insane? They’ve been so careful. What the hell?*

He smiles and tips the phone in her direction. “Agent Navabi would like a word with you,” he tells her.

She can’t feel her fingers, but he nods reassuringly and reaches out to rub a hand over her back, so she takes the phone.

“Samar?”

“Liz,” her former friend replies. “How are you doing?”

She can’t understand what’s happening. “I’m okay. You’re...you’re not calling in an official capacity?”

“No. This was arranged through an associate of Red’s,” Samar says slowly, as though she’s not sure why Liz doesn’t know this already. “It’s untraceable. Aram and I just needed to make sure you’re okay. Things were...you were...unstable, before. And now you’re with Reddington, so--”

“I get it.” Liz pauses. “Aram is with you?”

“Yes, he’s right here. He wouldn’t believe that you were okay from the reports, needed to hear it directly from you. Here he is,” Samar adds, and Liz listens to the static sound of the phone before he comes on the line.

“Liz,” he says, nerves speeding up his voice in a familiar way. “Thank god, are you alright? We’ve been worried, with the way you disappeared, and then the way that Mr. Reddington did…”

She manages to get a word in when he takes a breath. “I’m fine, Aram. It’s been crazy, but I’m here, and uninjured.”

“And Mr. Reddington, he’s...” Aram hesitates, still justifiably wary of her fugitive companion. “He’s treating you okay?”

“Yes, he’s been taking good care of me,” she replies, amused.


The phone is silent again for a moment and then Samar’s voice returns.

“Liz,” she begins immediately, “I don’t know how many opportunities we’ll get like this, to check in. We know you didn’t kill the Senator, we know about the Cabal, but...Tom Connolly.”

“Yeah,” Liz agrees. She chose to shoot Connolly to defend herself, and others, but she is a fugitive now for a reason--her friends can’t be just her friends anymore.

“Reddington will keep us informed of what he can,” Samar continues, “and hopefully that will mean we get to keep in touch...but I don’t know how long that might take. So watch out for yourself, alright? Be careful.”

Liz can hear the end of the conversation approaching, and she suddenly feels like crying. “You too, Samar. Look out for Aram, okay?”
“Of course.” Samar is back in agent mode, her words brisk and businesslike, but Liz can’t let things end this way—without even asking.

“Samar?”

“Yes?”

“How...how’s Ressler?”

Samar pauses, her tone more cautious now. “He’s all right. Doing his job.” There is guilt in her tone. Divided loyalties, for the agent who prizes loyalty the most. “He’s worried about you.”

“Yeah.” Everything she wants to say but can’t lives in that syllable.

“Lizzie, it’s time to hang up,” Red murmurs, checking his watch.

“All right. Samar, I have to go. Bye.” She shuts the call down on Samar’s farewell, unable to keep the line open for even a moment more.

“It’s okay,” Red tells her after he tosses the phone out the window of the car. Now she is crying, and she can’t seem to stop. He puts his arm around her, adjusts until she’s sobbing into his shoulder.

She is to blame for the unraveling of her life, the loss of her friends and family—the Cabal did their worst, but she took the shot. Knowing that, accepting it, doesn’t ease the pain at all. Her heart aches knowing that they’re out there, still going to the Post Office every day, stopping criminals. Life goes on; just not hers.

“Lizzie, it’s going be okay.” Red’s hand is rubbing her back again, trying to soothe. He presses a kiss into her hair, and it jolts her back to herself. He’s got more than enough to deal with without her falling apart in front of him. Things are different now. She swore she’d stop being this person.

She has never contradicted him, though it went from being someone, to being him in particular that she needed, a long time ago. He probably wouldn’t believe her, anyway, if she tried to explain it to him.

Liz shifts back to her own seat, wipes her face on her jacket sleeve. She doesn’t bother apologizing; all he does is scold her when she tries. “Expressing emotion is natural, as is the need to connect with others—to seek comfort. You never have to apologize to me, Lizzie, for needing someone to be there for you.”

So now, she sniffs a bit, then feels like she’s pulled herself together enough. “How was that safe?” she asks, watching his face.

“Well,” he admits, “Nothing is ever perfectly safe. But this was planned well in advance. Mr. Kaplan got the phone to Aram, in case Samar was being watched more closely, and the phone was encrypted...as an extra precaution, she was instructed to use it while she and Aram were far from DC. Our phone was being randomized through dozens of satellites in locations we have never been, and we were also on the move until we called, in case we need another layer of protection. That phone has been discarded. Their phone will also be tossed.”

“But how did you know it would be okay? They’re on the task force, Red. No matter our history, their job is to find us.”

“Yes, it is, Lizzie,” he replies calmly, “but that doesn’t mean they can’t be trusted. If you were still
on the task force and looking for me...if you were given the option of speaking to me with no hope of finding out my location, or not hearing from me at all...what would you do?”

She doesn’t have to think about the question--of course she would take the call. “But that’s different,” she argues.

“How so?”

_I was their friend. You’re not my friend. I’m not sure what you are to me, but ‘friend’ doesn’t seem like the right word._

She looks away, and if he’s not mistaken she might be blushing just a little. “It just is.”

****

He chose not to warn her, not to tell her that one of the most important reasons for this long drive was to make contact with Agents Mojtabai and Navabi. It was a calculated risk--not just the call, but keeping it from her. There was no guarantee that it would happen, until it did; too many variables he couldn't control, too many unpredictable people involved. But he wanted to give her something, something more than his constant company in lieu of the whole world she had before.

He wanted to give her hope.

After the call, though, she doesn't seem any happier. Truth be told, she seems worse. Maybe he miscalculated; it wouldn't be the first time.

Things are going to get harder soon. *Too soon.* They can't stop running, not ever, until it's done--but he's finally making progress while they do, and nothing about his plans will be easy, or comfortable...for either of them.

When he frees one hand from the steering wheel to reach out to her, Lizzie laces her fingers through his and continues to stare out the window. She is a distant star for the next few hours, her face pensive and drawn.

Red leaves her be. He cannot fix this, and no one understands wearing sorrow like a second skin better than he does.

****

While they have fast food for dinner, Red tells her that there’s only a few more hours left of this trip.

She sits with him, eating a really depressing sandwich while he picks his way through his salad, and eyes the tables around them.

No one cares who they are here, no one’s even looking at them--probably because the entire place is full of families. Children run between the tables, talking at the loudest possible volume; parents with frazzled expressions try to corral and feed them.

A wave of melancholy hits her, and she sets her sandwich down. It’s been a long trip--hours of time that she’s wasted waiting for a perfect moment to arrive. She can’t keep putting it off; she has to ask. *She’s afraid.*

“Red, what happened to my mother?”
“What?” He freezes, fork raised, looking at her as though he’s seen a ghost. Maybe he has.

“I asked you what happened to my mother.” She keeps her voice low and calm, but it’s a struggle. “I know what happened to my— I know what I did to my father, but that doesn’t explain how I ended up with Sam instead of my mom. Is she still alive?”

Red’s face closes down over the brief flash of panic Liz catches. “We cannot talk about this here.”

She narrows her eyes. “We can eat here but not talk here?”

“We can talk here,” he corrects her, “but not about that. It’s dangerous--you have no idea how much.”

“No,” she agrees. “I don’t. Because you refuse to explain anything. How can we be partners if you won’t trust me or tell me what you know?”

“Partners?” He tilts his head, looking almost disinterested if not for the twitch in his jaw.

“Aren’t we? Partners in crime? I mean, at this point I thought that was implied.”

His gaze drifts from hers while she waits impatiently. Then he shakes his head. “No, I wouldn’t call us that. I’m here to keep you safe...not make you even more like me. There’s a...necessary power imbalance, in that way.”

She’s not sure if he’s still talking to her now, or to himself. “Okay, fine. We’re not partners and you have all the power. But I need to know what you know, Red. I’m at the center of this web of secrets and I can’t protect myself when I don’t even know why.”

“Elizabeth,” he replies darkly. “Not. Here.”

“Then where? When?”

“I don’t know.” He rises to throw away the rest of his salad, taking her half-eaten sandwich with him. “We have to go. Now.”

She follows him, glancing at the still-distracted families around them as they leave. Did her mother lean in like that, to understand what she was saying as a toddler? Did her mother love her at all?

“There are things I can’t tell you,” he says quietly once they’re back in the car.

“Won’t,” she replies just as softly. “Not can’t.” She really had thought they were making progress, that things could maybe be different. That he would trust her. “It’s my parents, Red. My history. Why you were in my life to begin with.”

“Not everything about me is your business. Not everything about your parents is, either.” Red shakes his head as he pulls out of the parking lot and heads toward the freeway, but says nothing more.

They spend the next several hours in unhappy silence.

****

She doesn’t know what she’s asking, the deadly box she’s trying to unlock. He could feel the storm closing in--she never lets go of anything--but he’s no more prepared for it now than he was the first time she tried to use him as a bridge to her past.
Why did it have to be him?

He's not one to rage at fate, for the most part. Everyone makes choices, actions have consequences...the worst moments in his life were the result of people, not some sort of divine order. But the way that his life and hers dovetailed, and have been entwined ever since, that has no grander explanation. Sometimes--most days--it feels like the whims of destiny.

And in moments like this, destiny has a terrible sense of humor. Every question she could ask is tied into things he would give anything to forget. He isn't entirely certain that he can survive reliving all of it. How can he protect her and protect himself at the same time?

He knows what Katarina would want him to do. He knows what Liz's father would have wanted, too. Promises and debts ring in his ears whenever Lizzie pokes at the hornet's nest of her childhood. Her protector, her sin-eater, her secret-keeper...what if he's not strong enough?

But with everything falling apart around him, he's no longer sure if that should be what matters most; they're long dead and her life has unraveled in ways no one expected. Through all the years since the fire, he hasn't allowed himself to think about what he wants to do. Maybe he should. He is all she has.

She is all that matters.

There's no way for this chapter of their story to end well. He just doesn't want it to end quite yet.

****

Red takes an exit without warning after they cross the Texas state line, and proceeds to follow a convoluted path that must only exist in his head.

She tries to keep track of his turns and reverses, just to keep busy, but has to give up eventually. Something about the tense set of his shoulders and flat eyes makes her think that they're finally nearing what they came all this way for.

As he pulls into a warehouse lot and slowly glides past the unkempt buildings, she begins to worry.

He didn’t tell her about Samar’s call in advance; she assumes that he wanted to surprise her. But this feels different, unsettling. He looks anxious. And with Red in charge, unwilling to let her in on his plans, his reactions are all she has to go on--to prepare for what’s coming.

When they’ve circled toward one of the buildings in the back of the lot, a loading door opens. She can’t see a single person anywhere, but Red pulls into the open space and waits for the door to close behind him.

He gets out of the car, still without saying anything to her, and she hesitates, not sure if she should follow. Then a shape moves toward them from the shadows, and the way Red’s face lights up tells her who it is before she can even see him.

Liz exits, surprised when Dembe comes over to greet her.

“Elizabeth,” he says, with warm, worried eyes. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fine.” She smiles at him, but can’t keep her gaze from drifting back to Red, who already looks better than he has since he first spirited her across the country. Like he’s on solid ground again.

Dembe turns back toward him. “I am glad you could make it, Raymond.”
“As am I. You took all of the necessary precautions?”

“Yes. We will be safe here.”

“Good. And you’re...okay?”

Liz can see a few healing lacerations on his arms, and some facial bruising, but Dembe simply nods, trying to reassure Red. “I am fine. They were not as thorough as they could have been.”

“All right.” Red is still frowning at his sometimes-bodyguard, but he moves on. “All right. You have the package from Mr. Kaplan?”

“I do. It is in the back.”

Red glances at her, as though he has only just remembered she still exists. “I’ll be there in a minute.”

Dembe nods again in acknowledgement and crosses the expanse of concrete, leaving them alone in the echoing space.

“I’m tired of having this argument,” he tells her once Dembe is gone. “There are things I cannot tell you. Not won’t--can’t. Any inquiry into your parents, anything that even remotely connects to them, could be deadly. You don’t know the people after you, Lizzie. You don’t know what it’s been like the past thirty years...and you can’t. Even if I tried to explain it, you would never be able to truly understand it.

“What I am trying to convey to you in the clearest possible terms is that if you learn more about your mother, if you look for any information about who your father really was, it will almost certainly get you killed. They are everywhere. They are waiting. And no matter how angry or betrayed it makes you feel...even if you hate me. I will never give you the keys to your own death.”

“This life is already deadly,” she retorts. “We’re here right now because people want me dead. They could find me any day now. And I don’t want to die without knowing where I come from!” She is as startled by this outburst as he is. Where did that come from, and how long has it been lurking in the back of her mind?

Red looks stricken, and Liz wants to take it back. She didn’t mean to shout. She didn’t mean to toss the specter of her death in his face like a weapon. But it’s true--she doesn’t want to die still waiting for answers. She has been happy spending time with him and ignoring the outside world, but the world is still there. A world that’s gunning for her--not just them, but her, specifically--and she hasn’t the faintest idea why she was dragged into any of this in the first place.

He blinks, mouth working silently over whatever he’s thinking. Then he slumps a little and she knows she’s won.

“I have to...I have to go, work with Dembe,” he tells her slowly. “When I’m done, we’ll talk. I will tell you what I can.” He ignores her expression--ignores her, speaking as though he’s far away and trying to reconcile what he’s about to do with a lifetime spent avoiding it. “Not everything,” he adds, looking at her sharply before he turns away. “But what I can.”

When he leaves her standing in the empty warehouse space, he’s moving as though he’s aged ten years. Her presence isn’t required where they’re doing whatever it is they’re doing, so she sinks down onto the cold warehouse floor, stubbornly refusing to give in to the tears that want to come.
It’s been more than two years since he started hinting and she started pushing back. She was so frustrated with him for so long, this is all she wanted...and now it doesn’t feel like winning, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! :) The next chapter will be a bit of an angst-a-thon, as well, fair warning. Change hurts.

Chapter title from "Josh McBride" by The Head And The Heart
Liz falls asleep that night waiting for Red to return from his business with Dembe. It doesn’t make sense that she drifted off on the cold concrete, but one minute she is trying to avoid the turmoil of her thoughts, and the next she’s clinging to his jacket, choking awake from a dream in which she was drowning.

“Hey,” he murmurs, letting her tug him closer while she gets her bearings. “Lizzie, it’s me. You’re awake.”

She focuses on his face, breathing deeply and trying to believe him. *I’m alive. Red’s alive. We’re safe. We’re together.*

Then Liz smooths his jacket down apologetically, letting him lean away.

“All right.”

“That’s alright.” Red wears a distant, guarded expression--the result of her finally pushing too hard. But with so little space between them, his lowered voice is rough; the jagged sound of it makes her heart pound harder.

“We’ll be leaving again before dawn,” he adds, focusing on the floor.

“Okay…” Liz watches his face, wondering how long he can avoid making eye contact. “Will we be–”

He cuts her off. “We’ll talk here, tonight. This building is safe. Once we leave, Lizzie, we cannot discuss this again, unless I’ve fully secured another space. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Good.”
She reaches a hand out, then thinks better of touching him. He looks up at her, anyhow.

“I know you’re busy with Dembe doing…something,” she tells him. “And I’m not expecting you to fill me in. But is there anything I can do, about anything? I’m just sitting here.”

He stares at her pensively for a moment. Then he nods. “If you want to help, you could work on the profiles we’re putting together. The major players in the Cabal, the people most likely to be hunting us on both sides…the Task Force.” He seems worried about admitting that last part, but Liz isn’t surprised—or upset.

“It’s fine, Red.” Talking to Samar and Aram has oddly settled her internal conflict there; they all know where they stand. She and Red will run…her former colleagues will hunt them. That’s just the nature of things.

“I’m sure they’ve got profiles on us,” she adds, standing up and brushing off her clothes.

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get to work.” Happy to have something useful to do, Liz smiles at him.

He blinks once, his face a mask, and leads her to the war room.

Three men she’s never met are employed at different tables; one is muttering to himself. Dembe sits on the sofa against the back wall, reading a book.

Red taps the surface of the closest table as he walks by it. “Talk to Charles about the profiles.” He settles into a chair across the room, near Dembe, and returns to his own work.

Shrugging, Liz sits next to the slim blonde man and pretends not to care about being so easily dismissed. “You’re Charles?”

“Yep.” He remains hunched over his computer, glancing quickly at her between keystrokes. “You’re here for the profiles?”

“I’d like to help with them. I’ve got experience,” she adds unnecessarily. His frenetic energy is off-putting.

“If he wants you, it’s fine by me,” Charles replies, clearly unconcerned with the particulars. “I printed out the basics. The blue stack.” He returns to focusing on his screen, as though he’s the only person in the room.

Looking over at Red first, Liz reaches uneasily for the pile of blue folders. No instructions? Is their operation really this haphazard?

Opening the first one, she’s forced to reconsider. It’s the Donald Ressler file, and it essentially covers his entire life. Being his partner for two years taught her a lot about Ressler, but now she can see that she barely scratched the surface.

Nodding, Liz skims to the end of the file, and sees what they’re trying to do. What are his habits? Who does he trust? How is he likely to react in these specific scenarios? It’s prediction, then planning. Past data generating future theories.

It’s what she trained to do.

Liz gathers up the pile and leaves Charles and his jittery table. When she approaches the sofa,
Dembe smiles in welcome and moves his gun off the cushion beside him so she can sit.

She spreads the folders out on the side table, meeting Red’s watchful gaze before she starts writing. He can be upset at her; he can pretend he doesn’t care what she’s up to. But she’s not going anywhere.

_He needs to get used to that._

****

Red’s team breaks for food late, leaving the warehouse together. Dembe follows them after a murmured conversation with Red.

“He’ll bring back something,” Red tells her as a hush descends in their absence. “It shouldn’t take too long.”

“I’m not very hungry.”

He shrugs. “We should eat while we can.”

“Red?”

“Yeah.” He sinks back into his chair, meeting her gaze reluctantly.

“You’re the only person I know, that I trust, to tell me the truth. If something…” She can’t keep her eyes from filling, but she shakes her head and forces back the tears. “If something happens, to you, I won’t ever get to know…the things you know.” And I’ll never get to see you look at me again like I’m the only thing in the whole world that matters. Or reach for you when I’m scared. Or listen to your ridiculous stories.

Her face must betray her thoughts, because he’s gentle when he replies. “In the event of my death, Lizzie, I’ve arranged for you to be given a letter. I’ve written down everything that I know, so that you won’t lose your past…when you lose me.”

She is unable to form words in the wake of his admission. It’s intended to be reassuring, and she knows that it should be—but it’s so much more than that.

Since the day they met, she’s treated him like his value lies in being the keeper of her past, and he’s telling her that his death will guarantee her those answers--immediately. Does he understand the significance? The level of trust he’s placing in her? She does.

Eyes damp, Liz leaves the couch, taking the two small but vital steps to where he sits. When she hugs him, she does it slowly, giving him the chance to stop her. Giving him time to understand that this is not an impulse.

“That’s very good to know,” she whispers into his neck, and he lets her hold on until she’s ready to let go.

Liz straightens, blinking hard, and steps back. “So how has your work been going since we arrived?”

A slow grin spreads over Red’s face, and they move back to more comfortable ground. “You just want to know what I’m working on.”

“Guilty.”
“It’s going well.”

She rolls her eyes as he moves right past her curiosity.

“What about yours?” Red counters. "What have you learned?"

“I’ve learned that the resources of the FBI are pathetic compared to wherever your information comes from.”

“Too true. Were you able to add to the files?”

“I was. I started with the Task Force,” she informs him. “I’m done with Ressler, Cooper, and Aram. Samar is next. She’s a really interesting case…”

When Dembe returns, shortly before the other men, Liz and Red are calmly discussing business as though nothing interesting occurred during his absence.

After their late snack, they spend three more hours working. Every few minutes, Red absently touches his neck in the same spot, as though there’s a phantom sensation that keeps disrupting his focus. Liz is too deep in her notes to notice.

Dembe is too kind to admit that he does.

****

Red finds himself growing more anxious as the evening drags on. One by one, his contractors call it a night and exit the building. They’ll continue working on their own, sending him even more reports via Mr. Kaplan. He feels guilty about turning Kate into a glorified courier, but she aids him willingly. Always has.

For safety, even Dembe rests elsewhere, in an empty house miles away. From there, he can return at a moment’s notice, but still remain unconnected should the worst occur.

Red isn’t willing to risk him. The time will come when he doesn’t have the liberty to avoid it, but that isn’t today.

After he bids Dembe farewell, it takes concentrated effort for him to turn and face Lizzie. She has been pleasant all night, not pushing, not reminding him that the hours are ticking away–which has made him all the more aware of it.

It’s time. God help them both.

“Let’s sit,” Red says quietly, and watches her shift from relaxed to resolved. She nods and follows him back to the spot where Dembe kept them company.

Once they’re seated, he takes a deep breath…then exhales, no closer to feeling prepared. How does anyone prepare to dig up the dead?

“I don’t know where to start.”

Red looks so lost that Liz takes pity on him and reaches for his hand. “It doesn’t have to be today,” She already knows the worst of it. Why does he seem so afraid?

He slides his hand away. “No. It does.” It’ll only be harder, later. He’s never been a toe-in-the-water person; he always jumped right into the deep end, when given the choice. Until her.
“The night of the fire,” he begins, “I wasn’t there with the Cabal.”

She thinks back to her child-memories, of the strange men in the doorway. “Then why were you there?”

“Your father asked for my help.”

“My father.”

“Yes.”

“Not my mother.”

“No.”

“Who was he?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.” His eyes plead with her to understand, not to fight him on this.

She nods. “But you know.”

“As does the Cabal.”

“How? Why would they care?”

He weighs his words with the utmost caution. “You father had something dangerous in his possession. When they threatened you to get it, he ran…and he took you with him.”

She can’t get the words out without grief, but she manages to say them. “And then I killed him. What were he and my mother fighting about?”

“She came to take you back. She believed that the safest course of action was to give the Cabal what they wanted, move on with your lives. It wouldn’t have worked,” he adds. “Your father understood that. That’s why he agreed to my plan.”

“That night…” She stares at him, trying to sort out what she knows. “When they were arguing, he told her I wasn’t Masha anymore. You gave us new identities?”

Red nods, sorrow carving deeper lines into his face. “And a safe house. Traveling money…all the things he would have needed to disappear. But it was useless, because when your mother followed me to you…the Cabal followed her.”

Liz is silent for a moment, staring at her toes. “What they were after, it was the Fulcrum, wasn’t it? Did you put it in my bunny?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

“But you gave it to my father.”

Red reaches out impulsively and grips her hand. “No.”

Puzzled, she looks up.

“I didn’t create the Fulcrum, Lizzie. I didn't know anything about it until your father involved me. Then, a few years later, the Cabal made it clear that my involvement…would not go unpunished.”
Your family.”

He squeezes her fingers. “Yes. So I told them that I had it, to buy some time.”

“And you hoped I would lead you to it.”

“Someday, yes.”

“Was that why?”

He squints at her. “Why?”

“Was that why you brought me to Sam? So that if I found it...you could guarantee someone you trusted would give it to you?”

“No.” Shaking his head again, Red leaves his chair to sit beside her on the couch. “He was someone I trusted, and that was how I knew he'd be a safe harbor for you, away from anywhere the Cabal might look. But I took you to him as soon as it was safe, following the fire. They didn’t come for me until long after you became Sam’s little girl.”

Red lifts his hand to her cheek. “It was never about the Fulcrum. It was always about you.”

She shuts her eyes, turns her face to sink into the contact. Is he still talking about her childhood? Can he tell the difference?

“I need a minute,” she whispers against his palm.

“Of course.” Red clears his throat and steps away while she pulls her knees up, curling into the couch.

His phone buzzes; he aims a concerned glance in her direction. “I’ll be right back, Lizzie.”

She can’t hear his side of the conversation—he steps out of the room entirely after the first few words. He looks angry as he leaves, though, which is something she’ll worry about later.

So much of what she believed, what she remembered, is wrong. His desperate avoidance of this conversation reinforced her assumption that he was the cause of all the mayhem that has shaped her life…but very little of what happened was his fault.

Why has he let her believe the worst of him for so long?

****

Red returns, looking grim.

“What happened?”

“It can wait.” He sits again, paying careful attention to her demeanor. “Are you alright?”

Liz looks away. They’re here to finish it, aren’t they? Like pulling off a band-aid, she doesn’t give herself the chance to hesitate. She rips open the last wound. “You told me once that my mother died of weakness and shame.”

Red tenses. “Yes.”

“What did you mean?”
“When the Cabal followed her--us--they arrived a few minutes after…your father died. Your mother hid you in a closet, you remember that part?”

Liz nods.

“I helped her start the fire, to cover up what happened. She didn’t want you to know,” he explains, shaking his head. “She didn’t want you to ever know, to feel responsible, for something you were too young to understand. And she thought…she hoped that if the Cabal knew everything had been destroyed, perhaps the danger would die with him.”

Red goes away, somewhere inside his head, for almost a full minute. Concerned, Liz touches his arm, and he returns to the story. “So…we got the fire going, in the basement, and she was heading upstairs for you when they came.”

“The Cabal.” Acquainted now with the sort of men they employ, it gives her chills to picture them coming for that little girl in her mind.

“Yes. I was downstairs when they broke in, but they weren’t concerned with me. Guy knocked me out,” he remembers faintly, touching his temple. “Didn’t waste any time. Katarina had reached us by then. I heard her pleading with them as I hit the tile.”

He sighs, and Liz links her fingers with his, leans into him a bit. “But you woke back up.”

“I did. The fire was blazing, the Cabal was gone…your father was there, a few feet away from me on the floor. Your mother had been shot.”

Liz pulls away to stare at him. “She was shot?”

“She was. I imagine her attempt to reason with them was unsuccessful. Maybe they believed she knew where your father was keeping the Fulcrum, or they were just tying up loose ends. I don’t know. But I found her on the staircase, unconscious…bleeding out.”

“They didn’t shoot her there,” he adds softly. “She was injured too badly to make it upstairs, but she tried. She was trying to get to you.”

“I could have carried her outside,” Red confesses, his face a study in grief. “Even though the fire was spreading, I could have taken her with me at that point. But that trail of blood on the carpet…I knew what Katarina would have wanted. So I went to find you, and get you out.”

“And you did. You found me, and you saved me.” She wants to hug him, wipe the haunted look off his face. “I remember your hand, when I was huddled in the closet.”

“That’s where I found you, yeah.” His voice drops as he’s pulled into his memories. “Getting out was…difficult. I was too hurt to go back in for your mother. And there was a child to think of. You needed help.”

“So, I took you to Sam.” Red chokes out a laugh. “For all I know, he thought you were my illegitimate daughter from a liason outside my marriage. What an affair it must have been, to bring me to his door battered and still smelling of smoke! But he didn’t ask questions; Sam never did. He raised you as his own.”

Liz shakes her head. “I don’t understand. If my mother died in the fire, from a bullet, whichever…what does that have to do with shame?”

He rubs a hand over his face, then gives her the last terrible truth he can spare. “Years later, there
were rumors she survived—that through some miracle, she made it out of the house. But the love of her life was dead. Her daughter was…gone. If the Cabal learned of her whereabouts, death would follow to anyone she cared about. So she walked into the ocean one day…and eliminated the threat.”

“She killed herself?” This isn’t a totally unexpected piece of the puzzle. She’s had years to consider his first words to her, to compare them to what Sam told her growing up. But it’s difficult to comprehend as fact. She left a daughter behind. She left me.

Red hunches as he prepares to elaborate; in her peripheral vision, Liz can see him cave in on himself. What more can she really gain if he continues?

She lays a hand on his back, startling him. “Red. You don’t have to—I don’t need you to. Just…don’t. Okay?”

He nods, bewildered. He seems so young when faced with unexpected kindness.

“Please, just tell me–how do you know that’s what really happened? That it’s true?”

“There were witnesses.” He swallows. “I…did what I do. I looked into it. She’s…dead.”

“Okay.” Liz leans against him more firmly, keeping her hand on his back. “Okay. Thank you, for telling me.”

“You’re welcome.”

Her warmth is soaking into him, trying to erase the chill he’s carried since he found Katarina’s broken body stretched up toward her little girl. With his back against Lizzie’s arm, eyes half-closed, he can still feel the flames that tried to consume him. It aches.

He doesn’t deserve this. Lizzie cannot be here, trying to soothe him, while she digests the brutal reality of what happened to everyone who loved her. It’s inconceivable.

But…here she is. Rubbing small circles over his scarred skin, her face against his shoulder, calm now that he’s torn himself to pieces to give her back her past. She doesn’t ask how he became a purveyor of false identities, how he met her mother, how he lives with what he’s seen. Her acceptance is unexpected, but he is desperately grateful for it.

She makes him want to bury the memories again, welcome the solace she’s offering…be a man who chooses selfish happiness. There are many types of weaknesses, and for him she is all of them at once.

Instead, as he has for decades, Red chooses survival. He retreats.

“We only have about an hour until Dembe brings the car,” he informs Liz, forcing a casual tone as he stands. “If there’s anything you want to do before we go, now would be the time.”

She watches him go, brow furrowed. He never told her who was calling.

****

Liz gives him a half hour to collect himself, to hide, before she seeks him out. It’s not as though she really needs an hour to prepare for leaving. Their bags are packed; she doesn’t have personal effects these days.
She doesn’t have much at all.

_She has him._

So Liz leaves the crowded office and walks the length of the hallway. Following Red on the way in, she didn’t pause to see what else filled the back of the building. It’s an odd, haphazard space that’s been created inside the warehouse—as though someone sectioned off a rectangle and then shaped it into rooms without much interest in the result.

There’s a small washroom, a sad attempt at a kitchen, a storage area filled with unlabeled crates, and finally, a second office. Hidden behind a large desk, there is a cot tucked near the back door. That’s where she finds Red: in the dark, underneath the red exit sign.

He watches her approach, the glowing light emphasizing the angles of his face as he says nothing. _He’s doing that more, _she muses, _the longer they’re on the run together._ He used to be brimming with stories and advice. It’s not lost on her that this quiet man, who can no longer hold the weight of the world with a smile, is the result of her presence in his life.

"Hey," she says quietly, meeting his wary eyes. “Can I sit?”

He moves a shoulder a little, uncomfortably, but doesn’t look away. “Yeah.”

When Liz sinks into the bed next to him, she breaches the space that usually keeps them apart. _He gave her back her parents,_ she has been thinking for the last thirty minutes. _He gave her back her childhood, her understanding of where she comes from. He hurt himself doing it._ The pain he’s in is self-inflicted…and he did that for her.

There has to be something she can do to make it better; she just doesn’t know how. _She has no idea how to convince him to let her._

Her arm presses against his deliberately, though with care. She trusted him in the beginning—inexplicably, tentatively, but she did. _He didn’t kill her parents, or make them go away. He was trying to save her, even then._

Liz doesn’t move any closer. She doesn’t lay her head on his shoulder, or take his hand. He’s so brittle at this point, so carefully contained, that she’s not sure where the line lies between support and coercion. _What would he allow her to do, even if it breaks him?_

She has let the tumultuous years since he smiled at her from inside a box destroy the closeness they were starting to build…but it was there, once.

_She wants it back._

“Dembe will be here soon,” Red says, disrupting the silence. “We’ll be heading northeast.”

He has the strangest impulse to fidget, shift away from where she’s resting her skin on his. They were sitting like this only a day ago. The difference, of course, is that she didn’t know what happened, then. She didn’t have the admission, from his own lips, that he owes her a debt he can never repay.

_If only he hadn’t suggested—if only he hadn’t believed he could—if only, if only._ Nothing can reverse the damage. The proof is right there next to him. She is brilliant not because of his efforts all these years, but in spite of them.

Now that she knows, it's only a matter of time until Lizzie asks him to go. Sitting with her, feeling
like she’s content in his presence, is worse than if they’d never had these weeks together at all. He’s set everything in motion by giving her the answers she needed; that will be the reason he loses her.

“Will Dembe be driving us?” Liz glances his way, notes his misery, and sighs. “I’ll go wait in the office.”

Red shifts closer before she moves. “No, Lizzie—you don’t have to leave.” His traitorous heart can’t make up its mind. He should be fostering distance between them. Why can’t he let her go?

“Okay…”

There’s no way for him to explain that he can’t bear to be without her—or that he expects her to leave him, soon. He isn’t capable of saying anything at all. He’s said too much already.

And then, Lizzie demonstrates another reason why it’s growing harder to sustain the status quo: she’s learning to read him, the way he reads her. Nodding, she offers him a gentle smile—a gift more precious than he deserves—and relaxes back onto the cot at his side. She understands.

Her hand brushes his: Red experiences the dizzying sensation of being pulled in two directions at once. What a simple thing it would be, under different circumstances, to anchor himself with the touch of her fingers. How exquisite it would feel to pretend things were just that easy.

But while Lizzie might need time to process what he’s told her, he has always been acutely aware of the gulf that his past actions put between them. There has never been room for simple; uncomplicated is not an option.

Her presence in his life is not an option, not long-term. She belongs on a sunlit street, in a house with pretty blue shutters…in a world where she leaves her job behind at the end of the day and goes home to her family.

Like it or not—most days, not—he belongs in this underworld of intrigue and shifting loyalties. Now, it is the only life he has. There isn’t a word for the amount of selfishness and cruelty that would be involved if he tried to remain near her.

But these few minutes will end soon enough; Dembe will arrive and they’ll move on. For that reason, he feels safe in choosing a middle ground between the two places his heart wants to go. He doesn’t gather her closer…he doesn’t move away.

He stays sitting next to her, just as they are. Lizzie’s fingers lightly touch his, their breathing shares a similar rhythm, and neither of them speaks.

It is the closest Red has come to being able to define the word “home” in a very long time.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for every comment and bit of love!

Chapter title from "Immortals" by Fall Out Boy.
All We Know is Don't Let Go

Chapter Summary

Dancing, innuendos, weaknesses. "He couldn’t shield her from the world or her secrets. Doesn’t he owe her the last protection he can offer?"

Chapter Notes

Only one more chapter to go after this! For this story, anyway. :) I definitely still see it as the first in a series.

Disclaimer: They're all mine now and bear no resemblance to your official versions. Thanks anyway though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“From Texas to Wisconsin,” Red tells her as they climb into a new bulletproof cargo space—this one designed to look like a flower delivery van. The doors are shut behind them by a swarthy man she assumes is their new driver.

“No car?”

“We can’t leave the same way we arrived. We’ll be back in a sedan once we’re clear of Oklahoma,” he adds, leaning back against his bench seat.

"Okay.” She stretches out on hers, doing the math in her head. Texas to Oklahoma, Oklahoma to Kansas. “So, we’ll stop for the night in Kansas and then you’ll start driving again.”

“Yes.” Red’s eyes are closed, so she doesn’t feel bad watching him settle into the van’s rumble toward the highway. His long eyelashes flutter even while he relaxes—she’s certain his brain isn’t calm at all. But outwardly, he’s a man preparing for a long, tedious trip.

Filling the gaps in her memory has turned everything into a different picture. Red’s not the villain she always believed him to be. This ends right now. God, you’re a monster. But he fit so easily into the role; he practically cast himself. Now where is Liz supposed to put him?

The road glides smoothly beneath the van for minutes at a time. She can only recognize their forward progress by the occasional shudder when they hit an older patch of concrete. Red remains still, if not at ease, and she continues trying to make sense of him.

There is a dangerous history in the years that are etched across his face—she's seen enough in his company to be fully aware of it—but he’s also undeniably beautiful. He carries it in his bearing, in the curve of his lips. In the graceful way he once took her hand and led her into a ballroom.

He shows her that side reluctantly these days, and she can’t blame him. The cheerful moments faded away last year as they struggled to stay in each other’s lives while trying to change things…
demolish them. Rebuild them.

But she remembers every one of his knowing grins from the beginning, when they didn’t twist to cover despondency. When he felt safe in her company because she knew nothing.

Now that she’s beginning to decipher the mystery that is Raymond Reddington, Liz doesn’t want him to keep retreating. *He’s so good at escaping; is it even possible to get close to someone whose life depends on always being a step ahead and a mile away?*

As if he can read her thoughts, Red interrupts, eyes still shut. “Is everything okay, Lizzie?”

“Yeah…everything’s fine.”

“Good.” He shifts a little in his seat, golden lashes catching the light. “It’s rude to stare.”

His voice is mild, but she receives the rebuke. Go this far and no further; that’s been his motto with her all along. She’s tired of living with it unspoken.

If he has boundaries to defend, she wants to hear it from him. *He's never hesitated to cross hers.*

****

The trip is torture. Not the travel itself; their transport is as comfortable as Red could arrange, and he’s experienced much worse. But the journey…even with separate seats facing each other, Lizzie is too near. Sensations feel heightened inside such a small space, making Red restless. Her habit of silently watching him is like an itch between his shoulderblades that he can't escape.

Detachment is so much harder now that she's paying attention. Now that her first response isn't always anger--now that she seems genuinely interested--he's not capable of keeping things lighthearted. *In him, she's interested. Why now?*

Red hears the rustle of her clothing when she turns away from looking at him. It's a bad idea to think about how pretty she is with her hair rumpled from sleeping on the warehouse floor. The last thing he should do is remember the moments before they left, with her sitting so close that his skin hummed.

He is lulled by the road and Lizzie’s steady presence in the van. Though she doesn’t speak, he can sense her across from him as he loses the battle with his thoughts.

Until he nods off, unintentionally, and then he can feel nothing but agony.

*He thought he knew pain after his years of covert work. He was wrong. Nothing like this.* His flesh is burning as he covers the child with his body and breaks the window. The rush of air intensifies the heat behind him, giving more strength to the flames, but that’s of no concern once he and little Elizabeth are outside.

She’s unconscious from the smoke, soot smearing her cheeks. *Thank god, he can see her breathing.* Hitting the ground back-first helps to smother the skin that was ablaze, and he’s left gasping on the grass, watching as her parents–and her future–burn. Then he leans over, touching her pallid face carefully, trying not to inflict further trauma. “Lizzie…Lizzie, sweetheart. Can you hear me?”

When the girl opens her eyes, he's staring into the bright, guarded blue that he has known since they met as adults for the first time. Gravity has reversed itself, and it makes him feel unbalanced until he realizes he was asleep. Lizzie is hovering over him--no one is on fire.
“I was dreaming,” Red says before she has the chance. He sits up, looking at the cramped walls surrounding them, but Liz doesn’t return to her side of the van. She takes a seat next to him with visible concern.

They’re too close. The scents of her soap and shampoo are pressing in on him, taking advantage of his disorientation and sleep-hazed brain. With the nightmare so fresh in his mind, he wants to bask in her existence—her survival, her spirit. Instead, he clears his throat and slides away to the end of the bench.

“Yes, you were dreaming,” she agrees, aware that he’s putting distance between them. “A bad one.”

“I’m okay,” he replies. “Everything’s alright, now.” You can leave me be. You can leave me.

“You wouldn’t let me get away with that,” she replies easily, continuing to watch him. “Will talking about it help?”

Trapped by his own need to be someone she can count on, he answers honestly. “I don’t know.”

Liz nods, remembering her own nightmares. The confusion, the fear, the pull between discomfort and need.

“Oh, then let’s try. Just start with something small. What can you tell me?”

Red takes a deep breath, understanding that she needs to help as much as he needs to let go a little. He’s awake again. He can keep the walls up no matter how overwhelming her presence is, how much her sincere interest and concern make him want to believe that maybe… He kills that thought before he can finish it.

“I was back in the fire,” Red admits. He is motionless when Liz scoots a little closer. He cannot handle being touched so soon after; she doesn’t try.

“That night, when you saved me?”

He chuckles over the dry feeling in his throat. “Is that what I did?” Damned you, more like. Poor little girl.

“Red, stop it. You told me the story, I know what happened. Tell me what’s wrong.”

It won’t help anything, but what on earth could? So he gives her what she asks for.

“Sometimes, when sleep takes me back there, I wake up still feeling the heat on my skin. The weight of you in my arms, so lifeless from the smoke. And when I’m awake, and remember all that happened, I’m so overcome with…”

Guilt, Liz thinks, poised to comfort him, correct him.

“Revulsion,” Red says instead, and she turns her sharp gaze to his face, searching for answers.

“I met you at your most vulnerable,” he tries to explain. “I left you with Sam, and I was content to know that you were living a good life. Safe, and happy. When we met again, I didn’t even recognize you, you were so…” He gives up on that recollection, redirects himself.

“Even so, I knew you as a child, Lizzie. I knew your parents. When I remember that, and look at you now, I find myself monstrous. I prove you right.”
Liz shakes her head. “I said those things before I really knew you, Red. I was wrong. And so are you.”

He pats her hand, not wanting to get into specifics. He knows better than she what lurks inside his mind.

“No.” She reaches over and lifts his chin with her fingertips. “Look at me. I was wrong.” Liz tries to convey just how wrong, how horrific some of her choices have been, meeting his heavy-lidded eyes with her own apologetic ones. Then she removes her hand, unable to tell if she’s had any effect on the self-loathing she recognizes in him.

Once her hand returns to her side, Red doesn’t go back to staring at the floor. He continues to hold her gaze, searching for something of his own. When they hit a bump and she jolts, she can only hope he found it as he looks away and retreats to his corner.

****

They eat at roadside dives on the way to Oklahoma, small places that aren’t likely to remember them after they leave. Red pulls his concierge of crime veneer back on after the nightmares, and Liz doesn't comment on it. It seems like armor protecting him, rather than trying to deflect her. She understands that.

She hopes it helps.

It fascinates her to watch him slide in and out of personas between each stop—cantankerous, priggish, dim-witted. While it certainly masks his presence and makes it harder to connect them in different towns, Liz suspects that he’s doing it primarily for his own amusement. His lips twitch as she tries to keep up with his improvisation at each new table.

“What were you doing in there?” she asks as they leave the outskirts of Wichita Falls.

“Having lunch.” Red has dropped the drawl that accompanied their meal and is already back to his calmly cheerful self, tucked in the van and eyeing the newspaper he has yet to open.

“You were leering at me!”

Unfolding his reading material, he smiles mildly in her direction.

“Red, you made a suggestive comment about our appetizer.”

He looks up at her, purses his lips. Smiles again. “Did you know that they have a spring festival coming up? There’s a parade in the moonlight.” He glances back in the direction they came. “Shame to miss it.”

“Reddington.”

“The high school band is going to play.” He raises his eyebrows at her folded arms and stops trying to distract her.

“I was doing what needed to be done, Lizzie. Our waitress was paying more attention to you than was warranted—these small towns, sometimes their residents are crime aficionados. You don’t exactly blend in,” he adds offhand.

“It was necessary to distract her, give her something else to focus on. After my behavior, I’m certain Juanita will remember Tony the lech, and Becca will just be a woman she feels sorry for in
Liz frowns, thinking back to their time in the diner. “You may be right.”

He resists the urge to comment on the rarity of those words coming from her lips. “We should be in Kansas before dinner.”

“I didn’t like it.” She stares him down. Not like she has any hope of ever intimidating a man like Raymond Reddington, but it’s always worth a try.

His tone is as serious as hers, though there is no acquiescence in it. “Noted.”

Satisfied that at least they understand each other, Liz relaxes into her seat, picks her book back up. “Oh, and Red?”

“Hmm?” He’s engrossed in the business section now, pages rustling.

“Don’t ever call me ‘sugar lips’ again.”

The grin he flashes her is as quick and bright as lightning.

“Whatever you say, Lizzie.”

****

He’s as prepared as he can be for what’s coming next. When they stop for dinner at a roadhouse off the interstate, Red knows that Dembe and Mr. Kaplan are already setting things in motion. He has to lay out the larger plan—beyond highways and safe houses—for Lizzie tonight, but it can wait until they arrive in Topeka.

It’s also time to tell her what he’s learned about the Task Force. He is stalling at this point; he recognizes it. But as the country music assaults their ears, she smiles and takes his hand on the way to the bar, and he isn’t willing to feel bad about the indulgence. They have so few hours left before the outside world crashes down upon them.

Save for his weakest moments, he doesn’t really want to keep her by his side indefinitely. Red can barely stand his own company; he wouldn’t inflict it on someone as dear as Lizzie. He just wants more memories like this, to watch the way she laughs over a terrible glass of wine and feel her breath on his cheek when she leans close to be heard.

"This place is great!" Liz shouts into his ear. He winces, though he is secretly pleased by how easily she slides into new situations. What makes him so effective at playing roles isn’t solely his years of experience; it’s a genuine enjoyment of whatever place he’s currently in, and the people he encounters there. Lizzie has that quality too, whether she sees it or not.

He’s not crazy. There’s no part of him that genuinely believes this can go on. She’s in shock at the moment, she’s gotten used to leaning on him—maybe she has even learned to like him, a little—but the wreckage of her life isn’t the kind of thing Red could expect Lizzie to simply shrug off.

This was never meant to last.

Done eating, Liz interrupts his whisky-aided moping with a hand on his shoulder and a kiss beside his ear. "They’re staring," she tells him, before raising her voice again. "Let’s dance!"

Her slight slurring would make even him believe she was tipsy, if he hadn’t caught the mischievous
glimpse in her eye. "Come on, honey," she adds, sliding her hand down his arm as though she’s done so hundreds of times before. Bemused, but willing to play along, Red wraps his fingers around hers and follows.

"I'm not that familiar with...line dancing," he tells her on the way, wondering what she's up to.

"So what?" Liz grins as they find their place on the dance floor. "No rule that says we can't waltz. I know you're good at that."

Dipping his head in acquiescence, Red takes her other hand and steps closer, trying to pretend the loud music is Offenbach's barcarole. She's still smiling at him, sparkling and alive while he’s picturing his world without her, and he feels it fracture--the careful barrier he's keeping between what he knows is right and what he desperately wants.

Instead of stepping forward to lead her into the waltz, Red lifts their joined hands and spins Liz into a quick, dizzying turn, laughing when he pulls her back and sees the surprise on her face.

"Terrible music for waltzing. This is better," he declares. Before she gets the chance to adjust to his new tempo, Red is nimbly dipping her, her hair falling over her eyes.

Other patrons are definitely staring. Her designer jeans and sleeveless shirt feign casual, as though she could almost-but-not-quite belong here. His polo and slacks make him stand out less than he would in a nice suit, but he carries himself all wrong for blending into this twanging boot-stomping establishment.

Just now, he can't say he cares. When the song ends, they're both out of breath and still holding hands. The cacophony changes to a slightly quieter, slower tune, and Liz moves his right hand to the small of her back.

She doesn't have to ask again. Red nods, ignoring the other couples who've come to share the floor, and glides Liz into a waltz.

If he’s honest with himself, hints of what would come--the realization that he had utterly miscalculated--began that night. Lizzie was radiant in her red dress, blissfully avoiding the warning signs of her marriage, and more comfortable with him than she would have been willing to admit. He was acutely aware of all of it, and enjoying himself far too much.

What had he thought when he came downstairs and saw her in the mirror? That he could handle it?

He was a fool.

Now, he knows. He knows what it feels like to dance with her, the way she looks at him as they turn in slow circles. It's worse tonight, with Lizzie so flushed and happy, her palms damp from heat rather than nerves.

Red is not the enigmatic criminal any longer; he can't use cleverness to dazzle her while revealing nothing. She sees him too clearly for that.

He was never supposed to get this entangled. He couldn't shield her from the world or her secrets. Doesn't he owe her the last protection he can offer?

He's deadly to anyone he loves.

Their final turn slows and Liz tumbles against him, releasing his hands to steady herself. Because
he wants to pull her closer, Red lets her go.

Caught up in the moment, Liz returns. "Song's not over," she reminds Red, linking her arms behind his neck like they've gone from their imaginary ballroom to a strange themed prom.

"We should go," Red says, but against his better judgment, his fingers grip her hips and they begin to sway. Can't he give himself a few minutes to pretend, even though he'll regret it later? For so long now, hasn't he wanted to be right here?

_He can handle it._

Her eyes meet his, merry and completely clear. Lizzie is looking at him in a way he can't make sense of; all he recognizes is danger. It tempts him to forget why they shouldn't do this--why this isn't something they can have.

A roadside bar is the most unlikely place he would have ever thought two people could get lost in, but something about the noise and the nameless bodies surrounding them makes it easy to believe the whole world is right there, only them, with her in his arms. Though it requires painful effort, Red looks away, knowing even in this stolen moment that it would be unforgivable to bring his face any closer to hers. He’s already crossing too many lines.

With a contented sigh he can feel rather than hear, Liz tips her head down, tucking it against his chest. Moving his hands to the small of her back, he lets his chin rest on her hair. She shifts along with him, and for just a few heartbeats they fit together as though they were always meant to.

Swaying among the couples moving to a completely different rhythm, he marvels at how easy it feels. When he was a teenager and bumbling his way through prom, dancing was nothing but awkward. He grew out of the awkwardness, but never slow-danced quite like this again. The last time he did, Red realizes, Lizzie wasn't even born yet.

That thought brings him crashing back to reality. She may be having fun, but it's different for her. She doesn't...think of him the way he thinks of her, and that's for the best. _Her father was one of his closest friends. He's old enough to be her father. God, what is he doing?_

As Red pulls away, slipping out of her grip, Liz wants to ask why. But he was looking at her as he stepped back, so she doesn't need to--she recognizes terror when she sees it.

****

Until they arrive at the hotel, their next three hours are spent in complete silence. Liz approaches him while he's taking off his coat, draping it carefully over a chair.

Red behaves like he's still wearing suits that cost more than her rent. Out of habit, probably. Or a stalling tactic, she decides, when he freezes as she reaches him.

Whatever flipped the switch in his head from fun to flight, she’s doesn’t think he’s ready to talk about it. But there’s something else they need to discuss.

“Are you going to be okay?”

He blinks. “I don’t understand the question.”

She had a lot of time to think during the drive, and she's seen the look from the bar on his face before. _You saved a man you hate... to save me._ This time, Red can't walk away, but he has retreated all the same.
“Telling me about my parents. You...I know what that did--what it meant. It must have--”

“You can’t know.” He aims his haunted eyes in her direction. “It’s not something anyone could imagine without living it.”

“Fine,” she amends, her voice gentle. “I don’t actually know. But I can see that it hurts.”

She steps closer. “I’m sorry that it hurts.”

“I’m not.”

“Why?”

“The things that we do--the very worst of the things that we do in our lives--they should hurt. We should feel at least a fraction of the pain that we cause. Otherwise, we’re barely human anymore.”

“I killed a man,” she counters. “Do you think I deserve to feel pain about that?”

“You shot him defending yourself,” Red replies, as though that’s an answer.

“I shot him defending you,” Liz admits. Finally, the last of her secrets. He’s giving her his now. *Look what it’s doing to him.*

“What are you talking about?”

“When I pulled the trigger, Connolly had already threatened me, Cooper, the rest of the Task Force. But then he said you would get the death penalty, and that was when...I snapped. He’s dead because I didn’t want you to be killed. Should I feel pain?”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not. You were trying to save me, my parents. You failed,” she agrees quietly. “But you didn’t kill them.”

“Same result.”

“Different intentions. Just like me.”

He shakes his head, certain that there’s a flaw in her logic, even if he hasn’t found it yet. *Of course she doesn’t deserve to suffer. Of course he does.*

"Why..." Looking at her, Red realizes how closely they're standing, and walks away to sit on the nearest bed. "Why are you bringing this up now?"

"We never talked about it," Liz says, sitting across from him. "You answered my questions and then we went on like it hadn't happened. But it did, Red. I need to know if you're going to be okay." *I need you to be okay.*

"I'm fine, Lizzie. I'll be alright." He doesn't try to smile; he also doesn't avoid her gaze. In his eyes she can see the pain he usually covers, and the strength that has kept him going for so many years. She feels like she's falling.

Huffing out a breath, Liz stands back up, breaking eye contact to pace away from him and then back. Red watches, wary of her energy. Away, then back. She seems to have calmed down when she returns, so he is startled to watch her tug her shoes off and drop onto his bed.
"I can't do this anymore," she tells him.

Hasn't he been expecting this? Why does he feel so cold?

"I understand."

Liz moves forward, shaking her head. "I don't think you do." He can see the flecks of gray in her irises. She has ocean eyes, always verging on a storm.

"Red, you matter to me."

Puzzled, he waits for her statement to make sense. You matter to me, but I'm leaving. You matter to me, but I wish you didn't. You matter to me...but not enough.

"I know that I can't understand your life, or your past, or what it's like inside that thick head of yours." Her lips curve just enough to indicate that she's teasing. "But I watched you cut yourself up to give me answers. I'm not going to pretend that didn't happen."

"It needed to be said, Lizzie. It was time."

"Not the point. That doesn't matter right now."

"Then what does?"

"Didn't I just say it?" She smiles at him, confusing him even more. “You. You matter."

He is so braced for her to say goodbye that he has no defenses left to protect against this. Liz reaches out to adjust his glasses a little, her smile fading away, and a new kind of fear floods him. She's looking at him again in that alarming way that makes it hard to remember this woman is also the girl he swore to protect.

This time it's Liz who breaks the tension, returning to the matter at hand. "I need you to stop treating me like someone whose feelings you have to handle with care. Someone who needs to be protected from the truth. I get it, I'm not upset at you for behaving that way, but I can't live like that any longer."

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do." She shifts once more and she's closer, able to whisper and still be heard. "You're important to me, Red. I can't stand that you're hurt because of me."

"I'm fine," Red murmurs again, eyes on hers.

Liz lays her hand where it was once before, during an afternoon of subterfuge and grilled cheese. There's no challenge this time, no deception. Her fingers smooth over his hair, delicately, like he's breakable. He would laugh if he wasn't frozen in place.

“You’re suffering over it right now. Don’t you know I can see you bleeding?”

She leans forward, touching her forehead to his. There's something intimate about it...almost achingly sweet. Red can feel himself weakening, drawn in by the simple affection--and that’s when he realizes Lizzie is right. They can’t go on like this. He won’t survive it.

When she sits back, he can breathe again.

“I do need to talk to you,” he admits. “About what comes next.”
Liz nods. “Okay. Let me grab a shower first?”

Red watches her gather her things. “Of course.” He needs the time anyhow, to come up with a new plan.

****

“So what did you have to tell me?”

Liz finishes tousling her hair dry before she joins him on his bed without invitation.

*Where did the boundaries go? How did he let it get so out of control?* He has to be more careful. If he gets careless, distracted...her life is at stake.

Black strands cling to her face as she sits, pajama-clad. Everything about Lizzie in this moment is so open, so relaxed in his company. She trusts him.

It’s for the best, Red reminds himself. “I got a call about the Task Force last night.”

Liz is already nodding, unsurprised. “I wondered what that was about. It didn’t seem like good news.”

“It wasn’t. They found our disposable phone already. From when we spoke to Samar,” he adds. There have been a lot of disposable phones.

“Do we need to leave sooner than you planned?” Liz is already tensed to get up and run, and it hits Red hard, how very much he’s going to miss her. *She’s perfect.*

He shakes his head. “No, tomorrow morning will be fine. But our plans do need to change.”

Sighing, Red sits down on the other bed. She’s on edge now, recognizing that he’s more than just worried. His walls are back up, as though the last few days never happened.

“We’ll be in Wisconsin by late tomorrow night. Once we arrive at the safe house there, I’ll make arrangements for further travel. You’ll be going with Dembe,” he tells her, prepared for the way her eyes flash as she understands, the way they cut to his. The way they could cut right through him.

Liz shakes her hair back, away from her face, taking the moment to get control of her temper. Her voice only wobbles a little. “And where will you be?”

“I’ll continue along the path I originally charted. If the Task Force catches up, all they’ll get is me. You’ll be safer this way,” he says. *Much, much safer. Far away from him.*

Liz can’t fault his experience as a fugitive. And she knows--especially now, she knows--that he’s only ever wanted to keep her protected. But the last thing she wants is to part ways while Red puts himself in the path of anyone who comes for her. What a terrible, terrifying idea.

Red is no longer looking at her. Instead, he’s staring blindly at the wall over her shoulder, ready for an argument.

Taking him by surprise, Liz nods briskly. “Okay.” The argument can wait until she figures out what’s going on.

“Okay?”
She shrugs. “If this is what you think we have to do to dodge the Task Force...I trust you.”

Red nods, though his attempt at a smile is painful. “Thank you.”

As if things were as simple as that, Liz moves on. “So which bed is mine? I’m pretty tired.”

“Oh.” He looks from her to where he sits. It’s always better to be near the door. Another layer of protection between Lizzie and any threat. “This one,” he decides, rising to take the other.

She brushes past him as they swap, a little closer than necessary, and he is forced to acknowledge that not all threats are external.

Red stays awake until after Lizzie’s breathing deepens, listening to her sleep. Though he hates himself for it, he doesn’t fully trust her to stay put. Her agreement came far too easily.

He is miserably aware that this will be their last night together. The despair of picturing the next few weeks on his own isn’t something he can handle, so he locks it away with the rest of the unspeakable things he tries to avoid thinking about. *Sometimes, survival requires more than just avoiding capture.*

Red is scrutinizing the upcoming plans in his head--backup alternatives, all possible contingencies--when he hears Liz wake back up.

The floor creaks as she crosses it, before taking the empty side of his bed without pulling down the covers. He doesn’t speak, uncertain if she knows he’s awake.

It’s doubtful, as Lizzie settles in without a word. Her return to sleep is quick, and he envies it...but he takes comfort in the idea that maybe she’s going to miss him too. Turning over to face her, Red finally drifts off, worrying about tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

As always, thank you for reading, :) 

Chapter title from "State of Grace" by Taylor Swift.
Caught Between Forever And Nothing At All

Chapter Summary

Control, longing, plans. His voice lacks all of the polish she's used to, like a shot of whiskey over broken glass. She has the ridiculous urge to burrow into that sound and never leave.

Chapter Notes

Because you're all so awesome with leaving me reviews and checking on updates and just generally reminding me that there's an audience for this story, here's what's happening:

This was supposed to be the final chapter. I really liked the roundness of a ten-chapter story. Alas, it's not to be, because there's just too much story left! So, rather than make the final chapter more than twice as long as all the others, I'm officially extending the chapter count.

And then this will be a series, but the planned sequel will be a long one-shot, rather than another chapter fic. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Liz wakes before sunrise, the solid weight of Red’s back pressed against her own.

It takes a moment for reality to return. Oh, yeah. That’s right. She did the stupid thing last night, letting her loneliness override common sense.

Sneaking into his bed without a word. Could she be any creepier? She’s lucky he didn’t wake her back up to evict her…if he even knew she was here.

Red is snoring lightly, which is both endearing and helpful. When Liz cautiously pulls away from him to turn around, she doesn’t have to wonder if he’s awake.

It will be really awkward if he turns over and finds himself face to face with her—the wise choice would be to retreat to her own bed before he wakes—but she’s not willing to let this opportunity pass her by.

As of tomorrow, she’ll be heading who-knows-where, and Red will be gone. Dembe will be delightful company, less prickly than Red can be at times, but he won’t be…Red.

Liz squeezes her eyes shut, so tight she sees stars, and accepts the truth she’s been avoiding for days now. Weeks, maybe. God, months if she’s willing to look at herself in the worst possible light.

It’s not really about her safety anymore, or where her future is headed. Red will keep pulling
strings to clear her name whether they’re together or not, and Dembe is just as capable of keeping her alive—possibly more qualified, even.

No, this panic when she imagines going on without him is not about her at all. It’s about him.

*She loves him.*

Liz opens her eyes, strangely relieved to have admitted it, even just inside her own head.

Regarding the slope of his shoulders a few inches away, she wishes she was brave enough to cross the distance. He’s never pushed her away while conscious. Always had a hug available, or a hand to hold hers. She suspects he’s a cuddler.

*_Damn it, she’s going to miss him._* It’s not fair. After everything else, she has to lose him too?

They haven’t even had a chance to work out most of their issues, to rebuild what’s been destroyed. They need more time.

If only the Task Force hadn’t found the phone they used. Ressler is probably on their heels right now.

A thought strikes her, as Red turns toward her in his sleep. *He never said anyone was actually following them.* He said they found the phone. Knowing the phone was found, they would know if the FBI was tracing it in their direction. But he said *if.*

*If* they found the trail, Red would be the one captured. Not when.

What were the odds Red would stick to a path he knew to be on their radar? He was better at protecting himself than that. And if he would be safe staying the course, why wouldn’t she?

Not to mention, it was only a few short weeks ago that he was agreeing that it would be easier to split up, but he had no interest in doing so. Were things more dire than he was telling her, to change his mind? Or was it something else?

While Liz is busy asking herself questions she can’t answer, Red wakes without stirring. She’s never seen anything like it—his breathing remains even and quiet, his body still. His eyes just drift open, and she gets to watch them focus on her as he comes back to the world.

For that one instant, as she watches his eyes go from a deep, clouded blue to a brighter, alert green, it feels like she’s the world he’s coming back to—and she can’t help wishing that were true.

“Elizabeth,” he murmurs, still motionless. It’s the first time he’s ever called her that without using it as a reprimand. His voice lacks all of the polish she’s used to, like a shot of whiskey over broken glass. She has the ridiculous urge to burrow into that sound and never leave. There’s something captivating about it.

She doesn’t even realize she’s smiling until Red’s lips curve in response.

“Good morning.”

He has that sly, knowing look in his eyes now, the one that tells her he’s got her number. He might as well be wearing a hat, it’s so much like any day she met her to share intel and poke holes in her team’s work.

“Morning.” She resists the urge to sit up, turn away—anything to avoid the intense way he’s
focusing on her now. This wasn’t what she had in mind when she decided to steal a little time with him. She’s pretty sure she’s blushing, caught doing something she would never do when he was awake.

“How did you sleep?”

He’s not exactly looking at her now; more like through her, around her. If she didn’t know better, she would think his gaze kept drifting to her lips and back up. If she didn’t know better, Liz could pretend he liked finding her this close, rather than being too sleepy to care. Yet.


“Me too.”

“Sorry about this,” she adds reluctantly. Now she’s given him the opening to back off, push her away, but it’s better than seeming like she thinks she has the right to climb into bed with him. Falling for him has made her crazy.

Oh, god, she really has. She has fallen in love with Raymond Reddington. A man who kills without hesitation. A man who sees her as his life’s mission to protect, some sort of debt he owes her dead parents.

It’s a bad sign that the second part bothers her more.

He can’t know what she’s thinking, but he seems too busy watching the shifting expressions cross her face to take the out she gave him.

“You okay?”

Liz swallows the laugh that wants to betray her hysteria. Just fine, no problem…head over heels for the Concierge of Crime. Nothing to see here.

“Yeah.” She knows she’s blushing again. He must be half-asleep still, because for a man who reads her easily, he doesn’t comment.

But boy, does he stare.

****

Lizzie’s eyes are so darkly blue this morning that they’re nearly violet. He has never gotten to look at her this way, so close for so long. The delicate freckles across her nose delight him. He’s too happy to be here to feel guilty about wanting to kiss her along the line they form.

Why is she still here? Why is she looking at him like that?

He knows the dream he was having before he woke to find her here involved a life that doesn’t exist. That happens a lot; it leaves him melancholy to face the waking world.

For once, reality is better.

“Did you…have a nightmare?”

He’s not sure how to ask her why she’s with him without scaring her off. He’s incapable of accepting the gift without questioning it. Mercifully, Lizzie seems unspooked, no more eager to go than he is to lose her.
“No.” She looks away, lost in thought for a moment. “I just didn’t want to be in that bed any longer.”

Her response makes no sense to him, but it seems like she expects it to, and he doesn’t choose to dissuade her.

“Alright.”

Lizzie covers a yawn, turning away from him and then back, and he smiles. “We have another hour or so, if you need more sleep.”

“No, I’m good.”

Still, neither of them moves.

“Red?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry.”

He can’t tell if she’s apologizing again for waking up in his bed, or something else. Her sorrow seems incongruous with the moment, though, tears shimmering when everything feels warm, and close, and not-yet-traught.

“Lizzie.” He presses his hand to her cheek, catching the tears when they fall. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for.”

_I’m sorry for being so angry for so long, _she_ thinks. _I’m sorry there’s not enough time now. I’m sorry I can’t tell you, when you deserve to know._

Liz sighs. “I’m sorry anyway,” she says, shutting her eyes.

He stays there, her face against his fingers, until the tears dry.

****

The woman who hands Red the car keys is petite and trim and looks as though she’s rapidly approaching seventy, but the firmness of her mouth reminds Liz of Mr. Kaplan. Like all of Red’s associates, this is not a person to be trifled with.

“You be careful,” she tells him, eyeing Liz from the doorway.

“Always am,” he replies glibly, and the woman sniffs. Red shuts the door, not bothering with farewells.

Liz is smiling when he turns around. “Friend?”

“Of course.”

“She didn’t seem overly awed.”

“Ah, well. She’s seen far more impressive and terrifying things than me in my glasses.” He tucks the keys in his right pocket and surveys the room. “We’ve got everything?”

“What’s to get?”
“Good point.” He scratches his neck. “Well, then, I guess we’re ready.”

Liz glances around along with him. Ready? To possibly never see him again? To share a car for the last time?

How is she supposed to get ready for that?

“Let’s go,” she replies softly. She may not be able to explain her changing feelings to him, but she isn’t willing to lie. No, she’s not ready.

This sedan is a dull blue, similar to the last. It feels smaller, even though she knows it isn’t. There just isn’t enough room for them and their melancholy, both lost in solitary musings. They’ve only been on the freeway for a few minutes when Liz breaks the silence.

“So after we…when we leave Wisconsin tomorrow, what happens next?”

“Right.” Red squints harder at the road, as though the parallel lines might up and move on him. “While you and I have been zigzagging across America, Dembe and Mr. Kaplan and a few others have been putting things in motion.”

“Oh…”

He spares a quick glance for her before returning his attention to the road. There’s a deadly satisfaction in it. “Now that the groundwork has been laid, Lizzie—we take down the Cabal.”

“We?” She’s watching him carefully now. “But I thought…”

“We’ll be travelling separately,” he acknowledges, “but we will still be working together. Meeting occasionally. I did hear you,” Red adds quietly. “It’s time for me to stop treating you like a child.”

Well, that’s something.

“Okay…what do you mean, we’ll be meeting? When?” Will you be Red then, or will you have disappeared behind your carefully constructed walls again?

He chuckles, unaware of her fears. “Soon enough. When the details are set, Dembe will pass them to you. And we’ll be meeting, because it will take the both of us, to truly, finally eliminate our enemies.”

The dark determination in his voice when he talks about “their” enemies gives Liz a shivery feeling that she can’t blame on fear.

“You’re going to need to be in disguise a lot,” he adds. “Dembe can help you with that part.”

“That shouldn’t be necessary,” she counters. “I took a semester of drama—I know how to style a wig.”

“Right.” How had he forgotten that? Sam had sent him pictures of Lizzie as Persephone, her one onstage role. Red had considered it a shame that she preferred to stay behind the scenes, focusing on the work, until he saw them. She was radiant, a scene-stealer.

Even then, it worried him. He told himself he was concerned for her safety, the possibility that someone might pay a little too much attention and dig into her past—but of course that was ridiculous.

No, he was just terrified of getting attached, of letting his feelings get in the way of what he would
someday have to do.

*If only he had listened to his fear.*

Instead, he’s following the interstate, aware of every single minute as it passes. Red knows that whenever they do meet next, it’ll be too long an absence. Life without Lizzie will be a world without light, without color.

He can feel her eyes on him, and her mind working, trying to piece the plan together. When she gives in to her curiosity, it makes him smile. “So, if I’ll be with you, what are the disguises for? I mean, being in your company will make it obvious that I’m me–unless you’re talking serious prosthetics.”

“No, nothing quite that extreme. The disguises won’t be for disguise. They’ll be for testing loyalty.”

“They–wait,” she says slowly as it dawns on her. “I’ve heard of this. I studied this.”

“I’m sure you did. It’s a cliche at this point, but it works.”

“And you’ll what? Parade me around in different hairstyles and see what reports of me make it back to the Cabal?”

“As well as the FBI, of course. Any betrayal could put us in danger.”

“So I’m just for show.” Disappointment has dulled Liz’s voice. She shifts to stare out the window.

“Not at all, Lizzie.” Red reaches for her hand, glancing away from the road long enough to catch her expression. “The disguises will help me find weak links among my acquaintances, but that’s not why you’ll be with me. That’s a side benefit.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. You’ll be with me because it’s time to show the world that you are a formidable adversary. Our enemies”—there was that tone again—”as well as our friends need to know that if they go after us, both of us will retaliate. They need to know that I am not the only threat.”

She squeezes his hand. “So, I’ll be armed.”

“Yes, of course. Dembe will have weapons for us both when we get to Wisconsin.”

“You’re not worried…after what happened the last time?”

“Why on earth would I be?” The question baffles him. This is Lizzie.

“Well, I’m a little worried,” she admits. “I’d understand if you were.”

“I trust you,” he says firmly, letting go of her hand to rub her shoulder. “And if you need me, I’ll be right there.”

*Except for when you’re not,* Liz thinks but doesn’t say.

“So,” Red continues, “we’ll meet with my contacts some of the time, to check in, and our other reunions will be meeting members of the Cabal directly.”

“To get to the top of the organization?”
“To neutralize them.” Red returns his hand to the wheel, shooting her a careful look. “The Cabal isn’t structured in a centralized way, Lizzie. There’s no CEO, or President. That guarantees that if someone were to kill one member, they wouldn’t be much affected.”

“Like when I shot Connolly.”

“Exactly. We can’t kill their leader, because they have no leader. But they have a core.”

“And if we take out the core, the Cabal shatters.”

“Yes. Or is weakened enough that we can mount a broader attack.”

“It sounds like whack-a-mole.” Liz says, grinning at him.

“I suppose, in a way, it’s similar.”

She grows somber. “But we’ll be killing people.”

“Strategically, when necessary, I will be. Yes.” He sighs. “I wish I could leave you out of that part, Lizzie, I truly do.”

Noting his emphasis on I, Liz frowns. “Red, if I’m in this with you, I’m gonna be all in.”

“I’m not going to make a murderer out of you,” he replies.

“It’s too late; I already am.” She lays a hand on his knee, stopping him from arguing further. “I know you think there’s a distinction, and I would love to believe that. But I pulled the trigger, I made the decision. I chose to kill him. And Connolly was no greater threat to me than everyone else in the Cabal.”

Red is shifting his attention from the road to her and back, concerned.

“They want me dead,” Liz says simply. “And the way things are supposed to work, where the authorities can be counted on to take care of them, protect us all–we don’t live in that world. Turns out that world never even existed. So if we have to kill them first…that’s justice.”

He lets out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding, awed by her. There’s a warrior under all that tragedy and pain, one he’s seen glimpses of over the years but never so clearly as right now.

Sometimes, the way he loves her hits him like a fist to the stomach. He would die for the woman sitting next to him, without a thought. Without blinking. Without regret.

“Please don’t fight me on this,” Liz finishes quietly, misunderstanding his silence. “I’m with you, now–as far as it goes.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he assures her, gripping the steering wheel until it hurts. It takes all his strength to stop himself from pulling the car over right that second and telling her everything he’s still keeping locked away.

He could swear oaths and confess his feelings and reach for her, throwing a lifetime of caution to the wind for just one chance to touch her. Getting to breathe her in, finally letting his deepest needs out, his hands in her hair and mouth on her skin–

Red clears his throat, wishing not for the first time that he had been blessed with slightly less imagination.
It runs wild around her.

“You’ll have your own gun,” he says, returning to their conversation as though he can simply will the traitorous thoughts away. “I fully expect that you’ll use it if need be.”

“Okay. Good. Glad we’re on the same page.”

****

Grateful to have sorted out the plan of attack, Liz waits until they’ve finished lunch to bring up the question that’s been burning inside her all day. She swore she wouldn’t push anymore, but this isn’t something she can let go of without a fight–this is losing him.

If she has any hope of stopping it, she has to try.

“Red?”

“Yes, Lizzie?” He looks up from the paper he’s reading, so unsuspecting that guilt almost steals her words before she can speak them.

“Why are we splitting up, exactly?”

He sets the paper aside. “For safety. I told you yesterday, the Task Force–”

“Found the phone,” Liz agrees, interrupting his measured words. “Not us. You never said we were in any immediate danger. Red…you didn’t explain why going separately will be safer, if we’re just going to reunite to face the Cabal. It doesn’t make sense.”

“It’s more prudent,” he says. “If we can succeed even slightly at shifting the focus to me, you’ll be safer.”

“Except nothing you do is going to make me less of a target,” she argues. “On our own, we’re two targets, equally at risk. Or I’ll actually be more at risk–it’s me they want now, more than anyone else, including you.”

“Staying together isn’t the best course of action,” Red insists stubbornly.

He hasn’t actually responded to her argument. “This isn’t about our safety from the Task Force,” Liz decides. “One clue about where we passed through two days ago won’t guarantee them any viable leads. So what is this really about?”

“I told you that I trust you. Can’t you trust me when I tell you we need to do this? It’ll be safer this way,” Red insists again.

“Safer for who?”

His face is a mask, and he doesn’t reply. Why won’t he tell her what’s going on?

“Damn it, Red.” She slaps a hand against the window at her side, unable to hold back the impulse to lash out at something. Someone. Was it her father who passed that down to her?

Red doesn’t so much as blink, which makes her even angrier. How can he be so calm about this? How can he sit and watch her desperate need to understand–to find a way out–tear her apart, and be completely unruffled? It’s the feeling of spinning totally out of control that compels her to actually voice the question.
“How can you just sit there staring at me like you don’t even care? Say something!“

When he grabs her arm before she can hit their car again in frustration, she’s startled by the iron in his grip. He’s never been less than gentle with her.

“Of course I care.” His words are deep and heated enough to be a caress, but they snap like thunder. He’s still holding her arm immobile, and she’s too shocked to tug it back. “Not everyone lets their feelings rule them, Elizabeth, and it doesn’t make them any less passionate. You think too little of me.” You pay too little attention.

“That’s not true.” She feels cold, and she knows there’s a hint of fear here, buried under her frustration. Fear of losing him, of pushing him too far–fear of the look in his eye while he restrains her. She wants to know this man, she does, but what she’s already discovered heightens her rollercoaster emotions. It’s all ups and downs with Red: flirtatious smiles and sobbing in his arms, vengeful words and selfless rescues.

“I have always appreciated you for exactly who you are,” he says more calmly, drawing his hand back and watching dispassionately as she touches her arm where he gripped it. “However, your habit of lashing out this way puts you at risk. It might be wise for you to practice some control.”

She can’t stop the bitterness from coming out through words that should be said lightly, pleasantly. “I think you have more than enough of that for the both of us.”

Red looks at her, then at her arm, where she can still feel the pressure of his hand. “Not always, Lizzie.”

He shifts away, resting his head in the corner against the window and closing his eyes. “You need to be more careful.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who’s stuck with me this far. I have literally been writing this fic for years, and I’m amazed that you’re still reading. <3

Chapter title from "Scared" by Delta Rae.

End Notes

This has not been beta read, all mistakes are mine.

Series title from "We're Not Alone," by Echosmith.
Story title from "Slow Life," by Of Monsters and Men.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!