Until Next Time

by RedHarryWhoLocked

Summary

What if Lizzie had always known that Red was her dad? AU. Story also on fanfiction.net. I own nothing. ON HIATUS

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Four years old

He wakes to an incessant itch and a dull ache in his back. He tries to look around but he is laying on his stomach and can only crane his neck so far. He lays there a few moments, trying to shake off the haze in his head which was making him sluggish.

Then he remembers. Her panicked phone call, his promise to come and check on her. He was too late. The house was burning when he arrived.

“Lizzie!” He gasped, choking on his panic and attempting to sit up, only to flump back onto the pillow, too weak to move. He hears a rustling in the corner behind him, a thump as if something had been thrown onto the hard wood floor.

“Daddy! You’re awake!”

It feels like an eternity before she comes into his line of sight. The image of his little girl — dressed in a pair of jeans and a pink t-shirt, her little feet bare as she gnaws on her lower lip with worry— became blurry as his eyes filled with tears at the sight of her. Worry looked so wrong on her young face. She seemed to want to give him a hug but was afraid of touching all the bandages on his back, afraid of hurting him. She finally decided to put her little hand in his, careful of the IV that was inserted there. Only then did he notice her tiny wrist was bandaged.

“Hey sweetheart, how are you doing? Does your arm hurt?” He strokes his thumb over her hand in attempt to comfort her.

He remembers holding her close to his chest as he ran out of the house, his coat catching fire as he passed a burning curtain. Her wrist must have burned as she held onto him.

“It’s okay. You been sleepin’ a long time, daddy. I’m almost all better. Mr. Sam says I’m gonna have a real cool scar.” She smiles shyly at this admission before frowning. “I missed you. Why did it take you so long to wake up?”

“I’m sorry, baby. I was hurt really bad. Sleeping helped me heal faster.” Lizzie nodded her head in understanding, though he doubted very much that she did.

“Mr. Sam said you’d wake up soon.” She frowned again. He hated that she seemed to be frowning so much. He hadn’t seen her in so long before that night. He missed her little smile. “Sometimes I didn’t believe him.” Lizzie sniffled, her bottom lip wobbled as tears leaked from the corner of her eyes.

“Oh baby girl, come here.” Grunting at the pain, he scoots closer to the side of the bed and pulls her towards him. Her thin arms wrap around his head, the only place that was safe in the awkward position, as he wrapped his arm around her back.

“I’m here, Sweetheart. I’m so sorry you had to worry. I’m going to be fine. I promise.” He kissed her cheek.

“Ah Red, I see you’re awake. ‘Bout time, you lazy son of a bitch.”

Lizzie giggled as she pulled away from the hug to look up at Mr. Sam, wiping her eyes quickly as she gave the man a small smile as he walked into the room.
“Sam, language. There’s young ears present.” Red chuckled as Sam finally stepped into his line of sight.

“That the first thing you got to say to me after I save your half dead ass? ‘Watch your language?’” Sam shakes his head, looking over at Lizzie with an exaggerated look of exasperation. “That’s gratitude for ya.”

\\\\

“Sam, I need you to do this for me. Please!” Red’s arms rest on his knees, his hands interlocked as he looks up at Sam where he is leaning against the kitchen counter.

“This is insane, Red! You’re asking too much. You’re asking me to take care of your one daughter so you can go play happy family with the other… and your wife!”

“Sam, you have to adopt her! No one can know she survived. It isn’t safe!” Red implored, combing his fingers through his hair in frustration.

“Are you fucking kidding me? Adopt her?” Sam roared, and Red stood, shh-ing him as he listened for the tell tale signs that Lizzie had woken at the noise.

“I know. I know I’m asking a lot, Sam. But no one can know she survived that fire. And I have to go, I have to find out why the hell this happened. Please, Sam.”

Sam stood stock still, staring him down like he used to do when they were shipped out together and Red had gone and done something stupid. Red shifted restlessly on his feet, trying to ignore the itch of healing skin as it grated against his t-shirt while he waited for Sam to say something.

Sam let Red stew as he thought this whole messed up situation over. He knew Red was right. And it wasn’t like he didn’t like the girl. Even as traumatized as she was, she was adorable as hell. As upset as she was, the girl still managed to try and make he and Red laugh, to try and make them feel better and lift the depressing vibe in the house.

“You will not abandon her, Ray. You hear me? You’re gonna play a part in her upbringing. You are her daddy. Got that?”

“Yes, of course! I could never abandon her, Sam!” Red was caught between giddiness at the thought of his Lizzie being safe and annoyance that Sam could ever think he’d just dump her somewhere. “I love her just as much as Jennifer. Jesus Sam, I brought her and her mother here from Russia so she’d be safe! I will do anything for her!”

Sam’s nostrils flared with a heavy exhale.

“She’s been having nightmares. I know you know. I go to check on her and you’re already there curled up on the bed with her. Something happened that night, Red. Something more than just a fire.”

“I know. I—I’m not sure how to help her.”

“Well figure somethin’ out. That ain’t something a little girl should have to live with, and frankly, I ain’t equipped to help her through it.”
Chapter 2

"No! You can't!" Lizzie screamed, stomping her little foot for good measure.

"I'm sorry Sweetheart, I have to. I promise I'll be back." Red crouched down and reached out for her hand.

"No! You can't leave! The bad man will come and—" She choked on what she was going to say, her 4-year-old arms attempting to shove him away as she ran out of the living room. A moment later, Red heard the old screen door slam shut.

"Lizzie!" He shouted, following her outside and running after her. His heart broke as she collapsed under the giant oak tree in the front yard, her shoulders shaking with huge sobs. He quickly came to her side and picked her up, hissing at the stretch of skin on his back. "It's okay, Sweetie. It's going to be alright. I promise nothing will happen. I will protect you. I promise."

"I was so bad, Daddy. I did a bad thing!" She hiccupped.

"No Honey, no! You had to do it. I'm sure it was scary and I'm so sorry I wasn't there to protect you! I'm so sorry Sweetheart, but I promise, I will protect you."

"How?" She yelled as she slammed her little fist into his chest as hard as she could, her long hair flying into her face. "How you gonna protect me if you're not here?"

His eyes misted over at the agony, unable to bear the sight of her anger, though it's well deserved. She'd been through so much. How much more can he ask of his little girl?

"Sam, Sweetie. I chose Sam to protect you and he will. And Elizabeth, this isn't goodbye forever. It's just 'until next time,' okay? Remember? It's never goodbye."

\///\/\\\nmom

Red pauses just as he is about to turn into the room. Lizzie is singing. He can faintly remember hearing her mother sing the song to her when he visited. He smiles as her high, childish voice fades with the end of the Russian lullaby.

"Hey Lizzie, before I leave, I want you to talk to this nice man, okay?" Red walks into what has now become Lizzie's room, pointing to the man behind him, standing awkwardly in the door way. He looks nice enough. He's wearing a button-down shirt and dress pants, with a worn brown leather satchel hanging from his shoulder.

"Why?" She asks as she stands up from where she'd been sitting cross-legged on her rug, clutching her bunny to her chest.

"Well, you know how you've been having a lot of nightmares about that night? He's going to help you with them. He's going to make you forget."

\///\\

The trunk slams closed as Red looks up at her bedroom window, a frown creasing his face.

"She'll come around. We've got your number. I'll let her call you as soon as she's done throwing a tantrum." Sam says, scuffing the dirt of the driveway with his shoe.
"This isn't a tantrum, Sam. It's well deserved. I wouldn't be surprised if she hates me now." Red sighed, looking away as his eyes stung. He knew what he was doing was right. He had to protect her at all cost. Even if it meant she never wanted to see him again.

"Ah hell, Red. She doesn't hate you. Just give her time."

"Yea." Red sighs as he climbs into the driver's seat of his car. Starting the car, he gives a half-hearted wave out the window as he starts down the driveway.

"WAIT!" Her little bell of a voice screams and he hits the brakes at the sound of the screen door to the house slamming shut. He looks in his rear view to see her running full pelt towards the car. Throwing the car into park, Red climbs out of the car and kneels on the ground just in time for Lizzie to slam into him, wrapping her arms around his neck as he tightens his arms around her back.

"You can't leave without saying goodbye! You have to say goodbye! I'm mad at you but you have to say goodbye!" She sobbed into his neck.

"Oh Lizzie, I'm sorry. I love you so much, so much Sweetheart. Never doubt that. I love you." He whispered fervently, running his fingers through her hair.

"I love you too, Daddy. I'm sorry I didn't come outta my room. I didn't want you to leave."

Red chuckled wetly. He guessed that made sense in a 4-year-old's logic sort of way.

"It's okay, Love. I understand." Red looks up as Sam's shadow crosses over them. He breaks their hug and rests his hand on her cheek. "Now listen Lizzie, you be good for Sam, alright? He's going to take care of you when I can't. But I promise I will visit and call whenever I can, okay?"

Lizzie nodded her head slowly, sniffling as she looked at the ground. "I'll be good, Daddy."

"I know you will, Sweetheart. Remember, this isn't goodbye."

"It's 'until next time.'" She mumbled, unable to stop the small upward quirk of her lip at their ritual. It was a sad one, but it was theirs.

"Until next time. I love you."

"Hey Butterball! Your dad's on the phone for you!" Sam shouted from the kitchen and chuckled as within a moment he heard her little socked feet skittering out of her room and down the stairs. He was quick to raise the phone's cord from where it ran in front of the kitchen doorway so she didn't trip over it as Lizzie came running in. She was talking to her dad before she could even get the phone to her ear.

"Hi Daddy! How are you? Where are you? When ya comin' home?" Lizzie listened for a moment, a small grumpy frown quickly transforming on her face.

"But it's been forever! You have to come visit." Another pause. Lizzie began twirling the phone's cord around her fingers, making it bounce gently against the linoleum.

"Daddy, I'm four. Three months is forever." God. When did she get so sassy?

"No, yea. I love it here. Sam is the best." Lizzie smiled up at Sam shyly as she said this, as if she
were letting him in on a secret he wasn't supposed to hear. "But I miss you. You promised to visit.
She sighed as she listened to Red.

"Fine. Please try to visit soon though, okay? Promise?"

"No, yea. I started school. It's fine. All the other girls want me to play with dolls though. I don't wanna play with dolls all the time." Red seemed to have pulled off a successful conversation shift.

"I like cops and robbers. Billy said I can't play cause I'm a girl. But Jake let me. Together we got Billy into jail. It was awesome!" Sam choked as he imagined Red's reaction to this bit of news.

"Okay Daddy. I love you too. 'Til next time."
5 years old

"He's here! He's here!" Lizzie screeched, running out of the house, the screen door slamming behind her. Sam follows her, stopping on the porch to watch as she runs towards the car that's pulling up the drive. She bounces on her socked feet, eagerly waiting for the driver to step out of the car. Apparently her patience runs out as the moment the door opens, she jumps at them.

"Daddy! You came!" She gushes as she wraps her arms around his neck. Red laughs as he climbs out of the car with one hand wrapped around her back so she wouldn't fall. As soon as he stood upright, he swung her onto his hip and shut the car door.

"Of course I did, Sweetheart! I wasn't going to miss your birthday!" He said in mock indignation. "You only turn 5, once you know." Lizzie beamed up at him before laying her head on his shoulder, tightening her arms around his neck in a hug.

Red smiled as Sam clapped him on the back in greeting as they headed up the stairs to the porch. "Oh! I almost forgot! I got you a present!" Lizzie's eyes widen and she wiggles in his arms as he turns back around and heads back to the car. Red puts her down so that he can open the trunk and she gasps once her eyes fall upon her gift.

"A bike! You got me a bike! Papa! He got me a bike!" Red can't contain the small grimace at hearing her call Sam, Papa. It was necessary for her safety though. He'd used some of his contacts to get the adoption to go through, after all. Sam had to be her Papa for all intents and purposes. But Red consoled himself with the fact that he'd always be her daddy.

"Well ain't that a good looking bike! And red too. Huh." Sam gave Red an unimpressed look as he helped him finagle the thing out of his trunk.

"I like red! Purple's my favorite but all the other girls have pink bikes. I hate pink. It's stupid." As she disparaged the virtues of the color pink, Lizzie's eyes never left the bike as she hopped from foot to foot.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart, go put some shoes on and then Sam and I can teach you to ride, okay?" Before Red had even finished speaking, she was running back into the house to do as he said.

"God, she's a little fireball, isn't she?" Red asked, his wistful eyes watching as she retreated into the house.

"Yep, can barely get her to sit still. That girl's got more energy than I know what to do with." Sam tried to sound exasperated, really he did.

Red looked over at him, fully aware of the way Sam's voice had dripped with love.

"She's wonderful."

\///\\\\

6 Years Old
Both Sam and Lizzie looked up from their dinner at the sound of tires crunching on the drive and the sudden screech of brakes. They looked at each other then back towards the front of the house. They weren't expecting company.

"Stay here, Lizzie. And don't make a peep." Sam stood up from the kitchen table and walked down the hallway. She could hear him open the hall closet and grab something from the top shelf just before the front door banged against the entry way wall.

"Jesus Red! I almost —"

"Where is she Sam? Where is Lizzie! I need to see her! Lizzie!" Red called out to her but Lizzie was glued to her chair in shock. She'd never heard her Daddy sound that way before. Like he was angry and sad at the same time.

"What the hell, Red! Calm down! I ain't lettin' you see her 'til you calm your ass down! It's Christmas for Christ's sake!" Sam shouted over Red's continued yelling of Lizzie's name.

"Get out of my way, Sam! She's my daughter!" There was a scuffle in the hall before Red came into the kitchen. Upon seeing Lizzie sitting frozen in her chair, he dropped to his knees in front of her, clutching her to him so tight she couldn't breathe. Red's shoulders suddenly began to shake and she soon realized he was crying. She didn't know her Daddy did that.

"It's okay, Daddy. I'm right here. It's okay. I love you, Daddy." She looked at Sam desperately as this just seemed to make her daddy cry harder.

"Red, I don't know what's going on, but you gotta calm down. You're scaring our Butterball, Red." Sam put his hand on Red's shoulder in comfort and after a moment, Red loosened his hold around Lizzie.

"I'm sorry Sweetheart. I just missed you so much." Red wiped the tears from his cheeks and kissed her on the forehead.

Lizzie knew she shouldn't be sneaking. Daddy had put her to bed and read her a story, just like he always did when he came home. But he just looked so sad. She had to find out why. When she heard the murmur of his and papa's voices, curiosity got the best of her.

She crouched at the top of the stairs, careful to stay to the right side where there weren't any creaky boards.

"They're dead, Sam. Carla and Jennifer. I came home and—Fuck. It was everywhere. So much goddamn blood." It sounded like her daddy was choking. She wanted to go to him and give him a big hug but she was afraid she'd get in trouble for being up past bedtime. "And I couldn't—I'm so sorry, Sam. I had to come see her. She's all I've got left!"

"Shit Red. Who could have done this?"

"I think it's the same people that killed Katarina. I've… I didn't stop looking into it Sam. Fuck, now I may have led them straight here. Sam, we have to go. You have to move! It's not safe!"

"Shut up Raymond." Lizzie had never heard her Papa Sam talk like that before! He rarely even raised his voice at her. "Lizzie! What are you doing out of bed?"

Lizzie gasped at being caught out. She must have made some noise. She scurried back into her room, trying to be as quiet as possible, as if that would make it better, make them forget she was up in the first place and had heard things she probably shouldn't have. Lizzie grasped the knob and
shut the door, careful to turn the knob so that the lock wouldn't catch and make a noise. Sam had taught her that sneaky trick.

Sam sat at the kitchen table, the phone clutched in his hand.

"Ray, we have to tell her something. She started asking questions."

"No yea, it's fine. She's at a friend's house—"

"Jesus Red, will you listen to me? You scared the hell out of her the other night. She's been having nightmares about that night again!"

"No. Listen Red. She's smart. Other kids have daddies that come home every day. Other kids don't have a daddy and a papa that aren't… well." Sam cleared his through awkwardly. "And other kids don't have daddies that come home ranting and raving about her not being safe and needing to move."

"Dammit Red! Is that what you get out of that whole thing? For the last time, I'm not moving her! She's got enough to deal with! She's finally making friends. Think about her for a second!"

"Yea, alright—"

"Are you kidding me? A traveling business man? You're—"

"No yea, fine. Whatever you want." Sam hmm'ed in exasperated agreement. "Bye."

Chapter End Notes

Still don't own anything.
Chapter 4

7 years old

Lizzie squealed as Red got out of the car and threw her over his shoulder, holding her around the waist so she wouldn't fall with one arm as the other hand came up to tickle her mercilessly.

"Stop! Daddy, Stop! I can't breathe!"

Red laughed with her and finally relented, putting her back on the ground, groaning.

"Oh Sweetheart, you're getting too big. I'm not going to be able to pick you up soon."

Lizzie rolled her eyes at him, taking his hand as they walked to the house where Sam was cooking dinner. "I'm not much bigger than last time, Daddy. You were just home last month."

"Oh? Sick of me already?"

"No! Course not!"

Red had been coming to visit more often since last Christmas. He'd been calling more too. They had a routine now. He'd call almost every evening, just before bedtime and she'd follow along in her own book, sitting at the kitchen table, her pajama-clad legs swinging under the chair, as he read to her.

8 years old

"I promise, you're going to get it, Sweetheart. You've just gotta keep at it." Red patted Lizzie on the shoulder as he stood up from his crouched position next to her on the floor. "I promise, you're already getting better. You just have to listen and feel."

"But why, Dad? Why do I have to learn this stuff? Can't we go get some ice cream or something?" She fiddled with the stethoscope hanging around her neck. It had been fun to play with at first, but she's been practicing for the last hour and her butt was numb from sitting on the floor.

"C'mon Lizzie, just one more try. You never know when these things will come in handy."

Lizzie sighed and placed the chest piece of the stethoscope back against the safe.

"So stupid." She muttered under her breath.

"Lizzie." Red rumbled from behind her. "Just one more try. Then we'll do whatever you want."

A cabbage patch doll and a new Optimus Prime action figure greeted her as she opened the safe.

9 years old

"Jesus Christ, Ray. I'm not a damn orphanage! How am I supposed to explain this to the neighbors?" Sam kicked the cabinet in frustration, sighing heavily.

Red craned his neck to see out the screen door, where the boy sitting on the porch steps didn't seem to have heard, he turned back to lean forward on the couch and look at Sam.

"Listen, I know. But I can't take him with me. The last few months have been hard enough while I
had him tutored in English." Red took his fedora off, setting it atop his suit jacket that was neatly folded on the armrest beside him. Combing his hands through his close cropped hair, he sighed. "I get it Sam, really. I do. It's going to draw attention and that's the last thing I want. But I couldn't desert him! You should have seen—"

Red shook his head, unable to voice the horrors of that waking nightmare he'd walked into the day he found the boy."

"Alright. Fine. But what's the cover story, Red? You said he can speak English. Can we pull off… I don't know. Can we get away with saying he's a foster kid?"

Lizzie, I want you to meet Dembe. He's going to live here with you and Sam, okay?"

Lizzie looked from Dad to Pop, then to Dembe. He looked so sad and he seemed to find his shoes very interesting cause he hadn't looked up from them once.

"Hi Dembe. It's nice to meet you." She mumbled shyly. He didn't respond. Glancing up at her dad, Lizzie was taken aback by his huge grin. She didn't know what she did but if it made Dad that happy, she guessed she better keep doing it. "You wanna go play on the tire swing?"

It took a minute, as if it took a moment for it to sink in that she was talking to him. But slowly, Dembe's head rose from where he was studying his shoes and focused intently on her before nodding his head slowly.

"Where you from?" She asked gently as she pushed herself back and forth in the swing with her foot, dragging it in the dirt as she swayed.

"South Sudan." Everything he said was so quiet and careful. Like he had to think real hard about his answer.

"Where's that?" She asked, closing her eyes and leaning back on the swing as far as she could without letting go of the rope.

"Africa."

"Really? Cool. Is there a North Sudan?" She opened her eyes just in time to see a corner of his lips twitch.

"No. Just Sudan."

"Oh. I thought, well cause there's a North Dakota and South Dakota… and a North Carolina and a South Carolina, there should be a North Sudan and a South Sudan." It seemed perfectly logical to her. Dembe merely shrugged his shoulder from where he leant against the tree.

"How old are you?" Lizzie felt the need to break the silence.

"Fourteen."

"Cool. I'm nine."

"Yes. I know."
"How? We just met." Lizzie squinted at him in suspicion.

His lip did that quirky thing again.

"Mr. Raymond speaks of you often. I hear him on the phone with you sometimes."

She blushed and suddenly Lizzie didn't want to be out here on the swing with Dembe. Mumbling about going to get something to eat, she ran back into the house and up to her room, ignoring as Dad and Pop yelled after her. Slamming her door, Lizzie climbed onto her bed, her back to the door as she clutched her bunny to her chest. Stupid Dembe. What made him so special? She heard the door creak open as she played with one of her bunny's charred ears.

"Lizzie? Sweetheart? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Her voice broke slightly and she angrily cleared her throat. She didn't need to cry. Crying was for babies.

"Lizzie, talk to me. What's bothering you? Did Dembe say something to upset you? I'm sure he didn't mean to." He placed his fedora atop her head. She couldn't help the small smile as it sat off kilter as she laid on her side. He was always wearing these fedoras now. She liked them. Especially when he let her wear it. "C'mon Lizzie, sit up and talk to me."

Lizzie huffed but did as he said. Well, part of it. She sat up. Staring at her lap as she sat cross-legged, Lizzie played with the laces of her shoes.

"Lizzie—"

"Why does Dembe get to come with you?" If word vomit was a thing, Lizzie would have just made a terrible mess of her blankets.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart—"

"No! Stop saying my name! Just tell me why!" She threw her bunny and it flumped in a most unsatisfactory way at the end of the bed. She was angry. She needed the stupid rabbit to rip a hole through the wall. Break something.

"He doesn't, Lizzie. That's why he's here. He's been with me for a while, yes. But there was no choice. You are here because it's safe. Because you're a little girl and you need to be somewhere with a tire swing and a dirt road for a driveway, somewhere that you can slam your door when you're angry at your dad or pop. You need somewhere to grow up." Red lifted her chin with his fingers, caressing her cheek and wiping her tears with his thumb. "And so does Dembe. That's why he's here. Now. He's had a hard life, Lizzie. He deserves a home. We can give him that — you and Sam can give him that."

Lizzie stared at him for a moment, her brow furrowed in anger as she searched for something on his face.

"I love you Lizzie. Forever and a day."

There it was. That's what she was looking for. She huffed angrily, jumping off the bed and stomping back downstairs, ignoring him as he called for her to come back. Lizzie searched downstairs, stomping the whole way, ignoring Sam as he told her to knock off the attitude. Finally she found Dembe sitting in the kitchen, looking at his stupid shoes again.

Lizzie stood in front of him until he looked up at her.
"I'm sorry if I said something—"

"Shut up." Lizzie folded her arms across her chest. "I've always wanted a brother. So now you're it. You okay with that?"

Dembe nodded his head slowly, wide eyed.

"Good." Lizzie huffed, walking back out of the kitchen. "Come in my room or touch my rabbit, I stab you with a colored pencil!" She yelled.

"Lizzie!" Red reprimanded from where he stood on the stairs.

"I'm still mad at you!" She shouted as she breezed passed him and back up to her room.
10 years old

"Dembe?" Lizzie whispered as she slowly cracked open the door to his bedroom. His room was pitch black and she couldn't see a thing.

"Dem—"

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

Lizzie could hear the springs of his mattress creaking as he shifted. She assumed he was sitting up and walked to his bed, knowing the layout of the room from memory.

"I can't sleep." Lizzie traced the scar on her wrist with the thumb of her other hand as she shifted awkwardly on her feet. "Can I stay with you?"

She was met with silence. Lizzie waited in the dark for a beat or two but when no other sounds were forthcoming from the bed, she went to turn around.

"Nevermind, sorry I woke you."

"Wait, Elizabeth. Lizzie. You can stay."

Lizzie smiled even though she doubted he could see it and jumped into his bed. She could hear him chuckle as she hurried under the blankets to escape the Nebraska cold. As she snuggled in the blankets, she heard him shift to make room for her.

"I'm sorry that I took so long to answer. I am still getting used to … this." She heard him whisper in the dark.

"It's okay. I'm still getting used to having a big brother."

"I am enjoying being your big brother. Even if you do threaten to stab me with sharp objects." His voice smiled.

"Well, I'm your sister. I gotta say that stuff. It's the rule."

"Ah yes, the rule." He was definitely laughing that time, though he sobered up quickly. "What happened, Elizabeth? Did you have a bad dream?"

She didn't want to answer. She hated it. Running her thumb along her scar under the protection of the covers, she spoke, "Yea. Nightmare."

"Do you wish to speak about it."
She didn't. For a long time they lay in silence, neither of them willing to fall asleep.

"Did daddy ever tell you why he left me with Sam?" She could hear the scratch of his short hair against his pillow as he shook his head.

"There was a fire. I don't remember much. But I remember daddy saved me. He got hurt really bad though. Sometimes … sometimes I hear her screaming. My mom. And sometimes Daddy doesn't get back up." The words tumble from her and she takes a deep breath before a sniffle escapes. Under the covers, Dembe's hand clasps hers in comfort.

"I'm sorry that happened, Eliz..."
"That may be true, but I wish to shield you anyway. And I meant that I do not think I can give voice to what I went through. Not yet."

\\\\

"Daddy did you know?" She had been pacing the living room, calling Red until he picked up.

"Did I know what? Honey, this isn't a great time. If this isn't an emerg—"

"About Dembe's back! He was branded, Daddy!" Her voice broke as she allowed the tears for her brother to finally fall. He had been hurt. She could barely stand to think of the agony he must have been in as his skin was burned. She knew that agony. She remembered every time she touched her scar. For someone to do that to her brother on purpose, with the intent of leaving their mark, it didn't bear thinking about.

There was silence on the line and just as she began to think he had hung up she heard a rustling then what seemed like a door closing.

"Lizzie, that isn't my story to tell."

"But you knew."

"Yes, I knew."

"How could you not tell me?" She screeched. "He's my brother!"

"Again, Lizzie, this isn't my story to tell. I'm sorry Lizzie. When I brought him to you and Sam, I told you he had a hard life. I was not exaggerating." She could hear him sigh over the phone.

"Now Lizzie, this isn't my story to tell. Nor do I think that you're old enough to hear it—"

She hung up the phone.
Chapter 6

12 years old

"Race you home!" Lizzie shouted as soon as her feet hit the road as she jumped off the bus. This was their routine during the school week. Dembe would be there at the mailbox to meet her after school since he got out of school before her, and she would turn the walk back home into a race. When she did win, it was because he let her, and she knew it. But she didn't care.

"Elizabeth! Wait!" He yelled, before huffing in exasperation as she was already half way down the drive and began trotting after her, his long legs eating up the ground.

"Dembe! Daddy's here!" She yelled, having spotted his car.

"I know that, dummy. You would too if you had just waited so I could tell you. But Elizabeth—"

He gave an 'oompf' as she punched his arm before picking up speed to run into the house. Dembe followed after her, shaking his head. This wasn't going to be pleasant.

"Dad! Dad! Where are you? Pop!" Lizzie searched the downstairs, and upon finding no one there, she took the stairs two at a time to Dembe's room, which moonlighted as Dad's room whenever he was home. Bursting through the door, she came to a sudden halt. Her torso flying forward at the sudden stop before she regained her balance. Lizzie's mouth hung open in shock at the sight.

"Lizzie! Get out!" Both Sam and Red yelled from where they both sat on the bed, Red with his shirt off, and Sam with a bloody gauze pad in his hand and a needle. Lizzie couldn't move, frozen at the sight of so much blood. Her dad's blood. There was bloody gauze and bandages and a bloodied up dress shirt that must have been her dad's was scrunched up on the floor at their feet.

"Come on, Elizabeth. Let's go. I'll help you with your homework." Dembe came up behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders to guide her away from the scene.

Lizzie couldn't do her homework. She couldn't focus. Half of her wanted to go back up stairs and demand answers, the other half was sick with worry and fear. She couldn't stand the thought of her dad being hurt. Not again. Dembe tried to do his own homework but the sight of Lizzie looking so frightened had him setting his pencil aside.

"C'mon. Let's go practice. Get your mind off things." He stood, motioning for her to do the same. Lizzie just stared at him dumbly. "I promise he will be fine. It looks worse than it is, Lizzie. Come on."

She slowly nodded and stood up, following him down to the basement and over to the sparring mats. Taking her shoes off, and waited for Dembe to take his shoes off as well and put on the punching mitts.

"Your left hook still needs work. Let's work on that."

She squinted at him, her nose twitching in annoyance, and took position, aiming for the right mitt.

"Good! Now don't forget to put your whole body into it, move with it Elizabeth."
They came up from the basement, panting and sweaty. Well, Lizzie was panting and sweaty. Looking up after re-doing her ponytail, Lizzie stopped at the top of the stairs at the sight of Red and Sam sitting at the kitchen table, both staring at her in worry.

After a moment's pause, Lizzie ran over and wrapped her arms around her dad, hugging him tightly until she heard a hiss of pain.

"Oh! Sorry! Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" Red chuckled heavily, like it took all his energy just to laugh.

"I'm fine, Sweetheart. It's just a scratch. I promise. Looks worse than it feels."

"Bull—"

"Lizzie!" Sam reprimanded, causing Lizzie to sigh and roll her eyes.

"Sorry, but seriously Dad. That was a lot more than a scratch worth of blood. What happened?"

"Don't worry about it, Love." Red went to grab Lizzie's hand but she shook him off, making him frown, his brow crinkling in hurt.

"No, Dad. I saw it. That was a knife wound. Where were you? How did that happen?"

"I was in Colorado. On business." His jaw clenched. "I was mugged."

"Lie."

"Lizzie—"

"You guys think I'm stupid, don't you? I'm just the stupid little girl that needs protected." She gestured wildly with her hands in anger.

"God, dad. You're the one that wanted Dembe and I to learn to fight. You're the one who's teaching me how to pick locks, crack a safe..." Lizzie looked around the room at the three men who now refused to meet her eyes. "Ugh! You're unbelievable. You! I've seen you fight, even just in a spar, you can kick ass. And you think I'm going to believe that some random mugger did that?"

Her voice got progressively louder until her own voice rang in her ears. Only silence met her questions.

"That's what I thought." She murmured angrily and walked away. Moments later, the three men cringed as her bedroom door shut.

"I told you she was too smart for you to get away with not telling her."

"Shut up, Sam."

13 years old

"Lizzie, it's your—"

"Don't care." She breezed passed her Pop on her way to the kitchen, ignoring the phone in his hand as he tried to pass it off to her. She hadn't spoken to Red in three months. He hadn't come to visit on her birthday.
That wasn't why she hadn't talked to him. In fact, he hadn't come because she had told him she
didn't want him there. He refused to tell her what had happened the night he'd been stabbed. She
was afraid to know the truth but she knew she needed to know anyway. Her whole life felt like a
bad math problem. Like trying to add up $2 + 2$ and getting $3$. It just fell short. Why was he always
gone? What did he actually do for a living? Why was he always making her practice picking locks
and brush passes? Why he always came to them, and was so unwilling to do anything together. He
would rarely even go into town with her.

She rummaged in the fridge for a soda and could hear Sam still on the phone.

"I'm sorry Ray. Just... give her some more time."

"Yea, alright. Bye."

He walked down the hall, leaning against the kitchen doorway.

"Lizzie, you've got to talk to him sometime. He's still your dad. He loves you more'n anything,
Butterball."

"No. I will talk to him when he's willing to talk to me." She said, pulling a cookie out of the jar and
taking a bite.

"He was just on the phone! He wants to talk to you."

"Not about anything that matters!"

Later that night, Lizzie was heading to the bathroom when she heard Sam talking on the phone
again.

"I don't know, Dembe. I'm at a loss. I wish you were here, kid. You always talk some sense into
the girl." Lizzie frowned at that. Well that was rude. She did miss Dembe though. He was a
freshman at Notre Dame. Maybe she should talk to him.

\///\\

"Hello?" Silence. Holding his finger out in front of him to shut his associate up, Red quickly
walked into the other room, then closed and locked the door. "Lizzie? Is that you, Sweetheart?" He
heard a definitive sniffle before her garbled voice came over the line. It was the most beautiful
thing he'd heard in months.

"Hi Daddy."

"Oh Sweetheart. It's so good to hear from you. I've missed you so much." His voice came out in a
sigh as his eyes closed, his body finally relaxing from months' of tension he didn't know he'd been
holding onto.

"I'm sorry, Dad." She choked out over a sob.

"No, Darling. Don't cry. It's okay. It's alright. I'm just so happy to hear your voice again."

"I've missed you too." She managed around her heaving breaths as she tried to calm her sobs.

"Breathe for me, Lizzie. It's alright. We're going to be alright."

"Can you come home?"
"I'll be there in 8 hours, Lizzie. I just… I have something I need to wrap up and then I'll catch the first plane, okay?"

"O-okay. 'Til next time?"

"Until next time, Darling."
Chapter 7

Lizzie sat on the porch steps, watching the road. She'd been there since the crack of dawn and slowly watched as the night's dew soaked back into the ground. He'd promised he would be there.

"Butterball, come get some breakfast." Sam stood at the door.

"I'm okay." She didn't bother turning to answer, just kept her eyes on the road, willing his car to show up.

"Lizzie, he'll get here honey. But staring at a dirt road ain't gonna make him come any faster." She sighed, knowing he was right but unwilling to admit it. So she continued to sit there in silence.

"Fine." Sam sighed. "I'll put the pancakes in the oven to keep warm for you."

"I hate pancakes." Lizzie mumbled as his footsteps receded back into the house.

Lizzie began kicking around a pebble that lay at her feet on the steps, dribbling it between one foot and the other. Then she heard it. The distant rumble of a car coming up the brown dirt road. She looked up, a biting her lip warily as she watched the cloud of dirt that proceeded all cars down the lane as it came closer.

After what seemed a lifetime, the car stopped in the drive and she was jumping down the steps and opening the door, bouncing on her feet as she waited for him to climb out of the car enough to wrap her arms around his neck in a bear hug.

"Ah Lizzie—" Her name came out in a sigh as he held her to him.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry!" The sobs she'd been holding in ever since their phone call now crawled from her throat.

"No Lizzie, Sweetheart. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. You were right." Red paused here, stepping back to put his fedora on and carefully placing it on his head in the jaunty angle he'd recently started to favor. "You deserve some answers."

Lizzie smiled, content for now to know that she was going to get her answers. Taking Red's hat off his head and, mimicking the same angle that he liked, putting it on her own as she stepped back to admire his car. Red laughed at her antics, leaning against the car with a grin as he shook his head in good humor.

"A Mercedes, Dad? Is one of these secrets you're going to tell me how a traveling business man can afford a freaking Mercedes?" Lizzie lifted a brow in question and Red looked down at the dirt, scratching his head in consternation.

"Uh… yea."

"Hey Red! Now that you're finally here, maybe we can convince our girl here to eat, yea?" Sam shouted, holding the door open in invitation.

\//\\

Red cleared his throat for around the thousandth time.

"Dad. Just tell me. It can't be that bad."
"Lizzie, frankly, it is. And I have no idea where to start." Red sat at the end of her feet, unbuttoning the vest of his suit, having discarded the jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt before coming to her room. Lizzie sat up against her headboard. He couldn’t bear to look at her, surrounded by a mountain of pillows and stuffed animals, the proof of her age — of her innocence. He slouched forward, his forearms resting on his knees as he massaged the knuckles of his hands nervously.

"The beginning’s always a good place to start. Just pretend it’s like the bedtime stories you used to tell me." She teased, trying to lighten the mood as she hated seeing her dad so upset. "C’mon Dad, chapter one! How does it begin?"

Red turned his head to hide his wince. This was far from one of the fairy tales he used to read to her. Or maybe it wasn’t. Maybe he was the villain.

"It uh… It starts with a man who is in the Navy. Navy Intelligence. He has a wife and a daughter. But then he met this other woman. She was his asset." It’s surprisingly easy to tell the story as if it happened to someone else.

"What’s an asset?" Lizzie interrupted.

"It’s… well, it means that she had information that I… he needed. And she had the means of getting more. So they worked together for a couple years and they grew close until one day, they had a daughter."

"Me?" Lizzie’s voice was small and Red looked up just long enough to see her clutching her bunny. That damn bunny.

"Yes."

"You mean… my mom. She wasn’t your wife?"

"No Lizzie."

"Is that why you weren’t able to visit much at first? Cause you… cause you had a wife and another daughter?" She choked out.

"Lizzie —"

"No! You left me with Sam to hide me! You said it was for my safety but it was cause you had to keep me secret from your real family!" She couldn’t see through the tears and her aim was a bit off when she threw her bunny at him but still managed to hit him in the back. But once again, the effect the bunny had was dulled by the whisper of a flump it made on contact.

"No Lizzie! Don’t ever think that! It was to keep you safe, damn it!" Red took a deep breath, realizing his voice had risen. "Are you going to let me finish the story or is this enough for one day?"

"No. Tell me all of it. I need to know all of it. Rip it off like a band aid." She whispered in the wake of his anger, running her thumb along her scar.

"I can’t tell you all of it. There are things that you cannot know, that it isn’t safe for you to know."

"Fine. Just tell me what you can."

Red took a moment to regather his courage, grabbing the bunny from behind him and offering it
back to her. Once she took it from his hand, he rested his forearms on his knees once more and
continued.

"My asset — your mother got in touch with me one day. Said that you both were in trouble. That
she'd done something and was worried she was being followed, that they were onto her. So I
brought you here. To America."

"WHAT?! I wasn't born here?"

"No. And don't ask me where you're from. It's one of the things I can't tell you. Yet."

"But Dad—"

"No 'buts,' Lizzie! I cannot bend on this! I'm sorry, but believe me when I say, it's for your own
good. Maybe one day. I know I'm withholding something that you should know. You have the
right to know where you come from. But it's my job to protect you."

Lizzie stared at him, her brow furrowed and her eyes igniting in anger.

"Fine." She ground out through clenched teeth. "Please continue." Even to her, it sounded more like
a curse than a request.

"Everything seemed fine for awhile. But I was in over my head. My superiors - I eventually
realized that they didn't actually want me to get the information. They wanted me to babysit her,
make sure she never talked. She had information that they couldn't bear to get out and that's what
kept her alive. Your mother...she was brilliant." Red paused here, a small wistful smile on his face.

"Then she called me one day, told me that she thought she was being watched, that someone was
watching the house. So I came to her. I had been home with my— with Carla and Jennifer. It was
quite a long drive, I had to cross state lines. By the time I got there… the house was in flames." His
voice had gotten quieter as he spoke and Lizzie was afraid to breathe for fear of missing a word.

"I was too late. I found her laying on the floor. I was too late, Lizzie." This was the second time in
her life she'd seen her dad cry. She hated it.

"You saved me though." Red looked up at her and gave her a watery smile.

"Yes, that I did. She had hidden you in the closet. I called out for you as I ran through the house. I
could barely see or breathe but then I heard your little voice." He paused, closing his eyes, a small
upturn to his lips. "Music. Sweet music. You were so afraid. But when I heard your voice, I knew
everything would be okay."

Lizzie sniffled, trying to smile as he glanced at her but failing miserably.

"So I brought you to Sam. Because I knew the people who came after your mother were most likely
after me too. I needed to think that you had died in that fire. They could never know you were alive
or know your connection to me, know you're my daughter. You see, some of these people had a lot
of control here in the U.S. I soon realized that I had been assigned to get the information from your
mother, to learn what she knew. But your mom was smart. She didn't tell me much. Just enough to
get them worried but not enough for them to treat her as a threat. Or so she thought."

"But you said you were in the Navy, wouldn't—"

"No, Lizzie. The people who were looking for me were—" Red sighed, running a hand over his
face as he searched for words. "They were powerful people. So I did the only thing I could do. I
told them that I had the information that your mother died for. I blackmailed them."

"What's that mean?"

"It means that I held it over their heads so that they would leave me alone. And it worked, for a little while." Red stood and walked to the window, staring out into the darkness. "They began to think I was lying. So they killed my wife and my— your sister."

Lizzie gasped, smushing her bunny against her face as she remembered that night. The night she snuck downstairs and overheard her dad and pop talking.

"That's why you were so sad that Christmas."

"Yes." He sighed, coming back to sit on the bed. "And that's why you're with Sam. Because I cannot lose you, Lizzie. Not you too. You are everything."

Lizzie nodded her head slowly, finally beginning to accept his choice to leave her with Sam. "What happened next?"

"Well, I was in fact lying. Your mother hadn't fully trusted me with the information, remember. I didn't actually have it. But when they came after Carla and Jennifer… I vowed to get it. To find them all and take them down." Red looked at Lizzie, trying to gauge her reaction, and received an encouraging nod in return.

"And because some of the people I was—am hunting are very powerful in the legal world…I had to become equally powerful in the illegal world." Red looked over at Lizzie, his face void of emotion. He didn't look like her daddy in that moment. He looked scary. Like a villain from one of her fairytales.

"What does that mean?" Her voice quivered as the courage it took to ask drained from her.

"I'm a criminal, Lizzie."

She ran.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Try not to get too spoiled with how quickly I'm cranking out these chapters, guys. I've got a feeling that once I start going through where the show takes off, I'll be slowing down for some research. And by "research," I mean watching the episodes I'm including in the story. Again.

Obviously, with the alternate history, there will be a spin, but I'm trying to adhere to the same basic timeline as much as possible.

Lizzie had refused to leave her room for two days. Finally, in an effort to get some food into her, Sam forced Red to leave. She left her room two hours after he was gone and picked at the dinner that Sam sat in front of her. He tried to get her to talk, but she just sat there, staring at her peas as if they had personally done her wrong.

It'd been three days. Red called twice a day – in the morning and in the evening – to see if Lizzie would answer the phone. She always refused it when Sam tried to hand it over.

Lizzie sat on the old tire swing in the front yard, swaying back and forth in disinterest when she heard the distant rumble of a car coming up the road. Squinting, Lizzie stared until the car became distinct enough to recognize Dembe's beat up burgundy Oldsmobile. Tumbling out of the tire swing as the car pulled up, Lizzie smiled, bouncing on her feet as he climbed out.

"Dembe!" She pounced on him, embracing him around the neck and forcing him to wrap his arms around her back to hold her as her feet no longer touched the ground.

"I thought you weren't coming home for break for another week!" She asked, loosening her old and sliding back to the ground so that he could get his bags out of the car.

"Yes. But I knew you were having a hard time. I told my professors I had a family emergency and got permission to write my final papers from home."

Lizzie blushed, kicking the tire as she stared at the ground. "Thank you. You didn't have to do that, but thank you."

"What's going on in that head of yours, Elizabeth?"

They sat on the porch steps as dusk fell. The crickets were beginning to chirp and made Lizzie look forward to when the lightning bugs would come out. Should happen any day now.

"Nothing." She mumbled, looking at her feet as she ran a thumb over her scar.

"What was that, Pinocchio?"
Lizzie couldn't prevent the small smirk and bumped her shoulder against his. His jokes were so lame sometimes. They sat in silence for awhile. Dembe knew all he had to do was wait her out. He was a patient man. And he enjoyed the quiet.

"I just… I don't know him anymore, Dembe. I thought I knew who my dad was and now… he's a monster." Lizzie sniffled, trying to hold in the tears. It felt like she'd done nothing but cry lately.

"No Elizabeth. You know that's not true." He whispered fervently, wrapping his arm around her shoulder in comfort.

"How? I have no idea what he does when he's not in this house with us!" Despite the frustration present in her voice, Lizzie cuddled into her brother's side and rested her head against his shoulder. "Honestly, I don't want to know."

"But when he's here, he is your father! When he leaves, he becomes someone different. You have to separate the two. The father and the criminal."

"How the hell do I do that, Dembe? How do I forget what he is?"

"Because he does. Because he has to. I know he told you why he does what he does, why he became what he had to. It's to keep you safe. He knew that they would never stop hunting him, never stop hunting you. The only way to make them stop is to level the balance of power, to destroy them."

Lizzie stayed silent, unsure that there was anything else to say.

"He became a criminal because he loves you."

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

That evening, when Red called, she took the phone from Sam.

"Lizzie? Sweetheart, are you there?"

Silence.

"Lizzie, please."

Silence.

"I'm so sorry, Sweetheart. I wish things were different, that I was different – that I didn't have to become this…I'm sorry, Elizabeth."

Silence.

"Will you ever forgive me?"

Silence.

"Okay. Well, I'll call again tomorrow morning. Even if you don't talk, that's alright. I just want to know you're on the other line, that you're okay. We both know I can talk enough for both of us." His joke fell flat in the silence.

"Alright, Sweetheart. I love you. Until next time."

Just as he was about to hang up, he heard it though it was the faintest whisper.
"Until next time, Dad."

14 years old

Sam slammed through the front door, leaving a forlorn Lizzie to follow in his wake. She could hear as he threw the car keys into the dish that sat atop the cabinet in the hallway. Pausing for a moment, deliberating on whether she should go up to her room or follow after him, she heard his voice from the living room.

"Oh good, you're here. You can talk to her. I'm...I'm just done."

Wincing, Lizzie's stomach knotted as she heard Sam move into the kitchen. She was beginning to fear that this was the last straw – that Sam had given up on her. She slowly walked into the living room to see who else was there. It was Red. Of course it was.

"Elizabeth." He'd never looked at her with that stern face before. His lips were pursed, eyes grim and his brow was cruelly wrinkled.

"When'd you get here?" Lizzie said the first thing that popped into her head. She hadn't even noticed his car in the drive.

"I don't think that matters right now, Lizzie." Red stood from the couch and began to pace in front of the mantel.

"The third time, Lizzie. This is the third time in the last six months the police have been called on you. If you're not stealing from stores, you're pick pocketing in Wal-mart – what the hell do the people of Wal-mart have worth stealing?!" His voice raised even as he got side-tracked. "That's not the point." He mumbled to himself.

Looking back at Lizzie, Red sighed and shook his head.

"What's going on Lizzie? This isn't you. Tell me what's going on because you're very lucky that you apparently remind the Sheriff of his own daughter or you would be in a heap of trouble with the law right now. So tell me, Lizzie. And I will not accept the silent treatment from you. Not this time."

Silence.

"Lizzie—"

"What right do you have? Where the hell do you get off, yelling at me about my run-ins with the law? YOU? Are you kidding me? This is what you've groomed me for, isn't it Dad?" She spat his name like a curse. "I learned to pick-pocket from you, remember?" Lizzie watched in morbid fascination as his face became ashen and his mouth hung open like he'd been struck.

"Lizzie! No, never Sweetheart. This is what I've tried to protect you from, Damn it!"

"I thought you were protecting me from the super secret shady people who were out to get me. No? There's more that goes bump in the night? Tell me, Dad. What else am I supposed to be afraid of?"

"ME!"
She blinked at the grotesque caricature his face had become, spit flying from his lips as he shouted.

"...I'm trying to protect you from what I became. I don't... you can't go down this path, Lizzie. I won't let you. You need to run. Run in the completely opposite direction from where you're headed now."

"Dad—"

"No Lizzie. You promise me. This stops now." Her dad looked so desperate, with his eyes wide and his mouth slack-jawed, there was really only one response she could give.

"Ok. I promise."
Chapter Notes

Fluffy McFlufferton from Flufftown Flufftonia.

15 years old
"Hey Dad!"

Lizzie had the phone nuzzled between her cheek and shoulder as she rooted around the freezer for that pint of Ben & Jerry's Chubby Hubby she'd been working on. With a smile, she grasped her prize and walked over to the silverware drawer and shut it with her hip once she'd gotten her spoon.

"Hey Sweetheart. How are you today? How's school?"

"School's good. What's new with you?"

"Oh you know, same ol' same ol'."

Lizzie couldn't help but snort as she sat down, her back to the arm of the couch as she drew her knees to her chest and tucked into her ice cream. Yes. She could only imagine a boring day in the life of a career criminal. Red must have read the disbelief in her laughter and quickly changed the subject.

"Any exciting plans for the weekend?"

"Oh, you know. Going out with my…friend."

There was a heavy pause on the other end of the phone.

"A friend?"

"Yea. You know, going to the movies or something." Lizzie scratched her spoon along the rim of her ice cream container and bit her lip.

"Lizzie, I've never lied to you. I expect the same courtesy."

Lizzie snorted in derision at this. "Oh yea, Mr. Traveling Salesman?"

There was silence on the line for a moment and she could imagine him tilting his head and grinding his teeth and that way he does when he's frustrated.

"Well, I do sell my services to…clients. And I travel constantly."

"Mmm whatever you say, Dad." She murmured around a mouthful of ice cream.

"Don't try to distract me, Lizzie. What's his name?"

She sighed, admitting defeat. "Robby. But Dad, don't worry about it, okay? Pop met him. He likes him. In fact, I'm surprised he didn't tell you."
"I see," came the quiet reply. She could feel the tension radiating from her father though they were separated by hundreds – probably thousands of miles.

"Dad, what's wrong? You've gone quiet."

She heard him sigh and a slight rustling noise as if he was standing up and beginning to pace.

"Oh Lizzie, it's nothing. Sweetheart."

"Liar."

Another sigh.

"You realize you're the only person who can call me out on a lie right?"

Lizzie giggled around her ice cream. In a twisted sort of way, it was a rather high praise. Her dad was a criminal, he lied and cheated everyday. Yet she was the only person who could catch him out at it.

"Don't deflect, Dad. What's up?"

He seemed to pause and she imagined him taking a moment to gather his thoughts before taking a breath and beginning to speak.

"Sometimes I wish I could be there with you through all this stuff – meeting your first serious boyfriend, seeing you off for your first dance. I've missed so many milestones already. I've tried to be there. But I'm still missing so much."

"Dad, it's okay. I understand." Lizzie set her ice cream down on the coffee table, no longer in the mood for it.

"I know you do, Lizzie. And that's part of what makes you so remarkable. But sometimes I don't understand it myself."

Lizzie didn't know what to say to that. Her Dad sounded so upset and she hated that she couldn't just give him a hug to make it better.

"Well, I turn 16 in a couple weeks."

"I am well aware, yes. I've got it marked in my calendar – 'The day the sun first shined.'"

Lizzie giggled, shaking her head at her Dad's corny yet sweet antics.

"Anyway, I have an appointment scheduled at the DMV for a couple days after. I know you never miss my birthday but, well I'm worried about my parallel parking – it's stupid. I live in The-Middle-of-Nowhere-Nebraska. Why do I need to learn to parallel park anyway?" She checked herself, realizing she was babbling. "But yea, if you can stick around for a few days, I'd love it if you could help me practice and uh...could you take me to the DMV, maybe, the day of my test?"

It was so quiet, she almost thought the call had dropped until she heard a throat clearing.

"I would love nothing more in this world, Lizzie."

/
/
/
/
/
It was Christmas and the neighbor's pond had frozen over.
"C'mon Dad! Please! It'll be so much fun!"

"No, don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Your Pop and I will sit here and gossip about all your little boyfriends. It'll be a gas!"

Lizzie rolled her eyes, smacking him playfully on the arm.

"Not funny Dad." Lizzie looked over to Sam pleadingly. "Pop! Convince him to go!"

"Yea Ray, why don't you go ice skating with Lizzie?"

Ray glared at Sam across the kitchen table.

"Why don't you go with her, Samuel?" He growled back.

"Because I got a bum knee and Lizzie gave up asking me years ago." Sam smile shone with mirth at his friend's expense.

"Dad! Seriously, this is the first time you've been here for Christmas and the pond's been perfect for skating! Please!" Lizzie gave her best puppy dog eyes. Ray tried not to look at her, avoiding the eyes he knew she was giving him and that he never could resist. A small glance to see if she'd stopped was all it took. She hadn't stopped.

"Ah hell. Sam, do you have skates I can borrow?"

Sam laughed uproariously at his friend's predicament.

"No, but I imagine Dembe does. You can ask him if he has an old pair you can use."

Lizzie, Red, and Dembe sat on the little bench beside the pond, lacing up their skates. She was the first to finish and carefully stepped across the snow before gliding effortlessly onto the ice.

"Hurry up, guys!" She yelled, doing a twirl.

Red looked glumly at the pond and Dembe chuckled beside him.

"She's going to realize you can't skate sooner rather than later, Raymond. You may as well get it over with."

"Oh shut up, traitor."

Dembe laughed and stood up, making his way onto the ice and skating circles around Lizzie, making her laugh and chase after him.

Red sighed, a grin on his face at the sight of his Lizzie so happy. Most days he didn't feel like he deserved her, let alone deserved to see her smile. It was a gift and he never took them for granted. These visits with her meant more to him than anything in this world.

"Dad! Hurry up!"

Red groaned as he was broken out of his reverie. Well, might as well bite the bullet.

Standing up, he carefully waded through the snow until he was at the edge of the pond. Taking a fortifying breath, Red set a skate on the ice and — plonk!
Before he could even get the second skate onto the ice, his feet came out from underneath him.

Moaning in pain, he turned onto his back and stared up at the sky, clutching his injured elbow. That was going to bruise.

"Dad! Dad, are you alright?" He could hear Lizzie's panicked yelling over the distinctive ssk ssk of their skates as they glided near.

"I'm fine." He grumbled. "My pride however, is a bit bruised. And probably my elbow."

Lizzie went into a controlled fall and kneeled behind him. Staring at him, and assessing him for any injuries as best she could through his heavy winter layers, Lizzie finally decided that he would, in fact, be okay and began to giggle. The giggle soon turned to a shortle, then finally into a full blown belly laugh. At some point, Dembe had skated up behind her and began laughing as well, though he tried to hide it behind his gloved hand.

"Oh yes, everyone laugh at the wounded old man! Isn't it just grand!" Red huffed.

"I'm sorry, Dad! It's just..." Lizzie broke off as another round of giggles hit her. "Why didn't you tell me you couldn't skate?"

"I didn't think it'd be difficult, frankly." Red mumbled, his cheeks rosy and certainly not from the cold.

"The great Raymond Reddington, defeated by a pond." Dembe announced with mock grandeur.

"Shut up, Dembe."
Hey guys! I am so sorry! The previously posted chapter 10 is actually meant to be chapter 12. Bit of a copy and paste issue. Again, I apologize to anyone who already read that one. I suppose you guys got some spoilers! Here's the real chapter 10...

17 years old

"Sam! How is everything on the home front? Listen, I'm on my way to a meeting, I can't talk—"

"Get your ass here now, Red." Sam's gruff voice choked out over the phone's receiver. Red sat up in his seat in the back of the SUV.

"It's Lizzie, Red." Red waited for him to say something other than the obvious. "She's in the hospital. It's not lookin' too great."

The tic in Red's left cheek began going off like mad as he clenched his jaw, hanging up the phone without so much as a "goodbye."

"Dembe, take us back to the airport."

"But Raymond, we can't miss this—"

"Lizzie is in the hospital."

The sound of the tires squealing as Dembe made an illegal U-turn rent through the night air.

Sam was waiting for them on the curb outside of the Emergency entrance, his hands tucked into his jeans and his shoulders hunched against the cold.

"Tell me everything, Sam." Red asked as he and Dembe walked up.

"You ain't gonna like it, Red." Sam warned.

"What I would like is for you to quit stalling." It felt as though the tic in his left cheek had been going crazy ever since he'd gotten the call from Sam.

"Ah hell." Sam mumbled. "She met this kid – Damon, at that MMA club she joined. He's 19, maybe 20. Got an apartment in town, works at the Diner."

"The point, Sam." Red was getting frustrated though at least they had walked into the hospital and Sam was leading them to what he assumed was Lizzie's room.

"I never liked him. Useless little townie punk." Sam said, seeming to ignore him.

"Sam!" Red shouted brusquely, gaining the attention of some of the nurses.
"He beat the shit out of her, Red. From what the neighbors told police, it looked like she held her own — they saw him leaving his apartment building pretty bloodied up. But he is twice her size." Sam took a deep breath just as they reached the door to her room. As Red reached out to open the door, Sam put a hand on his forearm to stop him.

"He threw her down the stairs as she tried to get away, Red. She's in a coma. The little shit ran off." Sam said this as if spouting off a list of key facts. He looked down just in time to see Red's fists clench.

"Dembe."

"I will find him, Raymond." As Dembe rushed off, Red took a deep breath and opened the door, choking on a sob as he saw the state of his little girl.

"Oh Lizzie…" That boy didn't realize, but he was about to disappear.

Walking over to her bedside, Red sat and took her hand delicately in his, careful of the IV. Red knew the statistics. He knew the next few hours were crucial. It was increasingly less likely she'd wake up the longer she stayed asleep.

"You need to wake up, Sweetheart." He whispered, leaning forward to kiss the knuckles of the hand he held before looking over at Sam.

"Why the hell was I not informed of this new boyfriend, Sam?"

"I only found out about it a couple weeks ago, Red. She made it sound like they hadn't been dating long. I didn't think it was anything serious."

"I'd call this pretty fucking serious, Sam." Red growled. "You're supposed to protect her!" His voice rose with his ire. Sam looked away, wincing in shame and guilt. Red couldn't bring himself to give a damn.

Two hours later, Red got a call from Dembe.

"I found him, Raymond."

"Good. Text me the address and call Mr. Kaplan."

Red stood, picking up his fedora from where he'd placed it on the side of the bed, next to Lizzie's thigh.

"Red, don't do anything Lizzie wouldn't want."

With one last glance at Lizzie's battered face, Red walked out of the hospital room.

It was 4am. Sam lay in the corner, in one of those bulky hospital chairs that folds out into a "bed." Dembe was in another chair beside Lizzie's bed, staring at her with that intense look he gets that means a multitude of things. Red sat on the other side of Lizzie's bedside, dozing as he held her hand. They weren't supposed to all be in there. In fact, no one was supposed to be in there, it was well past visiting hours. But money did wonderful things. Red's lids were growing heavier and heavier when he felt a twitch. Sitting up from his slouched position, he was immediately alert.
Noticing the change in Red, Dembe also perked up.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart? Are you awake? Can you squeeze my hand for me?" Red and Dembe held their breath as they waited. When he felt the lightest pressure from her fingers, he grinned.

"That's it, Sweetheart! Can you open your eyes for me? C'mon, let me see those beautiful blues!" Red stood beside her, squeezing her hand in encouragement as he placed the other atop her head, petting her hair. He glanced behind him as he caught movement out of the corner of his eye to see Sam standing behind him, his hand resting on her calf.

"You can do it, Butterball." Sam's gruff voice was pure gravel with sleep.

"Maybe" She took a breath. "I don't want" Lizzie licked her lips slowly. "To see your ugly mugs."

All three men laughed, more from relief than her attempt at a joke. She was going to be alright.

/\/\/\/

It had been a week since the incident and she'd finally been allowed home yesterday— with strict rules to stay in bed for at least another week. Her broken leg didn't make moving easy anyway but she was getting restless. At the moment, she was playing cards with her dad, a pile of cards laying on the tray over her lap.

"Go fish." They'd played every other card game already. They were desperate.

Red shook his head, pursing his lips at the prospect of losing as he took another card from the deck. He was Raymond Reddington for Christ's sake yet he was being defeated by his daughter in a game meant for 5 years old. His enemies would never let him live this down. Lizzie probably wasn't going to let him live this down.

"So tell me Lizzie. You're turning 18 soon. Have you decided where you want to go for college? What you want to study?"

Lizzie swallowed, asking him if had any sevens. He didn't.

"Lizzie, did you hear me?"

"Uh yea. Yea, I've applied to a few places. Columbia, Duke, U Penn." Lizzie took a card from the pile.

"Trying to get out of the Mid West, are we?" Red asked with a brow raised, his lips quirking in amusement.

"Well, I think I've seen enough cows and dirt roads for a lifetime." She joked and he chuckled lightly.

"And what do you want to study?"

Lizzie reached for the glass of water on her bedside table. After taking a sip she licked her lips nervously. "Forensic Psychology."

Red stared, hoping he was successful at hiding his horror. From the way he looked down and away to avoid his gaze, he guessed he wasn't.

"I mean, you told me to run in the opposite direction when I was 14. To not be anything like you. I'm just doing what you told me to do." She mumbled, her cheeks flaming.
"I'm sorry Mr. Scott. I don't know what to tell ya. The boy's just disappeared. No trace of him. I'm sorry."

Lizzie and Red were both in her room — Lizzie in her bed and Red in a chair beside her—as they listened to Sam and the Sheriff talk downstairs. Lizzie's eyes searched Red's face as he resolutely avoided her gaze. When they heard the sound of the front door closing, Lizzie whispered with growing horror.

"Dad, look at me." Red refused, looking instead, out the window as the sun shone.

"Dad."

Red sighed, swinging his head towards her, his face an impenetrable mask.

"What have you done?"

"He hurt you." His voice was low as he spoke, as if this explained everything. "You could have died, Elizabeth.

"What have you done?" She repeated, her voice hoarse as her stomach roiled.

"I won't apologize."

Lizzie leaned over the side of her bed and vomited.
Chapter 11

18 years old

It had taken months for Red and Lizzie's relationship to mend. She hadn't completely refused to talk to him as she had when she first learned he was a criminal but she had been especially... cool towards him. He had missed her warmth and laughter when they spoke on the phone or when he and Dembe came to visit. He understood, however. It had been one thing to learn her father was a criminal, it was a completely new ball game to learn he was a killer. So Red exercised his infamous patience as he toed the line between trying to earn back her trust and convincing her how much of a very bad idea going into forensic psychology was. But his Lizzie was too stubborn and refused to listen to reason.

As he helped her pack her stuff to head off to college, he made one last ditch effort.

"Lizzie, what if one day you have to study me? I'm on the Most Wanted list, now. That'll make Thanksgiving rather awkward, don't you think Sweetheart? 'Oh hey dad, can you pass the stuffing? By the way, I heard about what you did in Sri Lanka.'"

"What did you do in Sri Lanka?"

"That's beside the point." His mouth turned into a small frown at having walked himself right into that one. Lifting her bunny up, he shook it slightly as if asking what she wanted to do with it.

"Put it in that box. I'll probably stuff it in the back of my closet but I want it just in case."

Red smiled at this, his eyes reflecting his fondness for her need to still have a stuffed animal to cuddle when in dire need. And with him as her father, that occurred much more often than he was comfortable with.

"But seriously Dad, stop. Can't you just... be happy for me? You're helping me pack to go to college. It's a big day! Can you just... not give me this lecture right now?"

As he watched her pick at the lint on her favorite sweater, Red frowned, realizing for the first time the hurtful effect his almost constant nagging on this issue has wrought.

"Of course, Sweetheart. I won't bring it up again. Scout's honor." Red put his fingers up in a mockery of a salute. Lizzie doubted very much that her dad was ever a scout. "And of course, I'm proud of you, Dear! My baby is going off to college! Columbia!" His voice turned jubilant, just like a proud father, as he walked around the bed to envelope her in a hug, which she enthusiastically returned, resting her head against his chest as she felt his fingers run through her hair.

"Don't ever doubt how proud I am of you, Lizzie. I've spent a large part of your life wishing I could give you the moon and the stars only to realize you're the damn sun."

Lizzie bit her lip as she teared up, sniffling slightly. "Inconsistencies in your astronomy, aside, that was the sweetest thing you've ever said, Dad." Lizzie said, pulling away slowly from their embrace to continue packing.

"Oh c'mon! Give your old man a break. If I had said that to a lady friend in a more... romantic setting, she would have been putty in my hands." Red smirked, hoping to get a rise out of her. It worked.
"Oh gross! Dad! Thanks for ruining it!" Lizzie shoved Red playfully on the shoulder, laughing as she shook her head. Red chuckled and they both went back to packing.

19 years old

It was two weeks until Christmas break during Lizzie's Sophomore year of college. Her phone began to ring just as she was unlocking the door to her dorm. Juggling the keys in one hand as she fished her phone out of the pocket of her book bag, Lizzie flipped on the light just as she flipped open her phone.

"Hello?"

"Lizzie, where are you, Sweetheart?"

"What do you mean, Dad? I'm at school. I just got back to my dorm." Lizzie dropped her book bag on the floor, kicked off her shoes, and flomped onto her bed.

"Oh good. Come outside, Dembe and I are waiting in the parking lot out front. I'll take you for coffee!"

Lizzie could tell something was off. His attempts to sound cheerful fell flat.

"Uh, yea. Okay. Let me just put my shoes back on."

Hanging up, she did just that, threw on her coat, and rushed down the stairs, heading out the front entrance she immediately spotted a Mercedes which she assumed was the new car of the week. Opening the back door, she climbed in.

"Hey Dad. What's up?" She leaned in for a quick hug before putting her seatbelt on, greeting her brother in the rear view mirror with a smile which he didn't return.

"Lizzie..." Red seemed unable to know where to start.

"Alright, I've learned not to like that face. That face says you're-not-going-to-like-what-you're-about-to-hear-and-so-should-not-listen-to-it-in-a-public-place-like-a-coffee-shop. Dembe, can we go to Morningside Park instead?"

Red pursed his lips as Dembe simply nodded and began to drive. They sat in an awkward, anticipatory silence as they drove the short distance to the park. Dembe let them off at the curb and murmured to Red that he'd keep the car running. Getting out, Lizzie wrapped her coat tighter around her as she chose of of the walking paths on a whim and began to walk, leaving Red to catch up.

"Alright, it's too cold for anyone to be out here to hear when I inevitably get upset at what you're about to tell me." She took a deep breath, allowing the frigid winter air to fill her lungs painfully. "Let's hear it."

Red was quiet for a moment before he finally seemed to gain the courage.

"Sam didn't want me to tell you this, but I thought you should be prepared for when you come home next week." He stopped, unable to continue as he clenched his jaw, looking into the distance at nothing in particular.
"What Dad? C'mon, don't make me pull it from you."

"He has cancer, Lizzie."

Lizzie stopped walking and it took a moment for Red to realize she was no longer beside him.

"What?" She asked. Red turned back around to face her just in time to see the horror growing on her face. "For how long? What kind? Oh God—"

"Lizzie, he's going to be fine. The doctors are optimistic that they caught it in time and I've ensured that he has the very best of care." Red walked back towards her, placing his hands on her forearms in comfort, moving them up and down in an effort to help keep her warm.

"He's going to be okay?"

"Yes. It's throat cancer, they already operated and removed a good bit of it. They're confident that with some treatment, the rest will be gone as well. He'll make it through this. He's a stubborn old jackass."

Lizzie nodded at this, trying to absorb this news as she bit her lip, her hand automatically going to her wrist to rub the scar only to realize it was covered with her gloves and coat.

"Okay… I um, I can talk to my professors. I can go home a bit early. Maybe I can work something out—"

"No Lizzie, Sweetheart that's why Sam didn't want me to tell you. He knew you'd pick up and go. You have to stay here and finish your finals."

"God Dad, Pop has cancer! I think this is a little more important!"

"He'll still be there when you come back in a week!"

Lizzie's jaw dropped in horror though it took Red a moment to realize what he'd said.

"No! Shit! I'm sorry, Lizzie. That didn't come out right. I just meant that Sam has already made it clear he wanted you to finish out the semester. So you have to do just that." Red placed his hand on her shoulder, squeezing slightly. "He's going to be alright. And when you get home, you can show off how well you did this semester. Okay?"

Lizzie wiped the tears from her cheeks as she nodded. "Yea. Fine." She mumbled. Red sighed, pulling her into a hug and kissing the top of her head.

"Wait! You mean he was already operated on and this is the first time I'm hearing about any of this?" She shouted in consternation as his words finally caught up with her. Red just chuckled in response.

"Come on, let's go get that coffee." He said, completely ignoring her.

"You guys are so going to pay for this." She murmured angrily.

"Hey Pop, how ya feeling?" Lizzie came into the living room where she found Sam stretched out on the la-z-boy, a quilt covering his legs. Sam smiled just before his body was wracked by coughs.

This was supposed to be him 'okay?' He looked like death! So weak and frail, his entire body
seemed completely exhausted after his coughing fit.

"It looks worse than it is, Butterball, I promise. I had a round of chemo this morning. Tends to drain me a bit."

"A bit?" She asked hoarsely.

"I promise, I'll be fine. The docs have said that it's shrinking. And when I've got an off-day from chemo, I feel real good. You'll see. I'm off tomorrow. I'll be so perky and annoying — asking you about your grades and your latest boy, you'll be wishing it were a chemo day."

Lizzie sobbed at this, her composure shattering. "Don't joke about that, Pop. You can't joke about this."

"Aw hell, Lizzie. I'll be fine."
Chapter 12

20 years old

"Lizzie! How are you, Sweetheart?" Red smiled into his scotch as he held the phone to his ear.

"Hi Dad. I'm alright. Listen, now's not a good time." Lizzie mumbled.

"But we talk at this time every day." Red's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I know, yea. It's just… something's come up."

"Lizzie? What's wrong?"

"What? Nothing. Nothing's wrong." She answered far too quickly. Red imagined he could hear the squeaking of her bed as she fidgeted uncomfortably. He began to pace in front of the mantel.

"Elizabeth, you're not the only one who finds it rather easy to catch the other out in a lie." Red replied, his voice turning stern. "Now, if you uh… if you have a boy over or something I could—"

"What? No! No Dad!" Lizzie sat up in bed, resting her forehead on the palm of her hand as her cheeks flamed. "It's just… something happened in class today and I'm trying to keep my head but I just… need a little time."

"What could possibly have upset you so much that you're unwilling to talk to me, Lizzie?"

"We had an assignment. We had to profile a criminal and present to the class." Lizzie sighed, rubbing her eyes. "One of my classmates chose you."

There was silence on the phone for awhile before Red downed the rest of his scotch and cleared his throat.

"Lizzie—"

"It's just, I've tried so hard to just ignore it. To try and separate the criminal from the father and then today, all of your crimes were on full display, right in front of me." Red clutched the phone, his knuckles going white as he heard her sniffle, trying to withhold tears.

"You're a monster." She choked on the words but felt they needed to be said. Red walked over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself a large measure before downing the entire thing, his face impassive to hide the pain.

"But you're also my dad. And when you're with me or talking on the phone with me, you're not… that. You're amazing and you're always there when I need you. But… Jesus dad, those are just the crimes the FBI knows about isn't it? There's probably more." Lizzie laughed bitterly.

"And the entire time this kid spoke; I was editing his profile in my head because he had it so wrong. So completely wrong." Red could hear the plastic crinkle as Lizzie took a deep swallow of water. "Because I know you. The fucking 'Concierge of Crime' is my father. What the hell am I doing here?"

"You're going to be better. You are better. You're there to rise above the past."

Lizzie snorted in anguish.
"Dad, you're my past, present, and future and it's not like you've stopped, like you're ever going to fucking stop."

"That's not true, Lizzie. That's simply not true. But what I'm trying to accomplish – it's a very long game, Sweetheart."

"It's not a game!" Lizzie screeched. There was a silence on the line as she tried to control her breathing. "I just… you're my dad, and I love you. But I can't talk to you right now."

The line went dead.

//////////

22 years old

Lizzie was just about to put the cap on her head when she heard a knock at her dorm door. Frowning, she walked over and opened it.

"Dad! Pop! Dembe! How did you guys get in here?" She asked, standing aside to let them in. Looking to her dad for an explanation, all he did was raise his brow.

"Ah, never mind. I don't want to know. Anyway! I'm so happy you guys are here!" Lizzie squealed and began making the rounds of her favorite men, enveloping them in hugs.

Red chuckled at her enthusiasm but returned her hug back just as tightly. "Of course we came! We wouldn't miss this for the world, Lizzie. Look at you! God, just yesterday you were throwing that stuffed rabbit of yours at me because I wouldn't let you have anymore ice cream." Red trailed off wistfully and Sam smacked him on the arm.

"That wasn't you, ya idjit. That was me. You ain't denied the girl a damn thing in her life." Lizzie and Dembe just shook their heads in mutual amusement as Red scowled at Sam. "But he's right, Lizzie. We wouldn't miss this for anything." Sam stated. "And look at you! Give us a twirl, girl! Look at that fancy gown."

Lizzie rolled her eyes but did as he asked. She knew damn well that the gown was rather frumpy. Graduation gowns weren't exactly the epitome of fashion.

"Wonderful! We should take pictures! How about in front of that lovely tree in the courtyard outside? Dembe, did you bring the camera?" Red swung around to look at Dembe and the poor man had to bite his lip to keep from smiling at Red's enthusiasm.

"Of course, Raymond."

"Good! Good." Red looked around at Lizzie as if asking if it'd be alright and she simply nodded, her eyes shining with fondness. "Well let's get going then!"

Red began to lead them all out the door.

"We have to be quick though! You guys need to find seats and I have to get in my spot for the processional."

"Yes, yes Lizzie. Don't be such a worry wart. We'll make it on time."

////////

"God, I can't believe my baby is graduating college… getting her own place…has a job already
lined up. I am just so damn proud of you, Beautiful. I'm positively bursting with it!"

Lizzie smiled shyly, looking down at her lap to hide her blush. "Thanks Dad."

Dembe had gone off to get the car and Sam had gone in search of a restroom so Red and Lizzie sat alone on a bench in one of the large courtyards on campus. Lizzie had taken off the stupid gown as quickly as possible and simply wore her white A-line dress that had been hidden underneath. Red wrapped his arms around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head as she leant into him.

"I'm serious, Lizzie. I know I had my reservations on your career choice at the beginning but I'm so proud of you. I love that you're so stubborn and driven to do your own thing. It's one of the things that make you the best thing since sliced bread."

Lizzie snorted in a very unladylike manner and pinched his side, setting him off into his own set of chuckles.

"Now Lizzie, I need to know. You'll be working for the police in that mobile psych unit or whatever. Does that mean you get to carry a firearm? If not, I've got a friend. I'm sure I can persuade him to get you a special license or something—"

"Dad, no."

"Lizzie, you're my daughter. I need to know you'll be safe. I know you're good with a weapon. I made sure of it. It'd be a waste for you not to!"

"Dad, you can't do that. You're the one who's always spouting off about my safety. I can't start calling in favors for me now. It'd look suspicious."

Red sighed, knowing she was right but hating it nonetheless.

"Your apartment, where did you say it was again? I really wish you'd let me pay to put you in a nice neighborhood – maybe a cute little brownstone—"

"Dad, it's fine. You already paid for my schooling. I've got a great job here, I can afford a decent apartment. Besides, I won't uh... I won't be living alone."

"I'm sorry, what was that? I could have sworn that you just said you weren't living alone. That's wonderful! Is it one of your little friends? What sort of job did she get here in New York?"

"Uh... it's not a 'she.'"

"What?"

"I'm moving in with my boyfriend." Lizzie words blurred together into one long word as she spoke.

"I'm sorry, I thought I just heard you say 'boyfriend' and 'moving in with' in the same sentence but I must be hearing wrong because this could not possibly be the first time I'm hearing about this." Red's voice had gone dangerously silky and low.

"Well, in my defense, I haven't told you about any of my boyfriends since you killed the one I told you about." Lizzie looked off into the distance, her lips pursed, frustrated that the mood had soured so quickly. "Not that I've had many since then, mind you."

"Lizzie, I'm sorry, Sweetheart." The guilt in her dad's voice had her immediately shaking her head
in regret.

"No, no Dad. I mean, yes, what you did was really messed up. Seriously. But he pushed me down a flight of stairs, Dad. That sort of thing creates some trust issues." Lizzie sighed. "However, I would be lying if I said that I'm anything other than afraid to tell you about my boyfriend because of what happened with Damon. So I need to set down some rules. Because I really like him and I know what you're like." Lizzie looked at her dad out the corner of her eye to gauge his reaction. He had his lips pulled into a frown and sighed sadly.

"Okay, I can understand that and try to respect it."

"See, I knew you'd say something like that."

"Like what?"

"Try. Which is why I'm not telling you his name. Because I want to prevent the urge to look into him."

"But Lizzie—"

"No 'but's' Dad. I know you're just looking out for me. But most dads don't perform background checks on their daughter's friends and boyfriends."

\\\\

Red, Sam, and Dembe climbed into the silver Mercedes and drove off towards the airport. Red had tried for a good hour to convince Lizzie to let them stay for a few days and help her move into her new apartment in hopes of seeing this mysterious boyfriend but she wasn't falling for it. Of course the only woman who didn't fall for his wit and charm was the only one hell bent on giving him a heart attack.

Red met Dembe's eyes in the rear view mirror.

"Dembe, Lizzie apparently has a rather serious boyfriend. So serious, in fact, that she's moving in with him."

"Ah that's why you wanted to help her move so bad." Sam cut in.

Pursed lips were the only sign that Red had heard Sam as he continued speaking to Dembe.

"Our man has made no mention of this. I want to know why.

Dembe's lip quirked up in a small smile. "Raymond, we hired him to look after her safety. A new boyfriend does not pertain to this."

"The hell it doesn't!"

"Wait, ya'll have got someone watching Lizzie? Aw hell. Wait 'til she hears about this one. Our kitten's gonna hack up a fur ball bigger than the state of Iowa." Sam grouched, leaning his head against the seatback.

Red barked out a laugh. "Let me deal with her, Sam. If she ever finds out."

"I'm not just gonna 'let you!' She ever comes to me about it, I'm squealing like a pig, you ass!"

Dembe chuckled from the driver's seat, shaking his head, never taking his eyes off the road.
"What's so funny?" Red asked, perplexed.

"Lizzie always says you two are like an old married couple. I don't know why it took me so long to see it."

He received two affronted looks and a silent car ride the rest of the way to the airport, in answer. That's okay. He liked the quiet.
Chapter 13

24 years old

Lizzie unlocked the door to her place and as she set her keys in their usual bowl on the hallway table, she noticed the lights were on. She hadn't turned the lights on. Spinning around, she let out a quiet gasp as she saw a figure sitting on the couch with their back to her. Taking a moment to breathe, she realized the person was wearing a fedora.

"Dad? What the hell are you doing here? You scared the hell out of me!"

Red stood up from the couch and turned to face her, grinning. Walking towards her, his arms open wide, he chuckled.

"Lizzie! It's so good to see you! Can't a father visit his daughter whenever he can?"

Red enfolded her in a strong hug before releasing her, guiding her to her own damn living room with a hand on the small of her back as if he owned the place. Well, okay, he owned part of it. Sort of. He was helping with the rent a bit. She and her boyfriend couldn't have afforded it on their own. And Red couldn't take no for an answer so she had finally caved and let him find her a cute little brownstone. She couldn't say that she regretted it. The place was amazing. Even if she had to fib to her boyfriend about the actual cost of the place. She was only glad that he wasn't there. She had strict no-meeting-the-boyfriend rules for Red to abide by.

"Not when it's midnight and she just got home from work and without giving fair warning. Wait – how do you have a key? I didn't give you a key."

Red waved her off, sitting back down on the couch and patting the cushion next to him in invitation.

"Bottom line, I've missed you Lizzie."

Just as Lizzie was about to give a retort, Dembe came out of her kitchen with the tub of ice cream she'd been saving for a dire situation.

"That's my Rocky Road!" She yelled, affronted. Dembe merely swallowed the rather large spoonful he'd taken and sat in the chair across from Red.

"You're such an ass," Lizzie mumbled, throwing herself onto her couch and causing it to bounce. She tried to hold back the giggle at the image of the great Raymond Reddington being thrown off balance by a bouncing couch cushion, really she did.

"Anyway, how was your day Lizzie?" Red ignored her giggling and resettled himself on the couch, bringing his knee up onto the cushion and turning so he faced her.

"Well, I talked down a suicide bomber and then my Dad showed up at my house unannounced so I'd say it's been pretty peachy." She was leaking with sarcasm.

Red's only answer for a few moments was to grind his teeth.

"And exactly how close were you to this suicide bomber when you 'talked them down?'" Lizzie snorted indignantly. "Well, it's not like I could talk him down with a bull horn, Dad."
There goes his twitchy cheek. "Are you sure this is the career for you Lizzie? I'm sure we could get you set up with a nice… normal psychology practice. We'll get you a lovely office building—"

"Dad. No, stop. I'm fine."

"Yes, but what if one day, you're not."

Lizzie placed her hand on his where it sat on the back of the couch and squeezed in comfort.

"I'll be fine. I promise. Besides, I could say the same to you."

Red merely pursed his lips. They both turned to look at Dembe as they heard him laugh around a spoonful. The last spoonful.

"You finished it?"

"What the hell is so funny?"

They had both yelled at the same time, causing Dembe to laugh more.

He pointed the spoon at Lizzie. "Yes." He pointed at Red with the spoon. "She's got you there."

"You owe me a new one, jerk."

Dembe grinned and shook his head.

25 years old

"Dad, listen, now's not a great time."

"Is that any way to answer the phone when your father calls? Honestly, Lizzie, it's like you—"

"It's really not a good time right now." She sounded anxious which caused Red to sit up in his seat in the back of the car of the week.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart?"

"Nothing."

"Are you in trouble? Is it something at work? Are you in the middle of catching one of my compatriots?"

"Ha. Very funny, Dad. And no. I'm not. And can you cool it with talking about that sort of thing over the phone?" Red could hear a door slam shut on the other end and waited patiently. "If you must know, I'm at the precinct."

"Ah I see. You're uncomfortable talking to your criminal father while surrounded by a bunch of police officers, am I right?" Red couldn't stop the pang of hurt that began to emanate from his chest though he knew that, logically, it truly was a bad place for them to chat.

"I mean… yea, Dad." Lizzie sighed before continuing in a whisper. "Your face hangs on the wall here. It's… I have to compartmentalize, Dad. I have to keep you totally separate from my job and I have to keep you separate from what you do." There was a pause and Red could easily imagine her putting to good use her nervous ticks – the way she rubs her scar and worries her bottom lip.
"Please understand, Dad. I love you. But I hate what you do."

Red crossed his legs, then uncrossed them, fidgeted in his seat, and then cleared his throat.

"I do, Lizzie. Trust me, Sweetheart, I do." After all, he hated himself most days. "Text me when you get home so I know it's safe to call, okay?"

"Yea, sure. Oh! I have something to tell you!"

"Oh?"

"Yea, but it can wait until later. I shouldn't get home too late tonight. Not that it matters to you—not sure what time zone you're in but I doubt you'll be sleeping. You never are."

They quickly said their goodbyes and hung up.

Not even a full second passed from the time she sent the text off to him to when her phone was ringing. Rolling her eyes, she clicked 'answer.'

"Hey Da—" She cut herself off with a yawn, making him laugh on the other end.

"Sorry, long day."

"It's okay Lizzie. Was it a bad one?"

"It could have been. But we ended it peacefully."

"Good. You know, I'm so proud of you. It seems anytime Sam and I talk, it's just to boast back and forth about your accomplishments."

Lizzie blushed as she toed her shoes off and flopped onto her couch.

"Thanks, Dad." She mumbled.

"Anyway, you mentioned having something to tell me…"

"Oh uh yea." Lizzie looked down at her left hand. "I'm engaged." She stated simply, turning the ring around on her finger.

She was met with silence.

"Dad?" Lizzie heard him exhale deeply then the faint clink as he set – what she assumed to be – his glass of scotch down on a table.

"Do I finally get to know his name, since he's apparently going to be my—" Red interrupted himself with a groan. "Oh dear god – my son-in-law?"

Lizzie giggled at her father's apparent alarm.

Red had gone out of his way to abide by Lizzie's boyfriend rules, even telling Dembe to omit their name and picture from any of the surveillance reports given to them by her watcher. So Dembe dutifully edited the reports before handing them off to Red and faithfully never told him the man's name.
"Yea, I guess you've earned some details. His name is Nick and uh… he's a surgical resident."

"Well Lizzie, you do pretty well for yourself."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Gee, thanks Dad."

"No but really, Sweetheart. I'm happy for you. I will pay for everything, of course."

"Dad —"

"Lizzie, I insist."

"Dad, you can't. I uh, I told him I want to elope. We're just saving up for the honeymoon."

"Why would you do that, Lizzie? That's nonsense! You deserve—"

"You couldn't come, Dad. My friends from work would be there… it'd be too risky. I don't want a big huge wedding if I can't have you there to walk me down the aisle." Lizzie had tried to keep the tears at bay as she spoke but could feel them sliding down her cheeks. Her body was quick to betray her with a small snibble too.

"Oh Lizzie." His heartbroken voice made her choke on a sob.

"It's okay, Dad. Really."

"No, Sweetheart. It's not okay." His voice sounded suspiciously watery. "It's not okay at all. I want to give you everything you ever wanted. I'm so sorry I'm the reason you can't have this."

"Dad, I came to terms with it a long time ago. Having you for a Dad has put a lot of limits on things for me that other people take for granted. Like talking to their dad openly at work, going on family vacations, or having him walk me down the aisle. It is okay, Dad." Lizzie laid back on the couch, covering herself with the fuzzy throw. "Because I could never ask for a better Dad."

There was a definite wetness to his laugh and she could hear a slight sniffle over the phone.

"Not even Sam?"

"He's my Pop. That's completely different. You're both completely irreplaceable."

"I love you, Lizzie."

"I love you too, Dad."

"At least let me pay for your honeymoon?"

Lizzie snorted. "We can discuss it later." The man just could not let some things go.
"Hello?" Lizzie answered her phone as she murmured her thanks to the barista and took her drink.

"Hello Elizabeth."

"Dembe! What's up?" She took a sip of her coffee, humming when it was still too hot.

"I cannot come to visit as I promised. Something has come up."

Lizzie paused in the middle of the sidewalk. "Is everything alright? Is Dad—"

"He is fine, Elizabeth. We're fine. I just…I have to visit someone."

Lizzie immediately knew something was up. Dembe always thought about what he was going to say before he said it. He was always succinct and never paused, never stuttered. She proceeded to walk the rest of the way to the precinct, though she slowed her gait.

"Fess up, Dembe. You're lying. Or hiding something. Who are you visiting? Who is more important than your sister?" She teased.

There was a pregnant pause before he finally spoke. "I do not wish to speak of this over the phone."

"Well too bad. Spill."

Dembe sighed. Lizzie could imagine him rubbing his hand over his bald head in frustration.

"I am going to visit my daughter. She isn't feeling well. She's got the flu, asked me to go see her."

Lizzie stopped in the middle of the sidewalk again before leaning against the nearest building, hoping it would hold her up. She wasn't sure how long she'd been silent but she supposed it was long enough for Dembe to begin calling her name over the line.

"You have a daughter and you didn't tell me? A daughter old enough to ask for you to visit? How old is she? Where does she live? Why the hell did I have to beat the fact that I'm an aunt out of you?" As she fired off questions, her voice became progressively louder until people began to look at her askance.

"This is why I did not wish to speak over the phone."

"Answer my questions Dembe."

"She is twelve. Her name is Isabella. She lives in New York with her mother."

Lizzie took a moment to digest the fact that her brother had a baby while a freshman at college. A baby. Her niece.

"And my last question? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're not going to like this."

"Tell me."

He paused again, gathering his thoughts. "Elizabeth, you must understand. You are a weakness for
Raymond and I. We will do anything to protect you. To keep our connection – especially Raymond's – to you, hidden. The same now applies to Isabella."

"How the hell does that translate to me not knowing about her?"

"Because you cannot deny that which you did not know existed."

Lizzie huffed and kicked the wall in frustration. "Spell it out for me, Dembe. I'm not understanding."

"Elizabeth, the more time that goes on, the more likely someone will find our connection to you. We do everything we can to protect you but you know as well as we do that Raymond is a dangerous man. That there are dangerous people who wish him harm. If they find out about you, Elizabeth, they will take you. They will torture you and send evidence to your father."

Lizzie bit her lip until she tasted blood as tears began to stream down her face. Her Dad, Pop, and Dembe had always shielded her from the realities of what Red and Dembe did. Even though she had learned in college about it, they had been so damn good at keeping her in a bubble that she had never thought about what it would mean for her. How could she have been so naïve?

She was sure that she was going to have a rather large freak out later about the idea of being tortured, but for now, she swallowed her tears and her chin jutted out in determination.

"Elizabeth, we will protect you. You are protected. I promise you."

"Ok, well this still doesn't explain why I didn't know about Isabella."

"If you were captured, Elizabeth, they would not just torture you to hurt your father. They will torture you for information. Information about his business. His weaknesses."

It finally clicked. She understood. He was just protecting his daughter. She could respect that. It hurt like hell, but she could respect it.

"Fine. I want to meet her."

"Elizabeth—"

"No! I know about her now. It's too late. I want to meet her."
unlikely that'd be.
"Maybe someday." Dembe finally answered.

\---

After a few hours together, Isabella had warmed up to her new aunt and they had gotten to know each other quite well. Halfway through the evening, Isabella's mom came home from running errands and after some quick hello's left the three of them to themselves in the living room.

It was getting late but Isabella refused to go get ready for bed until she obtained a promise from her aunt to visit again soon. Lizzie readily agreed.

Once Dembe had made sure Isabella was tucked in, he went to say goodbye to her mother before both he and Lizzie left to go to her place.

"Dembe, she's beautiful. I'm so happy for you." She grinned up at her brother as they walked to a busier street, where they could get a cab. Dembe nodded in acceptance, a grin of his own stretched across his face.

"I mean, I'm still pissed at you. I can't believe you have a daughter, living in the same city as me, but I never knew! But I get it. You need to protect her." Once again, Dembe merely nodded.

"Has Dad ever met her?"

"No. He cannot. It isn't safe. They believe I am the bodyguard of a very private, extremely wealthy business man and that I moonlight as his translator when necessary."

"Well… that's not wrong." They both chuckled darkly.

"You well know that your father speaks several languages and doesn't need me for that."

"Trust me, I know. I remember too many visits where you guys traded secrets right in front of me and I couldn't understand a damn thing. And I could barely pass my Spanish classes." She was only slightly bitter.

Dembe chuckled, prompting Lizzie to smack him on the arm lightly.

"So tell me, Elizabeth. How are you? You haven't called Raymond or I for a chat in a few weeks. We usually barely go a day without you speaking to at least one of us."

Lizzie winced, she'd been hoping she could avoid talking about her life right now.

"Yea, it's been a bit crazy with work and everything. I got that promotion. I think I'm now the resident bitch. Everyone calls me 'sir.'" Lizzie winced at her inadvertent new role at work. But she wouldn't change it. In her job, one little misstep – say the wrong thing to someone who's already on the edge and it could cost lives.

Dembe nodded thoughtfully before speaking. "And what does this 'everything' entail?"

Lizzie sighed, having really hoped he wouldn't pick up on that. She held up her empty hand and noticed Dembe's eyes widen. He was probably shocked he hadn't noticed before.

"I messed everything up, Dembe. Nick moved out a couple weeks ago."

"Elizabeth." The way he said her name sounded so sympathetic, she could barely stand it. "What
"I cheated on him. With a guy I recently met – a friend. Well, not-so-friend anymore. We're kind of dating." Lizzie groaned, running her fingers through her hair. "God, that sounds so awful. My fiancé calls everything off because I cheated and I stay with the guy I cheated with. It should have been a one-time thing but… I don't know."

"Do you love this new man?"

Lizzie snorted at this. "Dembe, I've only known him a couple months. I've only been…dating him for a couple weeks. It's a bit early for that." She bit her lip as she looked into the middle distance. "There's something about him though. Like everyday is an adventure. He just makes everything so fun and… light."

"If you like him, you should not feel guilty for staying with him."

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know, I think I mostly feel guilty about Nick. I loved him. I did. At some point, anyway. But then I didn't. Yet he still loved me. And I feel terrible for that."

Dembe wrapped an arm around her shoulders in comfort, which Lizzie eagerly soaked up, leaning against him as they walked.

"Do I get to know this new gentleman's name?"

"Promise not to tell Dad?"

"Of course." Dembe chuckled.

"Tom. His name is Tom."
Hey guys! I apologize that this is a rather short one but 1) I wanted to give you something to hold you over because 2) I'll be traveling for work this week so I won't be able to post until next weekend. Sorry!

"It is him, Raymond." Dembe stated as he sat at the small table in Red's jet.

"Are you sure?" Red asked, grinding his teeth.

Dembe passed the photographs he'd had taken over to the man in answer. The photos depicted Lizzie arm-in-arm with a tall, brunette man wearing glasses that did nothing to hide his large doe eyes.

"What are we going to do?"

Red was silent as he flicked through the photos, his eye began twitching when he came to a picture of the traitor kissing his daughter in the park.

"Nothing. We do nothing."

"Raymond—"

"No. You know what happened last time I interfered. We will watch him closely – watch them both closely. Have some of Baz's men put on a detail following Tom. They must be careful. We hired him for a reason. He's good. Very good, apparently since we're just now finding out." Red looked at Dembe angrily. He had trusted him to take care of Lizzie's surveillance.

Dembe pursed his lips, unwilling to back down. "His intelligence was good, same as always, Raymond. There was nothing in his reports to suggest that he was getting closer to her. Do not misplace your anger."

Red sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

"I know. I apologize. I'm more than angry, Dembe. I'm scared. I want — I need to just go get rid of the problem."

"Then why don't we?"

"Because he hasn't killed her. He's watching her, getting closer to her. There must be a reason. We have to find out that reason."

/\\\\\\

26 years old

"Lizzie! You know I love to hear from you but we just left you a couple hours ago. Our plane is
"about to take off, Sweetheart."

"No, I know. I'm sorry. I'll be fast, but I wanted to tell you something!"

"Okay, fire away, darling."

"Well uh, my boyfriend took me out to celebrate that he got a new job this evening once you left and well...he proposed. I'm getting married!"

Silence.

"Dad?"

Silence.

"Dad are you there?"

Red cleared his throat. "Yes Lizzie, I'm here. That's wonderful, Sweetheart! Truly." His faked enthusiasm fell flat even to his ears. It was best to make a hasty retreat. "Listen, my plane is taking off. I have to go, Lizzie. I love you." He hung up before she could reply and quickly threw his phone against the cabin wall, smashing it to bits.

"Raymond?" Dembe asked, staring down at the remains of Red's cell phone.

"He is dead. Lizzie's fiancé is dead."

27 years old

He wasn't dead. He was very much alive. Red stared down at the photos of his Lizzie, walking out of the courthouse, hand-in-hand with that disgusting little weasel, bile rose in his throat. Then he realized that his little girl's last name was now Keen. Elizabeth Keen. He had to swallow the vomit.

"How the hell did we not know about this? How the hell did this get past Baz's men?"

"It seemed to be a spur-of-the-moment thing, Raymond. I'm sorry." Dembe looked truly apologetic. He was just as angry as Red. They had let this situation go too far. There was no turning back now. Red's daughter, his little sister, was now married to the spineless traitor. And she had no idea who he really was.

Red stood from the table, swiping his arm across it, causing the photos to scatter and the tea-making paraphernalia to shatter against the floor.

"We've fucked up, Dembe. Royally. Our hands are tied. We need to find out who the bastard is working for. It's been over a year! How do we not know already?"

"We have seen no hints of communication between he and this mysterious employer. For all intents and purposes, he is Tom Keen, Raymond."

"No. There has to be a reason. Someone has sent him deep undercover. Why? Are they hoping to draw me out?"

"Raymond, have you not wondered that maybe, while watching her, he fell in love with her?"

Red's only response was a snort of disgust as he slowly walked around, picking up the photos he
had just scattered. Sorting them into a neat pile, he walked into the living room of their current hotel suite and calmly threw them into the fireplace. Taking the scotch he had left on the mantle, Red took a hefty swig. It was becoming increasingly apparent that no matter what he did to protect his daughter, he only seemed to hurt her more.
Chapter 16

28 years old

"You made it!" Lizzie squealed happily as she walked into the little hole-in-the-wall Chinese place that was their favorite meeting place.

"Of course I did! I wouldn't miss these dumplings! Oh! They're absolutely to die for!" Red stated exuberantly before shoving another one into his mouth.

Lizzie rolled her eyes, shaking her head in exasperation. "Gee, thanks Dad. I'm glad to know where I fall on the list of important things. Under dumplings."

Dembe chuckled as he stood so they could exchange a quick hug, before pulling a chair out for her to sit down. Just as she was about to do so, Red jumped out of his chair.

"I'm teasing! Don't you dare sit down without hugging your old man!" He shouted good naturedly, ensconcing her in one of his bear hugs. It only lasted a moment but she smiled a little brighter as she sat down, nonetheless.

"Seriously though, I'm really glad you guys were able to come. I have some news." She said, picking up her plate and beginning to pile food from the veritable buffet that sat on their table, and of course picking several dumplings.

"Oh dear god. Tell me you're not…" Red looked frantically at her stomach. "I'm not ready to be a grandpa, Lizzie. The increased security alone would—"

"No! Dad! I'm not pregnant, geez." Lizzie was quick to assuage his fears, having no plans of the sort anytime soon. If ever. "Wait. What the hell do you mean 'increased security?' Have you got people watching me?"

Damn him and his big mouth. He glanced over at Dembe to see him grinning around a spring roll. The bastard.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart. I know Dembe told you that we're keeping you safe when you discussed his daughter. How exactly did you think we were doing that?"

God dammit. He was right. She was an embarrassment to the police force. How the hell did she not connect those dots? It was like she was absolutely blind to everything that revolved around her or her dad.

"Son of a bitch."

"Lizzie—"

"Oh don't 'Lizzie' me. I just found out that my dad has super secret agent men following me around. It's gonna take me a moment to get used to this and not be royally pissed off, alright." She angrily stabbed some general Tso's and stuffed it into her mouth, earning a chuckle from Dembe and a pleasant smirk from Red.

"How long?"

"How long have we had someone watching over you?"
"No. How long until the apocalypse. Of course, how long have you had someone tailing me!"

"There's really no need to raise your voice, Lizzie."

"Answer the damn question then, Dad."

"Since you went away to college."

Lizzie stared at him, wide eyed. Looking over at Dembe for verification, he nodded.

Her chair squeaked loudly as she pushed away from the table, ignoring Red's shouts for her to come back. She needed to punch something and if she didn't leave now it was going to be her father's face instead of a heavy punching bag.

Unlocking her door, Lizzie threw her keys onto the hallway table. Sighing, she tugged the ponytail out of her hair and tried to fluff some life into the strands as she set her purse down and walked into her living room.

"Oh you have got to be kidding me. Out. Now. Get out. Tom will be home soon. He cannot find you here, and frankly, I don't want you here. I'm still royally pissed at you."

"I always said that Dembe would make a wonderful cab driver. He knows all the shortest routes. We had hoped to meet you at your door but when it seemed as if we beat you here, we just decided to make ourselves at home."

"You have got to be kidding me." She repeated.

Lizzie stood and walked towards her, his calm gaze holding her in place.

"Lizzie, I love you more than anything on this earth. I will do everything in my power to protect you. I'm sorry if you don't agree with the way that I do that, but I will never apologize for protecting you the only way I know how."

"How am I supposed to go on, without looking over my shoulder and wondering which person in the crowd is watching me?"

"The same way you always have. Just keep walking. Lizzie, they aren't malevolent. They're there for your protection. They are not there to harm you. Quite the opposite, actually."

Lizzie sighed and walked around Red to flop onto her couch. Red soon followed her, though he sat much more elegantly.

"I still want you to trust your instincts, Lizzie. If you ever get a bad vibe, you call me. Or you call this number. Memorize that. Burn it." Red handed her a scrap of paper. She glanced at it then looked over at him.

"And who will answer this phone?" She asked, waving the piece of paper slightly.

"The leader of the team who are covering you."

"Oh Jesus Christ." Lizzie groaned, throwing a hand over her eyes.

"Lizzie. Memorize it. Burn it." Red stated and when she removed her hand from her eyes, she looked over to see him with a lighter in his outstretched hand.
Oh. He wanted her to do that now. Taking the lighter, she stared at the page, memorizing the number. She closed her eyes and repeated it to herself – three times correctly, then three times backwards, then three time correctly again – before igniting the lighter and setting the little scrap on fire, watching disinterestedly as the ashes fell to her hard wood floor.

"I really can't believe this is my life."

They all basked in the silence for a few moments.

"Now, we didn't come here so that you could stomp out of the Chinese restaurant in a huff. You said you had news. Are you still willing to share?"

"Oh! Yea!" Lizzie immediately sat up, a grin spreading across her face, wiping away all of her previous ire. "I got into Quantico, Dad! I got in! I'm going to start training next month!"

It took a moment for the news to sink into the Concierge of Crime's brain. His daughter was going to be an FBI agent.

"Oh… wow. That's wonderful Lizzie."

"Gee Dad, don't sound so enthused."

"No, I'm sorry Lizzie. You're right. I'm just… worried."

"Why? Afraid I'm going to be assigned to the task force hunting you?"

"Well… yes." Red winced awkwardly as he crossed his legs. "But it's also not going to be easy for you, Sweetheart. The FBI are the agency looking for me. If you thought a kid profiling me in a class or seeing my face on posters at the precinct was bad, this will be a whole new level. You'll be profiling, yes?"

"Yea…" Lizzie answered.

"Well then, undoubtedly, my file will cross your desk, Sweetheart. And it has grown since you were in college."

Lizzie sighed, adjusting her position so that her back was against the arm of the couch so that she was facing her dad. "I know that Dad. I've thought about it, trust me. I can handle this. Frankly Dad, look at everything that has happened – everything that having you for a Dad has caused. And it's only served to make me stronger. And more of a stubborn mule."

She accomplished her aim, she made him chuckle. Though he winced at the thought of everything he's put her through, she was right. Lizzie had blossomed into a wonderful, stubborn woman. If, in some twisted way the adversity she'd faced because of who he was, was the cause of that in some small way, then so be it. He wouldn't change her for the world.

"Now! I need you to be happy for me because this is a huge deal!"

Red laughed loudly, throwing his head back before sliding across the couch and pulling her into a hug. "Of course I'm happy, Sweetheart. Have you told Sam or do I get that pleasure?"

Lizzie giggled as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "No I haven't told him, but you don't get to either. I want to tell him myself."
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Alright guys… I will no longer be mentioning her age anymore as we have finally reached the point of the time line that intersects with the show. Woohoo! I will be using lines from the show…I do not own them. These characters are not mine. Also, due to the AU nature and the alternate history, the timeline for this story is going to veer off course from the show… probably by a lot. The show starts taking place about 2 years after the last chapter.

Also, I wasn't planning on sending out this chapter so soon after chapter 16 but I wanted to hear your thoughts on how I've done with intermingling the show with the new time line. So please... REVIEW!

Red looked up at the camera, with a bored expression on his face, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"I said I'll help you find Zamani, and I will. But from this point forward, there's one very important rule... I speak only with Elizabeth Keen."

Ressler looked over at Cooper. "Who the hell's Elizabeth Keen?"

\\\\

"Oh, buddy." She grumbled sleepily.

"Seriously, dude?" Tom laughed, petting the dog and wrestling with him playfully.

Lizzie smiled as she looked over at her clock to see it blinking. Her eyes widened in panic.

"Babe, what time is it?"

"I don't know. What time you gotta be there?"

Lizzie grabbed his wrist and took a look at his watch. "Oh, crap."

"What's up?" Tom wiped the sleep from his eyes.

"Crap!" Lizzie threw herself out of bed and ran into the bathroom.

"What?"

"No! My first day!"

\\\\

"You took the dog out, right?" Lizzie asked as she spread peanut butter across her toast.
"I did. For the field trip... Air and Space or the D.C. Zoo?" Tom held up brochures for both.

"The zoo's gender neutral." Lizzie nodded at the brochure for the zoo as she took a bite of her meager breakfast.

"All right. Good thinkin'."

"We're out of milk." She grumbled good naturedly.

"Oop. Sorry." Tom gave her one of his boyish grins.

"Is this pee? I'm standing in pee, babe." She looked down at her foot in disgust.

"He's your dog, too."

"Yeah, thanks a lot. I'm gonna smell like a urinary tract infection on my first day!" She shouted as he started towards the hallway. Lizzie hopped on one foot as she took her socks off.

"Hey, don't forget we got the last adoption meeting today. One-thirty. You heard me, right? One-thirty." Tom shouted.

"Yep. One-thirty. Last meeting." She shouted back before taking the last bite of her toast. "I'm in the car. You got the keys?"

"Yeah, in my pocket." Lizzie yelled just before she heard the door slam closed. Almost immediately she heard her phone ring. Grabbing it out of her pocket, she smiled as she recognized the number.

"You know, for two men who are supposed to be on the run, you guys really call me at awkward __""

"Elizabeth." The way he said her name called her up short. Dembe was generally rather reserved but there was a certain tone he used that tended to sound like he was offering condolences at a funeral and always meant something bad.

"What's wrong?"

"Today. You do not know him."

"What?" Lizzie took a sip of her coffee, heading towards the door.

"You do not know him." Dembe hung up just as she opened the door. Staring at her phone in confusion, Lizzie shrugged it off and walked out, smiling as Tom plopped a kiss on her lips, having waited for her on the stoop.

/

Lizzie's eyes widened in shock as she looked up at the helicopter circling around her street. When the black SUV's pulled up onto the curb in front of her house, she felt Tom grab her hand.

"Agent Keen. Donald Ressler. Washington field office." Lizzie knew that she was an FBI agent but that didn't stop her from thinking that their tendency to go full cave man when introducing themselves was a bit ridiculous. Your name is not a full sentence. "I need you to come with me right away."

"Babe, I don't think I'm gonna need to take the car." Lizzie whispered, plopping the keys into
"Agent Keen. Am I getting that right?" AD Cooper smiled at her warmly.

"Yes, sir." She tried to sound confident, albeit a little giddy. On the inside she was freaking out. Oh god. It'd finally happened. He was caught. And on her first day. She was so going to have words with him.

"Harold Cooper. Assistant Director of Counterterrorism." He offered his hand for a shake.

"Yes, sir. I know who you are, sir." Lizzie laughed nervously.

"So, uh...can you tell us what's going on?"

"I wish I could. I can tell you that... I've been vetted by the agency like everyone else, you know, same background checks, psych profiles. I'm sure OPR's trolling my digital footprint right now, and I can tell you what they'll find." She knew exactly what they'd find. The benefits of having the Concierge of Crime as her father. Her entire history was one large alias. And he'd made sure that she remembered it in its entirety.

"What will they find?" Cooper leaned back in his chair, crossing his fingers over his stomach.

"Nothing. I have no history with Reddington." Lizzie surprised herself with her ability to lie while staring the AD of Counter freaking terrorism in the eye.

"They tell me today's your first day as a profiler."

"Yes, sir. I graduated Quantico last month."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." She was actually able to force a convincing smile. At least, she thought so.

"Do me a favor. Profile yourself."

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"Who are you? What is he looking for? Profile Elizabeth Keen."

"Oh. Okay." You can do this. You know your file like the back of your hand. Literally. You wrote it on the back of your hand once. You've got this. Lizzie gave herself a little pep talk. "Um, well, I was the head of the Police Mobile Emergency Psych Unit in New York. We worked murders, extortion—"

"Read your résumé." Cooper had the smile of a grandfather who asked you how you've been and then tunes out as soon as you begin speaking.

"Of course...My colleagues call me 'sir.' They think I'm... a bitch." Lizzie took a deep breath. She hated the next part of her file. It felt like a betrayal to both of her fathers. But she couldn't have a fake history without having a fake psych profile. She was a profiler for Christ's sake.

"Like most kids who raised themselves, I can display narcissistic behavior. I can be withdrawn, disconnected. Uh... I have a deep yearning to understand and relate to the criminal mind. I'm board certified in forensic psychology, and yet I operate under the delusion that I can rewrite my past by
having kids of my own." She gulped and started rubbing her scar as she remembered the appointment later that afternoon. She had the feeling she wasn't going to make it.

"Do you find it odd Reddington surrendered himself the day you started working as a profiler?"

"Yea, and I'm going to throttle him for it later. "I think that it suggests he was waiting for me."

"Why you? Specifically."

*Because I'm his daughter.* "Because I'm new and he thinks I can be easily manipulated. The man obviously doesn't know me very well."

\/\/\/\ 

Okay, don't panic. No recognition... oh for fuck's sake. She was going to kill Dembe. He couldn't have given her a little more of a hint when he called?

The bile rose in her throat as she walked over, watching as the box surrounding her father slowly retracted. It was physically painful to see her father shackled to a chair.

"Agent Keen, what a pleasure." The Concierge of Crime smiled at her but she could swear that she saw a little twinkle of her father in the corner of his eye.

"Well... I'm here."

"You got rid of your highlights." His eyes said 'Breathe. You're doing wonderfully.' "You look much less Baltimore. Do you get back home much?" He knew damn well she'd never lived in Baltimore. He was enjoying putting on a show for the FBI.

Lizzie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. He was just racking up the reasons why she was going to kick his ass in their next sparring session.

"Tell me about Zamani."

"I haven't been home in years." She knew he meant that literally. It'd been awhile since they'd all been back home in Nebraska. Red would always make sure Sam was flown to where Lizzie was so that they could all visit.

"Why involve me? I'm nobody. It's my first day. Nothin' special about me." Lizzie shrugged.

"Oh, I think you're very special." Lizzie had to look away as her eyes began to sting. If he wanted her to keep it together, he needed to stop insinuating... and being her dad while chained to a chair.

"Within the hour, Ranko Zamani will abduct the daughter of U.S. General Daniel Ryker. There'll be some kind of diversion, communications will be scrambled, then he'll grab the girl. He wants to be out of the country within 36 hours. If you don't move quickly, she will die. That's what I know." Lizzie shivered, she had never seen this mask before. At that moment, she knew she was looking at the concierge of crime.

She swallowed, sitting straight in her chair. "And how do you know this?"

"Because I'm the one who got him into the country."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

Reddington threw his head back and laughed. "No, of course not! I'm a criminal. Criminals are
notorious liars. Everything about me is a lie." You're my father. That's a fact. And you never lie to me. "But if anyone can give me a second chance, it's you. The two of us have... overcome so much." Her eyes screamed for him to stop. She prayed to whatever deity existed that there were no cameras with a view of her face.

"I mean, look at you. Abandoned by a father who was a career criminal, a mother who died of... weakness and shame." She was going to kill him. He was dead. He just didn't know it yet.

"And yet here you are, about to make a name for yourself, about to... capture Ranko Zamani. I'm gonna make you famous, Lizzy."
Lizzie strode into the containment room where Red sat chained to a chair, the box having retracted behind him just moments before.

"Where's the girl? It's been four hours. Your people haven't made any demands."

He looked up at her as if she had physically wounded him.

"My people? I told you Zamani would take the girl. I told you that's all I knew. This is in your hands now."

"I need your help with Zamani." She bit out, her anger boiling in her veins.

"How about a trade? You tell me and I'll tell you. Tell me about the scar on your palm. I've noticed how you stroke it." Her eyes blazed, she could feel her lips pursing. *You bastard.* He was testing her. In the middle of an FBI black site with cameras everywhere. He was testing how well she knew her fake history.

"There was a fire. I was fourteen."

Red smothered a smirk as he noticed that she'd unconsciously begun to stroke the scar.

"Someone tried to hurt you."

"Not exactly, no." He couldn't stop the smile now. That was rather close to the truth and a dark side of him couldn't help but be proud. The best lie is always the one closest to the truth.

"May I see it?" Lizzie hesitated before unfolding her fingers and showing him the scar that crawled up from her palm to her wrist.

"Is a child really what you want?"

"How on earth..." She was taken aback by the sudden conversation shift.

"But a baby won't fix what happened in the past."

"You lost the right to speak about parenthood when you abandoned your wife and daughter on Christmas Eve." She snapped, wanting to cut him as deeply as he had her. It worked. The Concierge of Crime mask was firmly in place.

"The girl. You won't find the girl until you learn to look at this differently."

"And how should I look at this?" She scoffed.

"Like a criminal. May come easier than you think. Shall I show you?" She scowled at him. Oh he was definitely getting it later. And by 'it' she meant a sharp object directly into his carotid.

\[//\\\\\\
They stood in the war room where all of the boards of pictures and attempts to connect the dots were displayed. The handcuffs around Red's wrists were a far sight better than being chained to a
"Well, at least you know what Zamani looks like." Red said, pointing to one of the pictures before laughing and moving to another photo. "Oh, my goodness! I haven't seen him in years. Very interesting fellow. Completely unrelated to this. You're pointing at the wrong guy here." He practically floated around the boards, taking in all of the information, shaking his head and pointing.

"Miroslav. They call him The Chemist. A highly regarded munitions expert. He left MIT to work for the Russian, Vor Usoyan. Last two years... very expensive freelancer."

He moved onto another board. "I don't know what the hell any of this is." He waved it off carelessly and moved on.

"Ooh, the German. A banker. Name's Reinhardt. He's most likely moving the money. What about the girl? What do you have on the girl and her father?" He looked over at Lizzie expectantly.

"Your 36-hour timeline would suggest a singular event. Something in D.C. I'm not sure how the girl fits."

"What about the Chemist?" He asked, clearly trying to lead her in a certain direction.

"Important...well paid... Whatever Zamani's planning is expensive. Some sort of attack?" Lizzie didn't want to admit it, but she was rather enjoying playing the game of wits with her dad.

He shook his head. "You're thinking like a cop. Cops are so objective. They're obligated to protocols. Make it personal."

"Okay, this is nonsense." Ressler cut in, clearly impatient.

Lizzie ignored him and tried to grasp the straw her dad was dangling in front of her. "Zamani's sick. CIA says he carries Nipah virus. Dying makes him dangerous."

"So what does he desperately want before he dies? And how does that relate to the little girl?"

"Her father, the General, spent time in Bosnia... supporting NATO troops in the Bihac Pocket region. Zamani's home. He bombed a chemical weapons facility... poisoning the village. It's about his family."

"They died, Zamani survived." Red nodded his head, clearly agreeing with her assessment.

"He wants revenge. He hired the Chemist to build a bomb, detonate it in Washington. He's gonna use Beth to settle the score... deliver the bomb."

She could swear she saw pride in his eyes.

Lizzie ignored her brother as he opened the door for her, choosing instead to storm through the hotel room in search of her father. She quickly found him sitting in the dining room, his legs crossed casually as he finished a crossword.

"Did you send him? Are you the one who did this?"

"Did what?" Red looked genuinely confused as he sat at the dinner table, where he had been attempting to complete a crossword.
"He was in my house! My husband is on a ventilator because Zamani came..."

"Calm down and tell me what happened." He tried to placate her, just like he used to do when she was little and in the middle of a tantrum.

"Don't play stupid. You're the only thing connecting us. He told me you're obsessed with me. Why the hell does he think that, Dad?" She spat the name like a curse. "You profess that you're staying away to keep me safe, yet you're apparently telling all your bad buddies about me!?!"

"Did he mention the girl or the bomb?" He asked as if he hadn't heard a word she'd said.

"We're not a team."

"Zamani."

"I'm not your partner. I'm your daughter."

"What did he say?"

"I don't know!" She finally screeched in frustration. "He said... he said something about casualties... and chemical agents, and... he talked about you. He even thanked me for getting rid of the Chemist."

"So the bomb's still in play." He placed the newspaper down on the table and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Why the hell was he in my house?! Tell me! You know him! Why is my husband dying in a hospital right now?!" She threw out her arm and tossed the lamp across the room, casting the room in shadow.

"The truth is, despite your feelings, your husband doesn't matter. Zamani did you a favor, Lizzie."

Lizzie walked up to him and slapped his cheek, causing his head to whip back from the force.

"Don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare. You just walked into the FBI and ruined everything. I was trying for normal. I could have had normal but you came in and wrecked it all!" She screamed, pacing the floor and finally allowed the tears to fall. "And do you have any idea what that was like? Fearing that they had found out, that the FBI had somehow found out what you are to me? Seeing you – seeing my father caged and chained like an animal! My first day. My very first day, I get your entire criminal history displayed out in front of me like a god damn story book! We had a deal!" She could see he opened his mouth to speak, a pained look on his face so continued over him. "I would never see this part of you. When you were with me, you were my dad – just my dad. The man who protected me, loved me, spoiled me. I was to never see the monster."

"Elizabeth—"

"You've ruined everything. And now my husband lays dying because of whatever stupid plan you've got going."

Lizzie stormed out, ignoring him as he called her name several times before she reached the door and slammed it shut behind her.

/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Later that night, once she had cooled down slightly, she called him.
"So here's how it's gonna work. You tell me how I find Zamani and make this right, or I wash my hands of you. Understand?"

"Yeah." He seemed to choke out the single word.

"But if you never speak to me again... you'll never know the truth about your husband."

"You know nothing about my husband." She hung up.

\\\

Lizzie watched a live video feed that one of the techies had set up for her of the meeting in the conference room. She saw Cooper at one end of the table and her father on the other with Ressler and a transcriptionist between them.

"Who is the Ukrainian?" Asked Cooper

"I'm not gonna tell you." Lizzie bit her lip at her father's blatant lack of deference. What was he playing at?

"You gave him a chemical weapon."

"He took it. That's the price of doing business, Harold, with certain people who can get certain things done. You know that. You never look at the larger picture. The bomb didn't detonate, the girl is safe, Zamani's dead. Frankly, I think this all went down rather swimmingly." Lizzie had never seen her father's charm mixed with the dangerous criminal before. She didn't like the combination.

"This was never about Zamani." Ressler spat. "You surrendered and infiltrated the FBI to get at our intelligence."

"Your intelligence?" Red scoffed. Clearly he didn't think much of the FBI.

"To get that weapon."

"I certainly don't want your intelligence, Agent Ressler. I'm quite happy with my own. I think it's more likely that I tried to help you in good faith and had to finish the job myself because... you couldn't."

"I think we're finished." Cooper went to stand when Red's words made him pause.

"Well, this was fun. Let's do it again. Really, let's do it again. Understand, Zamani was only the first." Red crossed his legs and leaned back as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"The first what?"

"Name. On the list."

"What list?"

"It's called The Blacklist. That sounds exciting. That's why we're all here, of course. My wish list. A list I've been cultivating for over twenty years. Politicians, mobsters, hackers... spies."

"We have our own list."

"Agent Ressler, please. We all know your Top Ten is little more than a publicity campaign. It's a
popularity contest at best. I'm talking about the criminals who matter. The ones you can't find because you don't even know they exist. Zamani was a small fish. I'm Ahab. And if you want the whales on my list, you have to play by my rules."

Lizzie had to admit. Her father had style.

"I never sleep in the same location for more than two nights in a row. I want a fully encrypted 8-millimeter tag embedded in my neck... not that garbage from AlphaChip you stuck in my shoulder. I want my own security. I've compiled a list of five acceptable applicants. Pick two. Whatever I tell you falls under an immunity package that I negotiate myself. And finally, most importantly, I speak only with Elizabeth Keen."

Lizzie laid her head on the desk at which she sat none too gently. How the hell could her father expect her to act as if they had no prior relationship? Especially when he was so blatant about his preference for her? How in the world was she going to explain that away?

\\\\

Later that night, Lizzie was ripping up the carpet in her dining room, having decided that attempting to remove her husband's blood stains was a lost cause. She soon noticed the cut out of a door once she revealed the hard wood and pried it open. Sitting on her heels, she took out a wooden box and opened it, fearful of what she may find.

\\\\

She walked through the holding facility. Not a prison. Her father was not in prison. She swallowed as the guard opened his cell door but couldn't hold back a tear as her father was revealed in a blue jumpsuit, opening his eyes as if he'd been napping or lost in thought.

"You've discovered something curious about your... husband, haven't you, Lizzie?"
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

So I'm hoping to write as little of each of the cases they have and keep to only what pertains to furthering why exactly Red has decided to turn himself in as well as playing with the new dynamic in Red and Lizzie's relationship. Because frankly, the story will never get finished if I delve too deeply into the people they're catching and everything that is going on in the background to further the smaller single-episode plot lines.

Also… the more I write, the more I realize exactly how much this is going to start veering off from the show's timeline, although I am going to stick to it as much as possible while I feel out how I want to write alongside the show and how that affects their relationship. I know some of my reviewers have expressed their hopes that Tom doesn't stay a part of the storyline as long as he has in the show and trust me, I don't want to keep him any longer than necessary.

Lizzie's scar itched with the urge to stroke it as she was hooked up to the polygraph. Taking a deep breath, Lizzie reminded herself to keep her cool, went through the steps of how to cheat a polygraph in her head. The irony of how useful the things her dads taught her over the years were to her while an FBI agent was not lost on her.

Step 1: Lie on one of the baseline questions.

Step 2: Breathe steadily. Calmly.

"Monday, 9:07 A.M. Examiner Hatch. Subject Elizabeth Scott Keen… Here we go. Before Monday of last week, did you have, or have you ever had, – personal contact with Raymond Reddington?"

"No." Lizzie looked straight ahead, almost thankful that she couldn't see the monitors.

"Did Reddington notify you before he surrendered himself to the FBI?"

"No." You got this Lizzie. Heart Steady. Breathe normally.

"Does Raymond Reddington know, or has he ever known, your husband?"

"No."

"And have you been truthful to the best of your knowledge?"

"Yes." Thank god it's finally over.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

"Have you ever been convicted of a crime?"
"Convicted? Not yet." Red gave his trademark smirk, his eyes portraying his boredom.

"Please answer "yes" or "no. Have you ever been convicted of a crime?"

"You're wasting valuable time."

"Does Elizabeth Keen know why you surrendered yourself?"

"Yes."

"Before Monday of last week, did you have, or have you ever had, personal contact with Elizabeth Keen?"

"No." Red didn't need to see the read outs to know his polygraph just spiked. He just hoped Lizzie never saw the read outs. She'd never let him live it down.

"He's lying." Ressler murmured from where he stood on the otherside of the one-way mirror.

"You're asking the wrong questions. I'm trying to help you with a matter of some urgency. It's your choice whether you listen to me or not, but there will be an incident at 11:00 this morning at the Decatur Industrial Park. I would send ambulances. We need to move quickly."

Lizzie sat beside Tom's bed side, her eyes going from watching his still figure to glancing at his hand. She knew that she should take it. She was his wife. But she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

"Those things I found under the floor, they're not yours, right? He put them there – the gun and the passports. Tell me he did this, and not – I wish you were here so you could explain yourself. I don't know what to do anymore – who to believe. My dad or my husband. How could anyone make that decision – especially considering who… what he is? Just please, wake up soon."

They all stood around the television in the war room as the news caster sped through the headlines. Cooper had ensured that the audio would be blared into the Box as well.

"60 people have been confirmed dead and dozens injured after a passenger train derailed this morning at the Decatur Industrial Park."

"Because of you." Cooper looked back at the monitor which showed Red chained to the chair inside of the box as he shut off the TV.

"Because you don't return my calls, Harold. If you want to save lives and catch the bad guys, pay attention."

"They're not going to make your deal." Cooper shook his head, clearly exasperated.

"That's unfortunate. The next name on my list is an absolute snake."

"The train. How did you know?"

"I know lots of things, Harold. But the train I didn't. I knew the time, the place, but the train was a big surprise."

"We've ruled out terrorism."
Red shook his head. Honestly, there were more criminals in the world than just terrorists. Apparently even the FBI got caught up in all the media hype. "Look at the list of casualties, Harold. You'll find some councilwoman from Albany. Apparently she's been tangling with some rather cunning, powerful people."

"You're saying the derailment was an assassination?"

"I'm not saying anything. Unless it's to Elizabeth Keen." Red smirked.

Lizzie walked into the room as the Box retracted behind her father and stood a few feet away from his chair, her feet planted shoulder width apart. God she hated heels.

"Tell me about the train wreck."

"If you had any idea how hard I've worked to keep you safe, Lizzie."

"My name's 'Liz,' not 'Lizzie.' To you, I'm 'agent Keen.' Now, I've heard all your demands, but I don't think you've heard mine, so let me tell you how this is gonna work. I ask the questions, you answer them. Screw with me, and I walk. Understood?"

Lizzie knew damn well they'd over been this already on the phone, but she felt it needed to be reiterated for her coworkers' benefit. Not to mention, she was still so damn angry and still hadn't figured out exactly who she was angry with. Maybe it was both her father and her husband. She was beginning to contemplate finding a deserted island and forming an all-female colony. Everyone says women are so dramatic but it appeared to her as if it were the men in her life causing all the drama.

"How is Tom?"

Lizzie's lips pursed. Did he have to do this now? When the entirety of the war room were watching them?

"They're never gonna give you immunity. Not a chance."

"Oh, I think they will."

"Tell me about the train wreck."

"What would you like to know?"

"Everything."

She wasn't sure why he apparently found that funny. She wanted to wipe the smirk right off his face.

Red rubbed his wrists as he gazed at the articles taped to the boards in the war room. It didn't matter how padded the handcuffs were, after a while they always began to chafe.

"The train accident was no accident. You know that. But what you don't know is the man behind it. Is quite prolific. He's responsible for a slew of other premeditated killings just like this one, disguised as accidents. Shall I go on? A building collapses in Moscow, a ferry capsizes on the Brahmaputra River. These are the events we've come to expect on the evening news. But in truth,
there's always more to the story. Hidden between the facts and figures, the victims and the heroes, there's always a murder. The work of a man who disguises his killings in the headlines of everyday tragedies.

"What proof do you have?" Red shook his head in wonder. Honestly, golden boy Ressler needed a massage...or something to release all that tension. His brow was constantly furrowed in constipation.

"His work is difficult to detect, but the victims are there. An appellate court judge in Ohio, a French diplomat who dies in a plane crash. Look closer. The pattern will emerge. Over the last seven years, more than 3,000 innocent civilians have died, all collateral victims as a result of this man's unique methods. In the 20–odd years I've been working my side of the tracks, I have not encountered another contractor who's had as significant an impact on the civilian population as he. He's rivaled only by governments and terrorist organizations. And you've never heard of him. I have it on good authority that his next contract will take him to New York. This is not an opportunity to ponder or deliberate, because once he's done, he's gone.

"This guy have a name?" Cooper spoke up.

"They call him 'The Freelancer.'"

"And how do we find him?"

Red tilted his head jauntily. "You don't find him. I do."

"What, are you two pen pals? You guys send each other, uh, coded e-mails?"

Red was getting rather annoyed with Ressler's archetypal FBI agent routine. "I don't have e-mail or a phone or an address. I prefer to handle my business face–to–face."

"You've met him." Cooper inquired.

"Once. I brokered a few jobs. He works through an intermediary. He might be for sale. Perhaps I should set a meeting."

Lizzie winced, glad no one was looking at her. Her dad had just gotten finished telling them how the Freelancer had killed thousands of civilians and in the same breath carelessly told them that he had brokered some of those jobs for the man.

"Maybe you should."

Red smiled over at Lizzie and walked over to her.

"You should come. Just the two of us – no wires, no clumsy agents in the bushes. You want me to make an introduction, you need to trust me with my source. Ah! What fun! It'll be like one of those vacations you never got to have." Lizzie's eyes narrowed in anger. They both knew damn well he was the reason she never went on vacations like a normal kid. "You'll need a dress."

"And where would this meeting be?" Cooper asked, causing Red to glance over at him, interrupting the staring war he'd been waging with Lizzie.

"Montreal."

"What do you know about the passports?" Lizzie whispered as she and Red walked down the hall, heading out of the Post Office.
"What passports?"

"You know what I'm talking about. As far as I'm concerned, you put them there."

"Put what, Lizzie?" Red looked over at her, genuinely confused.

"The box. The money and the gun. The passports." Lizzie looked back at the officer who was following behind them, realizing her voice had risen slightly with her ire.

Red's jaw worked, grinding his teeth together as they walked. "Who else have you told?" He finally asked.

"Nobody."

"Have you told Cooper?"

"No."

"If you go to the police, they'll file charges. If the gun's not registered, it's a felony. The passports are 25 years each. On the other hand, if you confront him, what good does that do? He'll deny everything, and you'll continue to doubt him. Either way, it's an impossible situation."

They had arrived in Montreal and were on their way to the restaurant. Lizzie grabbed Red's forearm just as he went to exit the taxi.

"Before we do this, let me be clear. I'm not here to socialize. I have no interest in having dinner with you, nor do we have the time. We meet your contact, we get the name of the Freelancer's next victim, and we go. Understood?"

"I agree with you completely. But it is a restaurant." Red looked down at his watch. "And it is dinnertime."

Lizzie rolled her eyes as he exited the car. Damn the man could be infuriating.

"So, what does this liaison look like?" She asked as they headed into the restaurant.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves." He said as they were led to their table. "Anyone asks, you're my girlfriend from Ann Arbor."

"Absolutely not." Lizzie gasped, absolutely appalled.

"Fine. You can be my daughter." Red smirked at her and she realized that she had fallen right into that one.

"Bonsoir." Their waiter greeted.

"What would you like to drink?" Red directed at Lizzie.

"I'll have wine. Chardonnay?" Lizzie looked up at the waiter.

"S'il vous plaît, pour madame, un cocktail de l'aviation." Lizzie rolled her eyes as the French rolled off her father's tongue as if it were his native tongue.
"Oh, this isn't what I ordered." Lizzie murmured as a martini glass with a delicious looking blue cocktail was sat in front of her.

"Merci." Red thanked the waiter. "To the future." He raised his glass to her before pointing at hers. "Aviation cocktail."

"Uh–huh?"

"It's from the '20s." He stated, taking a drink of his scotch.

"Hmm." Was her only response as she took a sip of the cocktail. Damn it. It was delicious.

"Tastes like spring, doesn't it? Tell me about your job. The profiling. I'm fascinated. How close to the truth do you think you can really get?"

Lizzie was confused. He knew damn well what she did. They had had enough conversations while she was in school where she expounded on everything she'd learned thus far. Then it clicked. They were being watched and he knew it.

"Where's your contact?" If they were being watched, then she certainly didn't want to get into anything resembling a personal topic.

"Tell me my profile."

"Why would I do that?" What the hell was he playing at?

"You've heard the debriefs. You've read Ressler's book reports. I so want to know how you see things."

Lizzie paused, took a deep breath. He was testing her. Again.

"You're a loner. You keep your distance. You travel freely through foreign lands. You're rootless. You're very comfortable here with your glass of Scotch, but you're just as comfortable sleeping in a cave with rebels or sharing dinner in some hole-in-the-wall noodle shop. Your closest friends are strangers." At this, they both shared a look. They both knew it wasn't true. He had Sam. He had her and Dembe. "You understand that tight bonds can make you vulnerable, so you're careful not to have any. And that's why you're so conflicted about me. You need me. And you hate that about yourself, because it makes you vulnerable."

Red's signature eye twitch was the only indicator of how unsettled her stellar assessment was.

"Tell me about your husband. Does he know you as well as you know him?"

Oh no. They were not going there. "Your contact is late."

"Does he know about you as a child?" Translation: Does he know I'm your father?

"It's been 35 minutes."

"Does he know about the fire?" His eyes glanced to her scarred wrist where it rested on the table.

"Why am I so important to you? Did you know my parents?" Red turned his head, shaking his head at her blatant act to try and throw off those who were watching them. "I asked you a question."
Red subtly got the waiter's attention and waited until he walked over "Oui, monsieur?"

"S'il vous plait, apportez–nous une bouteille quatre vingt deux chateau latour."

"Bonsoir."

"Are you gonna keep trying to impress me with your knowledge of French wine, or are you gonna answer my question?"

"What if I were to tell you. That all the things you've come to believe about yourself are a lie?" Red began to stand. "Please excuse me for a moment." He stated before disappearing to the back of the restaurant.

Lizzie sat there, paralyzed by confusion. She was beginning to wonder what, in their little game, was truth and what was a part of their elaborate lie.

//\\\\\n
"What the hell was that? You sold him out!" Lizzie yelled at Ressler outside of the restaurant.

"You let him go!" Ressler pointed angrily at her.

"I let him go?! Who notified RCMP?!"

"You compromised an asset. He's Number 4 on the Most Wanted List, Keen. What did you expect?! And now he's gone because of you!"

Lizzie scoffed. "We all know that's a popularity contest, Ressler." She accidently spewed her father's previous words at him.

Ressler opened the door to the surveillance van only to stop in shock at the sight of Red calmly sitting inside.

"Hey, there, guys." Red smiled at them.

"You planned this! You knew he would never show!" Ressler grabbed Red by the neck of his shirt, slamming his head against the side of the van.

"Ressler!" Lizzie gasped.

"Take a breath, agent Ressler. You think I'm gonna fly all the way to Montreal for the cheese cart? My contact was the first person I saw when I walked into the place. I told you he would help, and he did. The coat-check attendant. I left payment in my hat. In exchange, he left a photo of the assassin's next victim." Red took off his fedora with a flourish and took out a newspaper clipping with the picture of a woman in what looked to be her 50's.

"Floriana Campo. The human–rights activist?" Lizzie asked, recognizing the woman in the picture.

"There you have it – a solid lead delivered exactly as promised. Find Floriana Campo, you find the Freelancer. Not bad for a day's work. Let's celebrate. Hey, Donald. How 'bout that cheese cart?"

//\\\\\n
They met up with Floriano Campo on the bank of the Hudson River.

"Floriana Campo? Donald Ressler." Ressler greeted, flashing his badge.
"Elizabeth Keen. FBI." Lizzie stated, flashing her badge as well. "We need to have a word with you. We have reason to believe someone's planning an assassination attempt on your life. Tonight's fundraiser needs to be canceled."

"Oh, it can't be canceled. It's a donor event, and I have my own security." Floriana shook her head.

"It's too risky." Ressler stated, slightly impatient.

"We can't guarantee your safety." Lizzie attempted to persuade the woman.

Floriana smiled at them pleasantly. "Nobody can guarantee my safety. I have many enemies – traffickers, cartels."

"We know what they did to your husband, what you've gone through. Your work, it's been an inspiration. I wrote my senior thesis on your time in Kuala Lumpur. I was going through a very bad time. And in some ways, I think you helped me through it."

"Do you have children, agent Keen?"

"Uh, Elizabeth. And If all goes well –"

"There is no work more meaningful than being a mother. I didn't have kids of my own. This is my one regret. But these girls that I'm trying to protect, they are my family. Tonight is for them. I won't cancel."

"Look, we can't force you to accept our protection, but we need your help to find the man contracted to kill you. To identify him, to capture him, we need you to cooperate – you're our only link. Will you help us?"

They were back in the war room, discussing the next plan of action.

"She spent 15 years with the UN, stationed primarily in eastern Europe with small stints in north Africa In 2000, she helped pass the Trafficking Victims Protection Act. Since that time, her nonprofit has raised over $35 million in her campaign to eliminate human and sex trafficking around the globe. Three years ago, her husband was murdered by the Eberhardt Cartel."

"Eberhardt is the most ruthless human-trafficking cartel in Europe. Leaving a power vacuum. To this day, nobody knows who's actually running the outfit. What we do know is that he's merciless. Murdered rival cartel leaders to expand his reach. Survivors tell stories of torture and forced addiction. He killed Floriana Campo's husband, and he most likely hired The Freelancer to kill her." Ressler seamlessly picked up where Lizzie left off. "We're doing everything we can to disrupt The Freelancer's plan."

"We've changed schedules, travel routes." Lizzie cut in.

"And you've moved tomorrow night's event?" Cooper questioned.

"Yes, based on what we know about The Freelancer, he takes months to plan these attacks. If he had something planned for tomorrow, he's gonna need to pass through our security in order to pull it off."

"What good does that do if nobody knows what he looks like?"
Lizzie walked up to Red in the Box. A bit like Jack in the Box but if Red were to pop out, you'd probably receive a bit more than a fright. Except Lizzie. No matter what happened between them, she knew she was always the exception.

"I need your help. You said you've seen this guy once. We're compiling photos of the people who are scheduled to attend the event tomorrow, and —"

"Please understand I want more than anything to help you. It's the reason why I'm here. But I won't say another word until the terms of my deal are met. I'm so sorry to bother you with these trivial details, but it's a simple yes or no."

"You got your deal. Our turn now. Compiled a list of the attendees for tonight's event." Ressler stated as he walked into the room which held the Box, shaking the fist full of papers which Red assumed were his immunity deal as he stared at him through the glass.

"Is this really the right approach?" Red asked, looking over to Lizzie where she stood off to the side.

"Hey. I'm right here. Talk to me." Ressler stated angrily.

"Honestly, is this how the FBI does things-- comb through the invitation list? This guy didn't RSVP. I've seen the man. If he shows up tonight, if you're going to have any hope of identifying him, you need to put me in that room."

"So, you want to go to the party?"

"Oh, I thought you'd never ask." Red smiled brightly.

They walked through the parking garage and Red grinned as he saw Dembe and Luli standing by a couple of cars, waiting for them. They were his "new" security detail. Red greeted Dembe with a hug and a kiss. Lizzie figured that had been the first time they'd gone so long without seeing each other for some time. Lizzie was always intrigued by the relationship between her brother and her dad. There was always a familial dynamic but there was also a camaraderie that transcended a father-son relationship. She was only slightly jealous. Really.

"Dembe!" Red exclaimed before kissing Dembe on the cheek before smacking said cheek playfully as Dembe smiled brilliantly.

"Luli, my dear." Red murmured as he walked over to her, kissing her full on the mouth. Lizzie fought down the nausea as she swore she could see a bit of tongue. That was not something she ever needed to see. Ever.

"Raymond." Luli murmured in greeting as they mutually pulled away from the kiss.

"Watch yourself with her, Donald. She hates men, and cops most of all." Red teased as he pointed to Luli before directing said finger to the woman standing next to one of their black sedans. "You, I don't know."

"Meera Malik."
"You look like the CIA."

"Oh, yeah? What's the CIA look like?"

"Attractive but treacherous."

Meera smirked. "I guess we'll find out."

Red shook his head in amusement. "This is gonna be a gas."

\[\text{\\\\\\\\} \]

"It's him." Red said, staring across the fountain.

"What?" Lizzie questioning, looking around them.

Red pointedly nodded his head in the man's direction. "The waiter. The Freelancer."

\[\text{\\\\\\\\} \]

Liz escorted Floriana down the hallway. "Sweep the floor. Lock it down." She spoke to a nameless agent.

"We're all clear inside."

Liz nodded her head as she ushered Floriana into her hotel room.

\[\text{\\\\\\\\} \]

"He asked you a question." Meera hovered over the Freelancer where he slouched in the fold out chair.

"I can't." He practically whimpered in pain.

"Last time. Who hired you?" Meera asked, crouching down in front of him and grasping his leg right below his compound fracture.

"No!" The Freelancer grit his teeth in pain.

"My friend here is with the FBI. I'm from the CIA – you know the difference, don't you? Now, we haven't got much time because you have a compound fracture and you're bleeding internally, so we're going to expedite things." At this, Meera tapped his bone exposed bone.

The Freelancer grimaced as the small tap seemed to jar his entire leg. "I can't."

"A name." Ressler barked.

Just as the Freelancer went to shake his head, Meera pushed down on the exposed bone.

"Reddington! He hired me." He screeched in agony.

\[\text{\\\\\\\\} \]

"Thank you. For everything." Floriana said just as Lizzie's phone began to ring.

"Don't leave your suite." She warned, before exiting the room to answer the call.
"It was Reddington. He hired The Freelancer." Ressler's voice came over the speaker.

"What? No. How could he?" Lizzie's mind began to race.

"The coat-check attendant. Think about it. The coat check didn't leave the picture in Red's hat. Red left it for him. He was signaling the hit."

"Why?" Lizzie asked, desperately hoping it wasn't true.

"Couldn't get close enough to do it himself. Pointing out The Freelancer was a diversion. He wanted us to empty that party. He wanted to get her alone."

\///\///

"How did you get in here? Where's my security?" Floriana asked, looking around the room as if her security were going to just jump out and shout 'Surprise!'

"Your security is…occupied." Red stated gravely.

"This is because of you. The threats, the FBI." It seemed as though Floriana had finally begun to connect the dots.

"The FBI works for me now."

"Why are you doing this, Raymond? I offered to make you a partner. My people came to you about the shipping routes. You turned us down."

"I've never liked you."

"You never liked me because you're a wanted man living in the shadows, and I am not. I run my business, and I'm being wined and dined by the city's elite." Floriana flourished her hand as she spoke as if she were some 1940s dame.

"I don't know how you do it – the duplicity. How does the devil in you contend with the angel? I would have kicked her out years ago." Red never deluded himself to think he was anything but a monster. He knew what he was. But he had deluded himself into thinking he could keep the true ugliness hidden from Lizzie.

"You can learn a thing or two from me, Raymond. I'm going to kiss that sweet, young FBI agent on the cheek and say, 'good night,' and then go down to docks and pick up my next shipment of girls."

At that moment, Lizzie burst into the hotel room.

"Oh, Elizabeth! Thank God you're here! This is the man. He's the one who wants me dead."

Floriana pointed dramatically at Red, quickly switching to the role of a kind-hearted woman in distress.

"You hired The Freelancer." It was meant as a question but came out as more of a statement as Lizzie looked at her father.

"To do what? Was it the champagne? What's the headline gonna read? "Italian dog born with two heads. No? How about 'humanitarian, exposed as fraud, commits suicide'?"

Floriana clutched her chest in horror. "What have you done?"

"I didn't do anything. I think the assassin may have slipped her a lethal cocktail of the same
barbiturates she uses to drug her children."

"What are you saying?"

"She's not the woman you think she is, Lizzie."

"You're a liar." Floriana's words whipped out of her mouth.

"Who's lying, Floriana?"

"Shut up, Raymond!"

Lizzie's eyes widened in shock at her idol's slip of the tongue.

"Ooooh, that was a mistake." Red chuckled.

"You know him?" Lizzie questioned Floriana.

"Everybody knows this son of a bitch!" Ah there was Floriana's true ugliness. Floriana's breath became labored as she collapsed to the ground.

"I need a medic!" Lizzie shouted out to anyone who could hear in the hallway.

"You don't need a medic. I have the antidote right here." Red tapped his jacket pocket.

"Give it to me!" Lizzie lifted her hand up in a 'gimme' motion from where she crouched next to Floriana on the floor.

"I'd be happy to, as soon as she admits the truth."

"Give it to me now! She's not breathing!" She was not going to let her father kill a woman right in front of her.

"Tell her the truth, Floriana."

"This will help you breathe." Lizzie stated, grabbing a pen from the desk before stabbing Floriana in the trachea with it.

"Madam Campo doesn't free children from slavery. She imprisons them."

"I don't believe you." Lizzie replied a she unscrewed the top of the pen and removing the ink well, hearing the small hiss as air flowed freely through the pen.

"Don't be so naive. Floriana Campo is the largest distributor of enslaved children in the eastern hemisphere. Her Foundation is a front to launder the profits of the Eberhardt cartel, which she runs. She's been eliminating the competition. Good God. The woman had her own husband murdered."

"Give me the antidote."

"All you have to do is tell her, Floriana. A simple nod will suffice."

Floriana nodded frantically and Red handed Lizzie the syringe which Lizzie then plunged into the side of the woman's arm. Nothing happened.

"What's happening?" Lizzie asked, wondering why Floriana's breathing didn't seem to be improving.
"Looks like she's dying. Definitely dying." Lizzie shivered at her father's nonchalance.

Red had completely given up hiding the monster from her.

\/

Lizzie sat on a bench in the park next to the Hudson. She could hear him approach and sit on the other side, facing the river but held herself still.


Lizzie completely ignored his baiting, unsure why he was doing it when they weren't at the Post Office. He didn't need to keep up the act. "What would you have done if the antidote had worked on time? It would have exposed you as our informant."

"There was no antidote."

Lizzie resisted whipping her head around and staring at him in horror and instead swallowed before plowing on with the conversation.

"We've confirmed that Floriana Campo was running a fortune through the Kowloon Bank. You were right. The woman ran the Eberhardt cartel. Based on the information you gave us, we were able to intercept the shipment and rescue the girls."

"She preyed on the weak and the innocent while dressed in the wings of a savior. I detested everything about her."

"I had no idea. I mean, I just I should have known."

"We never really know anyone, do we?" He murmured thoughtfully. "I read that thesis you wrote about her. It was really quite good, Lizzie. You're a wonderful writer. I'm sorry that she wasn't who you thought she was." He received no response except for the sight of Lizzie biting her lip and rubbing her scar. Frankly, Lizzie was getting whiplash from how quickly Red went from cold-blooded criminal to loving father. She was pretty sure she was going insane from it all.

At her continued silence, he turned the conversation to a different track. "What are you gonna do, Lizzie? About this situation with Tom? It seems you have two options. Either you turn him in or confront him. Or perhaps there's a third option —" His voice trailed off as he got up and walked away, palming his fedora onto his head.

\/

Liz awoke from a dream flashing back to Tom being attacked by Zamani. Unable to stand being in the bed with him, her mind whirling, she heads downstairs but before she could get halfway down them, she collapses onto a step, her legs folding as she sits down. At that moment in time, she doesn't know what to do. She doesn't know if she should stand or just continue to sit there. She doesn't know what to do about her father. She doesn't know what to do about her husband.

After some time, Lizzie had an urge – an absolute need to learn something, anything, that can help her make a decision. Standing up, she rushes into the kitchen where she has Tom's bloody clothes in a plastic bag. Strangely unaffected by the sight of her husband's blood staining his clothing, she searches them for answers. In Tom's jeans, there is a small envelope labeled "Background Profile Elizabeth Keen." Inside is a flash drive which she inserts into her computer. A video of Tom sitting in an office, the sign for the adoption agency behind him as he smiles bashfully appears on screen and she hears a female voice off camera ask Tom, "Tell us a little about Elizabeth."
Tom let out a little laugh. "Elizabeth? Uh, to me, she's always just been Lizzie. Uh, I remember the first time she brought up adoption before we ever thought about coming to see you guys. She was so nervous. She tried to cook dinner, which was a complete disaster, because she's, uh, not the best cook. I think it was around my third bite of cold spaghetti, she just started to cry. I, uh I don't know. I think she was afraid of disappointing me. But she looked me in the eye, a–and she told me the truth that she didn't want to have a biological child, not with so many children in need of a loving family. She wanted to adopt. It was important to her. In that moment, I just I–I don't think I've ever loved her more. She's… she's gonna be a great mom. I mean, she really is. I know that."

Removing the flash drive, Lizzie sits there a moment, tears streaming down her face as plans begin to form in her head. She knows what she's going to do. She's going to go with option three.
Lizzie couldn't sleep. This was becoming a more regular occurrence since her father came to town to hunt down bad guys with her and started insinuating that her husband may be one of them.

To be fair, she did find a box full of passports, money, and a 9 mm. That generally isn't a keepsake kept by an innocent man. Which is why this morning, Lizzie had rolled up the rug, removed the box from its hiding place and took the gun out. Grabbing a few old phone books and a bucket, Lizzie walked out to their little backyard and placed the books at the bottom of the bucket before filling it with water. She then placed the gun right up against the phone book, grabbed a open bag of fertilizer and placed it over the muzzle then waited. It was trash day. She waited until the garbage men were right next door and as their noise reached its crescendo, she pulled the trigger.

Later that morning, Red sat in the park, playing chess alone, or seemingly alone. His eyes glanced to Dembe who sat at a bench not too far from him then at Luli who stood in the shade of a tree as he innocuously took off his fedora and placed it on the table next to his chess board.

Within moments, a man in a suit almost as nice as Red's own walked over. "From Wujing."

"Good God. Not here." Red made a shooing motion and the gentleman awkwardly placed the envelope he held back into his jacket pocket. "The gentleman I usually contract with is unavailable – stung by a manta ray off the barrier reef in Belize. I have another tech in mind."

"This needs to be done quickly. Today?"

Red nodded as he gazed at his board, pondering his next move. "Speak with Luli about the replacement I'm offering. Conduct your due diligence. If things are in order, we can proceed as discussed." He nodded again with finality. When the man didn't leave, he looked at him over the rim of his sunglasses. "I prefer to play with myself in private."

Tom and Lizzie sat at the breakfast table. Lizzie had tuned Tom out a few minutes into his talk as she warmed her hands around her mug of coffee.

"Are you okay?" Apparently Tom had finally caught on that she wasn't listening.

"Yeah … sorry. I'm just a little distracted." Lizzie gave a small smile.

"No, that's – that's all right. I'm sitting here talking about what happened to me like it only happened to me." Tom took her hand where she rested it on the table. She immediately had to tamp down the urge to remove it. "But it happened to us both. It's just a little weird to be home because … Lizzie, a man came into our home."

"I know. I'm sorry. I wish I could tell you more. I want to tell you more." Her regret was sincere, at least. She hated that her home had been violated.

"So, tell me something. Who was he?"

"He's gone. He was killed."
"So ... it's over?"

Was he disappointed? He seemed a little disappointed. "Yes."

"Look, I love you."

Just before she could respond, the doorbell rang. Saved by the bell. "That's Ellie." She said, beginning to stand.

Tom grabbed her hand again. "I just hate that there are things you have to hide from me."

"Good morning! Hope you're hungry. I'm making breakfast." Ellie said playfully, having let herself in and placed groceries on the counter.

"Oh, you don't have to do that." Lizzie smiled brightly up at Ellie, grateful for the distraction.

"Are you kidding? A good omelet has healing powers. Bruce and Melissa are bringing over dinner tonight." Ellie was apparently very good at weaseling her way into playing host in someone else's home when she felt it necessary.

"That's incredibly cool of you." Lizzie said, coming around the kitchen counter to peak into the grocery bag.

"Hey, friends don't let friends starve when they've been stabbed by violent psychopaths. How's he doing?"

"I'm sitting right here." Tom waved his hand as if to bring attention to himself.

"I'm not asking you. You'll say fine, because that's what you do. You're a good actor. Karen's covering my classes. We're gonna eat and then head over to physical therapy."

Lizzie was frozen for a moment as a terrible thought crossed her mind. He's a good actor. "I got to run. Ellie, we owe you." She hoped that she had recovered quickly.

"So true." Ellie pointed some celery in Lizzie's direction.

"You know I wouldn't go if I didn't have to." Lizzie winced sympathetically at Tom. He wasn't the only one who was a good actor.

"Look, whatever they pulled you into, the sooner you get it over with, the sooner we get our life back."

"Okay." Lizzie kissed him on the cheek and backed away, heading towards the hallway.

"Bye!" Tom called after her.

After grabbing her purse, Lizzie walked out to her car, unaware of the man standing on the sidewalk eating an apple.

Lizzie walked up to the counter in the ballistics department and handed over the Ziploc bag containing the results of her early morning experiment.

"Slug and casing from a 9-millimeter. Can you run these and see if they match any crimes in our system?"
The Tech took the bag, nodding his head yes.

Lizzie rolled her eyes as she walked into her father's choice of meeting place. He always did love a good hat.

As the door chimed behind her, Lizzie looked up to see Red trying hats, the owner of the establishment standing patiently beside him.

"An opportunity has come our way. Yesterday, the Chinese killed a C.I.A. agent in Shanghai. They took his computer, which they thought could decode a message they intercepted. It couldn't. They've asked me to help." Lizzie motioned to the dark-skinned man behind the counter, a question written across her face. "Oh, Rodrick is a dear old friend."

Lizzie nodded absentmindedly before his speech finally seemed to catch up to her. "I'm sorry. You're decoding C.I.A. messages on behalf of the Chinese?"

"Now, you see, you make it sound like treason. So black and white. It's not. It's green." Red waved around the hat in his hand as he spoke. "The fact is, American secrets are for sale by an assortment of reputable vendors, myself included. If I don't do this, someone else will. The man who's paying me is called Wujing. Perhaps you've heard of him. Formerly, he worked for the Ministry of State Security. He's not officially sanctioned by the Chinese. But unofficially, he's contracted to take out rival agents – American, British. The message likely contains the name of another agent."

"Do you expect me to believe that – a secret meeting with the mysterious Wujing?" Lizzie placed her hands in her jacket pockets, rocking onto the balls of her feet.

"Intriguing, isn't it?"

"He's a myth."

"That's what they said about Deep Throat … and the G-Spot." Lizzie looked at her father, appalled.

"You can never say anything like that in my presence again. Ever."

Red gave her a wan smile and continued. "I assure you Wujing is quite real, and he's hired me. Now you have the chance to catch him. I've already forwarded them your cover."

"What? What cover?"

"Carolyn Givins, PhD in Applied Physics from M.I.T. I've told them you're my new encryption specialist."

"You're asking me to betray the life of an American agent." Lizzie's lips pursed, feeling as if she was being manipulated into something.

"Listen, this is a guy who the intelligence community has been talking about for decades as if he were a figment. You don't even know if he's real or not. Well, he is real – very. And I'm giving you the opportunity to grab him. Now, the good news is he's not even in China. He's right here in your own backyard. If we play our cards right, I can still make Lisbon by breakfast." Red then looked over at the owner of the store to gain his attention. "Rodrick, both." He said, pointing to both of the fedoras that sat on the counter.
"Okay. Say I do this. What's in it for me?" Lizzie asked as they settled into the back seat of her father's car.

"Look at you, camel trading like a Bedouin." It was starting to get ridiculous, the things that made Red proud of her.

"If I'm gonna help you, I want something in return."

"Such as?" He couldn't help but look at her as his interest piqued.

"The truth. I want to know …why now."

He seemed to contemplate this for a moment before nodding. "Well, then, we need to move quickly. Things are already in play."

"Three minutes till the meeting, sir." Aram announced, directing the statement towards Ressler from where he sat in front of the computer screens, situated inside of a closed down café.

Ressler looked at his watch. "Where the hell is Reddington? He's late. He's gonna blow this whole damn thing."

"Do you smoke?" Meera asked Lizzie, standing next to where Lizzie sat in one of the uncomfortable café chairs.

"No." Lizzie answered in mild confusion.

"Well, you do now. Or at least you're trying to quit. This is C.I.A. equipment." She held up a clear patch. "It's brand-new. It looks like a nicotine patch, but it's a very sensitive transmitter. It has a range of 300 yards, and it's a plastic polymer, which means it won't show up if it gets wanded."

"And if you're wrong?"

"I'm not wrong." Meera stated as she held the neck of Lizzie's shirt out of the way so that she could place the patch on Lizzie's collar bone.

Ressler paced the small area. "Where the hell is he? He was supposed to be here an hour –"

"What are we waiting for?" Red seemed to simply materialize in the doorway that lead to the kitchens.

"Right this way." The man from the park, Wujing's assistant, announced, sweeping his arm out to the side as he stood beside the doorway, as if to say 'after you.' Lizzie looked around them. According to Red, this place used to be a radio station before Wujing – or rather – the Chinese government bought it out three years ago.

They were led into a back room that seemed to double as a security room.

"Sorry, sir. Protocol." The gentleman stated, waving the wand to signify what he was apologizing for."
"Miss, please." He twiddled his fingers in a clear 'please come here' motion and began to run the wand over her.

"Thank you. Sir?" He then begins to do the same to Red and then pauses as the device beeped as it reached Red's neck. The gentleman looked to him, patiently waiting for an explanation.

"DARPA tracking chip – eight millimeter tag. I was taken by Somali pirates last March, spent three weeks in a shipping container. The first two were a nightmare!" Red cocked his head and rolled his tongue. "The third one was actually quite pleasant. Even so, that won't happen again. If you have a clean razor blade and some morphine, I'll remove it."

The man coughed nervously. "That won't be necessary, but I am going to need a biometric print scan from your associate."

Red's lips pursed and Lizzie barely controlled the urge to look his way in panic. "She's with me." Red stated darkly, seemingly offended that this man wouldn't trust anyone that he vouched for.

"Understood. But my orders are to scan any new visitors."

"What database is this being run against?" Lizzie asked as she proffered her hand for the scan.

"All of them." The gentleman stated as he pressed her thumb onto the scanner.

Lizzie could feel the tension in the room, felt as if it was positively coated with it as they waited for the results.

"So, you went with the gray?" Apparently even Raymond Reddington was susceptible to a bit of nervous tension.

The scanner beeped and the gentleman nodded his head. "Follow me." He stated before directing them to an elevator. "As you can see, we've made some improvements. Oh, your DARPA chip won't work where you're going. Wujing will explain when you get there."

"Get where?" Red asked in confusion. There was no response as the door closed behind them.

/\\\\

"How far down do you think we're going?" Lizzie asked, her nerves getting the better of her.

"Far enough." Red stated gravely just as the elevator stopped.

/\\\\

"My friend." The man who Lizzie assumed was Wujing greeted Red placidly as he walked out of the caged monitoring room.

"Don't be cheeky, Wujing. You don't have any friends." Wujing gave a small upturn of the lips at this as Red pointed to Lizzie. "My associate." He stated in introduction.

"Ms. Givins. Professor Robins only works with the best." Wujing stated, offering his hand for a shake.

"Oh, he was an amazing teacher. I was so sorry to hear that he passed away." Please, you really think that's gonna trip me up?

"You've made some changes." Red stated, looking around the underground bunker.
"We had to increase security."

"I can imagine – four American agents killed in the past year and a half. You've been busy. I presume nothing gets in or out, no radio or satellite transmissions. Nothing but trust."

"Please don't take offense. I can't risk American surveillance. Only our systems are hard-wired to the outside world."

"Let's get to work. I once had a bad experience in a deep hole in the ground." Red said, wandering around the room as if he owned the place.

A man that had "techie" written all over him shyly walked up next to Wujing. When he noticed him, Wujing threw his arms around his shoulders. "Jin Sun! My new senior cryptographer." He introduced the man to Lizzie.

"We expected standard RSA encryption, but this was something stronger." Jin Sun said, trying to strike up a conversation with Lizzie – coder to coder.

"The government's been experimenting with better factoring algorithms. It's only a matter of time before RSA's obsolete." Ha. Apparently there was something to that one-hour crash course in coding and network security that Meera insisted on actually paid off.

"You're right. It is." His eyes widened as if he were impressed.

*Oh yay, I passed another test.* Lizzie thought grimly. "I'll just need a few moments to set up my equipment."

"This way." Jin Sun directed her over to a cleared tabletop.

Red walked up next to her as she pretended to get her computer set up. "We ready yet? Do you get home much, Jin Sun?"

"Not for two years." The man responded from his own workstation, looking confused as to why Raymond Reddington was speaking to him.

"Oh, that must be hard. It certainly would be for me. I don't even have a phone. I insist on delivering all of my messages in person. What province are you from?" Red asked conversationally as he placed a hand on Lizzie's shoulder.

Lizzie began to type on her computer so that Red could see.

**NEED SATELLITE SIGNAL! NO TIME TO DELIVER IN PERSON. AGENT WILL BE KILLED.**

"From Yunnan." Jin Sun responded.

"Oh! Beautiful part of the country! I spent a month in silent meditation at a monastery just outside of Kunming."

**MUST ACCESS JIN'S COMPUTER. SUGGESTIONS?**

"It was a wonderful escape from the distractions of everyday life. I can't imagine the distractions one might encounter down here." Red looked to Lizzie. "Can you?"

"No. I can't." She said quietly.
"Excellent! I think we're almost ready. This should be fun."

Red clapped his hands, walking towards Wujing and seemed to do a double take as he glanced at the security monitors. "What the hell is that?! I swear, if I run into the same trouble I had with you in Hong Kong – In all the years you and I have known each other, I've never put you in a position like this! You know how I conduct my business. I don't need this kind of crap! You assured me this place was secure!"

"It is." Wujing's nostrils flared in impatience.

Red pointed to the monitors. "Then what the hell is that?! That van. It was there when we arrived, and it's still there. That is the FBI."

While Red has everyone distracted, Lizzie inserted the USB key which would allow Aram remote access to Jin Sun's computer."

"With all the scans and wands and this elevator you've built that goes down to Middle Earth, and you don't even bother to sweep the street around your building?! This is nonsense!"

"Calm down, old friend." Wujing tried to placate.

"You're under surveillance!"

"If the FBI was outside, it's because you led them here." Wujing seemed to have lost his patience.

So had Red. "I've been moving comfortably through the world for the past 20 years without a trace, and now some two-bit spy killer is gonna put my life and business in jeopardy?" Red's teeth were gritted at Wujing's apparent audacity.

Wujing's lips thinned before he spoke to one of the guards standing idly and directed him to do something. As the man left, they soon saw him exiting the building and the surveillance team that was doubling as construction workers quickly packed up as he walked towards them.

"Unbelievable." Red shook his head in disappointment.

"You see? Nothing. Now can we continue?" Wujing pointed to the monitor where the van had driven away.

"You should be ashamed of yourself. To put Ms. Givins and I at risk, it's unprofessional. I've reached my limit."

"Enough!" Wujing shouted, at the end of his patience.

"What? Okay. Okay. You know, I'm sorry. I've had a rough day." Red put his hands up in surrender. "Unbelievable. Should we do this?"

"The message." Wujing directed, looking in Lizzie's direction.

"Don't you miss the good old days with the pay phones and the brush passes?" Red asked as he and Wujing watched Lizzie press a few keys on the "magic box" that was on loan from the CIA.

They soon watched as the file was decrypted right before their eyes.

"There's your next target – kill number five. Henry Cho. This was sent from a C.I. , delivered to a
server at the Nanjing Grand Hotel.

"So, why is the C.I.A. sending you secret messages at your hotel?" Wujing asked the computer monitor.

"Henry Cho works for Zhongku Construction – not in China, here in D.C. His immigration file says he's been to the company headquarters six times in the last ten months." Jin Sun had obviously been doing a bit of digging at his desk.

Wujing took out his cell phone and dialed a number. After a few moments, someone seemed to answer as Wujing began to speak. "Henry Cho, please. It's very important that I speak to him immediately. His brother, Xiaoping, has been in a car accident."

Wujing seemed to have gotten all the information he needed as he quickly hung up the phone and walked over to them. "My friend, I can't thank you enough." He then hands Red a red envelope with Chinese script on the front.

"This is all the thanks I require." Red waved the envelope before putting it in his jacket pocket.

Lizzie couldn't help but glance at the USB still connected to Jin Sun's computer. "Get your things. It's time to go." Red stated before catching where Lizzie's eyes were directed. "Leave it." He murmured as he picked up her bag for her, grasping her upper arm to steer her towards the door. They didn't get two steps before a siren began to blare.

"Lock it down." Wujing demanded and within moments, a door shut them off from the elevator. "Stop! You were right. Maybe that was the FBI outside. In fact, maybe they're not just outside. Maybe they're right here … in this room."

Red and Lizzie both turned to face Wujing. "Think hard before you accuse anybody of anything." Red's voice was dangerously low.

"A few minutes ago, contact was made from this room to an FBI server. A message I worked so hard to intercept was sent to the Americans. Well, all my instincts said it was her." Wujing pointed at Lizzie. "I trust my instincts. You're smart. The one responsible was smart, but our systems are smarter. Any contact with a government server is flagged for review. So … I know who betrayed us. Wujing spun around and punched Jin Sun in the face. "You son of a bitch!" He began to pummel the poor man to the ground.

"Get him up." Wujing ordered his guards who quickly moved to obey, supporting Jin Sun by holding him under his arms as his head bobbed from side to side, unable to find the strength to keep it up. "I thought you were loyal to us."

"I don't understand." Jin Sun whispered as Red and Lizzie looked on.

"The message was sent from your system, Jin Sun." Wujing kicked him in the stomach, causing Jin Sun to fall to the ground, moaning in pain as Wujing walks over to his desk and throws Jin Sun's laptop to the ground.

"T-that's not possible."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Hey, hey, hey!" Wujing began to shout, smacking Jin Sun in the face as he began to lose consciousness.

"That's not possible."
"It is, and not just one message." Wujing kicked him again. "You gave them everything! Files we've worked on for months! Nobody else had access."

"We have to do something." Lizzie whispered frantically to Red.

"Quiet." He murmured in response.

"We can't just let them do this." She whispered.

At that moment, both Red and Lizzie notice Jin Sun looking at the USB still connected to his laptop where it lay partially shattered on the ground.

"You –"

Red grabbed one of the guards' guns from its holster and shot Jin Sun three times in quick succession right in the chest as Lizzie gazed on in horror.

"As entertaining as all this has been, we really do need to leave now. The next sound you hear is gonna be the FBI knocking on your door, and I, for one, am not gonna be here." Red gesticulated with the hand that still held the gun.

"Wujing! Look at me!" Red ordered as Wujing stared down at Jin Sun's body.

Wujing then grabbed a gun and pointed it at Red and Lizzie.

"You don't kill one of my people. Now I have to kill one of yours."

Red subtly stepped in front of Lizzie, shielding her. "The moment he sent that message, he became worthless to you. You would have beaten him for another 20 minutes and then killed him yourself. But if I let you kill a contractor of mine, I'll lose the trust of all my others – and that's just bad business." Red's voice dipped to a bass that sounded like gravel. "So if you kill her, you better kill me. Or I'm going to kill you."

Red and Wujing stared at each other for a tense moment, sizing each other up.

"You hired me to do a job. It's done. Now let's get out of here." Lizzie stated with bravado.

"Follow me. I have another way out." Wujing finally stated after another tense moment.

\\\\

"I can get us out of the country." Wujing stated from the front seat of the SUV they were currently escaping in.

"That's very kind, but I'm sure we can muddle through on our own." Red made a circling motion with his pointer finger. "Anywhere in the shade up here would be fine."

The SUV slows to a stop to let Red and Lizzie out.

"I fear I've disappointed you. The deal was for us to actually catch the criminals on the Blacklist, and now Wujing is as good as halfway to Beijing." Red sighed as they watched the SUV head down the street.

"I don't think so." Lizzie murmured, giving him a secret smile. "I put the patch tracker on their car."
Red's only answer was a full bellied laugh.

After a few minutes of standing on the sidewalk, Red's silver Mercedes pulls up.

Dembe quickly hops out of the driver's seat and looks between Red and Lizzie, concern etched into his features.

"Is everything okay?"

"We're fine." Red stated, quickly climbing into the backseat as Lizzie gives Dembe a reassuring hug.

They arrived soon after to Red's hotel. "Luli can stay with me. Dembe will take you wherever you need to go." Red said, looking over at Lizzie.

"You didn't have to kill him." After the adrenaline wore off, Lizzie was suddenly hit with the fact that she'd just watched her father murder someone in cold blood. And it hurt. Like lightning was burning through her synapses and her heart was burning.

"I believe I will always do whatever I feel I have to do to keep you alive. As I have done for over 20 years."

Red went to exit the vehicle, but Lizzie leaned over him and shut his door.

"I held up my end of the deal. Now it's your turn. You owe me an answer."

Red sighed, leaning back in his seat again as if to get comfortable. "What's the question?"

"Why now?"

"Because I'm your father."

"What does that mean? That doesn't explain anything!" Her shout of frustration was loud inside the cramped space of the car.

"I wish the answer were as simple as the question seems. But the truth is, the question isn't simple either. I share your frustration." Red's lips were tight and the pinched creases around his eyes made him appear tired… and old.

"Don't do this, Dad. Don't pull me into your world. Please."

"I will shield you from it as best I can Lizzie. But I cannot make any guarantees. Except one. I will always protect you."

Lizzie was shuffling papers at her desk in their shared office when she looked up to see Ressler walking in. "You okay?" She asked, wincing at the sight of his bruises from his run-in with Wujing's thugs while trying to protect Henry Cho.

"I'll live. Look – I just wanted to say, uh … maybe I've had some doubts about you. Maybe I haven't done the best job of keeping them to myself, but what you did today was good work."

"Thanks." Lizzie said, uncomfortable with the praise. She was still on shaky ground after watching someone be murdered right in front of her. Shot by her own father. She was still…processing, trying to assimilate the two images of her dad – the caring man that had sat there with her in the
car, admitting that he'd do anything to protect her – and the man that proved through his actions that the list of 'anything' apparently included murder.

"If you didn't get that message out when you did, Henry Cho wouldn't be alive. Whatever else went down in there, you should feel good about that."

Lizzie's only answer was a nod.

Lizzie sat in her car in front of their house, her head leaning against the head rest as she holds the envelope that held the ballistics report in her hands. Once she finally found the courage, she ripped open the envelope and took out the enclosed pages only to find that the majority of the report was blacked out, labeled 'Classified.' Lizzie slammed her head back against the headrest in frustration.

"You were right. Liz Keen is hiding something." Ressler said, walking into Cooper's office and tossing an envelope onto his desk. "I put a flag on her. Any tests, reports, or files – anything she requests gets sent to us first. She brought a bullet and a shell casing into ballistics. At her level, the results were classified. But that's the full report."

"This isn't just classified." Cooper stated as he took out the report and looked it over. "Any briefings on this homicide include the Secretary of Homeland Security. Who else knows about this?"

"Hey!"

Ellie hugs Lizzie as she greets her at the door. Of her own house. "How are you?" Ellie asks.

"Great."

"Let me take this for you. Everyone wanted to be here for Tom." Ellie states, taking Lizzie's jacket and her work bag from her.

"Hey." Tom murmured in greeting as she walked into the living room and sat next to where he had his wheelchair parked.

"Hey." Her greeting came out as more of a sigh.

"Everything go okay?"

"Fine." She murmured as someone handed her a glass of wine.

"Hey, can we, um … talk for a second, pre-lasagna? I just wanted to apologize for this morning."

Lizzie took a large gulp. "It's okay."

"No. I was wrong. It's your job, and, uh, I understand if there are certain secrets that you have to keep right now, and that's okay. Because – because we'll survive, like always. I just want you to – I-I love you. He laughed as one of their guests took hold of his wheelchair and carted him off to the kitchen. "I got to see a man about some lasagna!" He shouted as he was wheeled away.

Lizzie valiantly swallowed the vomit in her mouth.
Chapter 21

Liz quickly found the box with the case number pertaining to the ballistics report of Tom's gun.

"Hey! You don't have clearance to be in here! Who's your supervisor?" She heard the clerk just as she was about to open the box. Memorizing the date and "Angel Station," Lizzie quietly made her way out of the archive.

Where are you on Keen?" Cooper didn't look up as he shuffled around some papers on his desk.

"She's still looking into this classified homicide. The file she has is redacted. No way she finds out what really happened." Ressler replied, his hands on his hips in typical Captain America fashion.

"We need to continue to keep an eye on her. She's testifying today in a case from her time in New York with Mobile Psych. A Mexican drug dealer, Hector Lorca. I want you at the courthouse."

Cooper finally looked up to await Ressler's confirmation and gave a tight smile as Ressler nodded.

Lizzie was in her office which she shared with Ressler, gathering her notes on the Lorca case and going over last minute details. She already had the entire case memorized backwards and forward but research was a nervous habit of hers. If you can't control it, research it.

"Hey."

Lizzie startled and looked towards the door where Ressler lingered. "Hey."

"What's going on?" Ressler moved further into their office, stopping to lean against his desk as he nodded towards the case files in Lizzie's hands.

"I've got court this afternoon. Just going over some notes."

"Mind if I come with you? Nothing would make me happier than seeing Hector Lorca being sent away for life."

Lizzie gazed at Ressler, her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why do I get the feeling that you're less interested in watching Lorca than in watching me?" Seriously, what did she have to do to earn this guy's trust? It's not like Reddington was her father or something... oh wait.

"I don't know. Are you hiding something?"

Lizzie was beginning to understand her dad's dislike of this man. Though before she could reply, she turned at the sound of quiet knocking on the opened doorway.

Meera looked back and forth between Ressler and Lizzie, realizing that she had interrupted something. "Dembe made contact. Reddington wants to see you alone." Meera said, her gaze finally settling on Lizzie.

Lizzie walked over to the park bench, giving Dembe a low wave and a small smile in greeting. Sitting on the bench next to Red, she gave him a small smile as well.
"You're due in Port Au Prince at noon if we're going to make your appointment." Dembe leaned over to speak to Red in hushed tones.

"This won't take long. Bring the car around." Red looked down at the newspaper in his hands and began to read the headline. 'It was only through the efforts of an FBI profiler that suspicion began to fall on Hector Lorca, leading to his arrest and indictment.' Well done, Lizzie. Very impressive." He looked up at Lizzie and gave her one of his lazy smiles though she knew there was true pride hidden behind his sunglasses.

"You are aware, then, that I'm due in court in three hours."

"Your case is about to go sideways."

Lizzie's brow furrowed in worry. "Why? What's happened?"

"Lorca's people have reached out to me. Normally, I wouldn't give him the time of day. He's a vicious little drug-lord thug. Certainly nothing there to hold my interest. But their request is of great interest because it concerns you." Red nonchalantly turned his body towards her and rested his arm against the back of the bench, his hand landing on her shoulder and she smiled at the slight pressure as he squeezed her shoulder in comfort.

She read his message loud and clear. He was always, first and foremost, her father.

"What's he asking for?"

"Transportation out of the country, new identity, passport, bank account, credit cards, as well as the proper introductions to reestablish his operations elsewhere. And he wants it by tomorrow night. For whatever reason, Lorca is under the impression he's about to be a free man."

"I've got a witness testifying today who's got him cold. Lorca's not going anywhere."

Red squeezed her shoulder once again before standing up. "Something is going to happen, Lizzie. I don't think you're going to have a very good day in court at all." Red adjusted the fedora that sat on his head and walked off.

\\\\
Red Leisurley sat on the steps of his private jet as his buyer surveyed the merchandise.

"The manufacturer has replicated the specs of the FIM–92 with a few small improvements. It's lighter, more consistent tracking. I'm confident your client will be thrilled."

Several chirps came from Red's SAT phone which Dembe held. After a moment's hesitation, Dembe answered the call.

"Put him on." Lizzie didn't give him a chance to greet her.

"Mr. Reddington is not avai—"

"Now!"

"It seems to be urgent." Dembe addressed Red as he handed him the phone. The buyer apparently didn't like that he was taking calls in the middle of a deal and drew their weapons.

"Yes," Red laughed, pointing at their guns. "You also have a few dozen of those." He said as he walked off to another corner of the hangar.
"Sweetheart, not really the most convenient time for me." Red finally spoke into the phone once he judged that he was a safe distance away.

"I don't give a rat's ass. Where are you?"

"Haiti."

"Doing what?" He had literally been speaking to her on a park bench in D.C. three hours ago. Honestly, did the man never sit still?

"Keeping up appearances. I'm a criminal. The minute I stop being one, I become quite useless to you."

"My witness, Peña, is gone. Lorca's people contacted you. What did they say, exactly?"

"What I told you is what I know. Beyond that, I really can't help."

"A man's life is at stake!"

"A man's life is always at stake and tragically low stakes, at that. I shouldn't have to remind you I did not offer my services so that I could help you round up your run–of–the–mill drug lord or what have you. You all seem to be doing a perfectly mediocre job of that on your own. I'm after the big game, Lizzie, the ones that matter."

"This case matters to me, to the hundreds of families who deserve to know what happened to their loved ones. No bodies were ever recovered. They never got to say goodbye, to bury their dead." Lizzie hissed angrily. Sometimes she really hated how blasé he could be about the deaths of innocent people.

"Did you say hundreds? And no bodies have ever been found."

"What? What are you thinking?" She knew her dad was sniffing for a bone.

"Nothing. You should go home, Lizzie. Pour yourself a Chardonnay and move on. Your witness is most likely dead. I think you already know that. And if what you're telling me is true, you'll probably never find him, either."

Lizzie stares at the legal pad where she had written "Angel Station" and "July 23, 2012," the only things she was able to take from the label of the box that contained the case files. Just as she was about to google Angel Station, she heard the front door open and close followed by Tom's footsteps in the hallway. Quickly scribbling out the words "Angel Station," Lizzie looks up and smiles at Tom as he enters the dining room.

"How you holding up?" Tom walked over, leaning his arms on the corner of the table and bumping his hip into her shoulder.

"Fine." Lizzie smiled tiredly.

"Nice try. But I always know when you're lying."

"Really?" Lizzie's heart rate jumped up a few beats per minute as she looked askance at him.

"Yeah." Tom gave her a boyish grin, one of the ones that were so wide, his dimples hit his glasses. "I know all your tells. Right now, you're telling me that you want to be alone. And that's okay, but
I just wanted to say what happened today is just part of your job. You know, you deal with bad people, and sometimes bad things are gonna happen, and it's not your fault.” He rested a comforting hand on her shoulder and Lizzie had to actively stop herself from shivering at his touch. She had a sudden desperate need for a shower.

She bit her lip as Tom looked down at the legal pad.

"What's this? Um- It's- I mean-, besides the best day ever, right?" He seemed to stumble for a moment before catching himself and throwing her another grin.

"Right." Lizzie dragged out the word, unsure of where he was going with that.

"Hey, I get it. Bad day at work. Come home. Don't want to talk to anybody. Especially someone whose stitches are officially oozing. Seriously, It's so gross." He laughed. "I know." Tom placed his fingers on the mousepad of Lizzie's laptop and quickly found and clicked on a folder of pictures from the weekend of July 23 2012. "And you park yourself in here and cheer yourself up with memories of better times."

Gazing at the pictures, Lizzie smiled faintly.

"We were in Boston that weekend. You had that job interview." Relief rushed through her at the realization. She was his alibi. He couldn't have been doing anything nefarious that weekend. He was with her in Boston.

"Yeah. It was a great trip."

"Yeah." Lizzie smiled, biting her lip.

"God, when was the last time that we did that, you know, that we just packed up the car and got the hell out of here? Because we need that. Like right now." Tom stood behind her, wrapping his arms around her.

"You have no idea." She groaned, resting her head on his shoulder.

"I know." He kissed her cheek before walking into the kitchen.

"Do I really have tells?"

"Lizzie, you're an open book, which is one of the things I love about you. 'Cause I always know exactly what you're thinking."

Lizzie shivered. She may be happy that her husband didn't kill someone but she was on high alert and if he weren't her husband, her stranger danger radar would have been beeping like crazy.

Her thoughts were interrupted by her cell phone going off.

"Keen."

"We found out where they took Peña." Ressler greeted.

Seriously, they need to start teaching proper phone etiquette at Quantico. Though honestly, she wasn't much better.

/

"An eyewitness saw a white van leaving the courthouse. They found it abandoned. Traffic camera
picked up the swap car. APB got a hit on the plate from local P.D. The desk clerk said it was a large black duffel bag.

Lizzie stood in the parking lot of the sleazy motel with Ressler and Meera, updating each other on the latest intel on the case as red and blue lights bounced off the walls around them.

Eventually, the broke up so that Meera could show Lizzie around the crime scene.

"There's no sign of him, Liz. I'm sorry." Meera murmured regretfully as she led her into the motel room which was their apparent crime scene.

"Has forensics been through?"

"They're going through now. So far, they found a hair on the bed skirt, but we don't think it's human. The desk clerk said he saw the suspect with a dog. We found traces of adhesive on the walls. We think he maybe used tarps or plastic sheeting. It's a motel room. Should be latent prints all over, and there's nothing. He's wiped the place clean."

Lizzie's phone chirped again. She looked down to see the caller ID read "Nick's Pizza."

"What do you want?" Okay, so maybe she too needed to sign up for some of those phone etiquette classes at Quantico.

"I've been thinking about your case. What do you have so far?"

"I'm at the crime scene. Or what we think is the crime scene." Lizzie replied, looking around the room with a sigh.

"You didn't find anything."

"Not much."

"Tape residue on the walls?"

"How do you know that?" Lizzie didn't realize she'd been hunched over until she straightened in alert.

"Look in the tub. Run your fingers around the drain. What do you smell?"

Lizzie walked passed the moseying CSI's and climbed into the enormous tub, squatting down and running her fingers along the drain before bringing them underneath her nose and taking a whiff.

"Chemicals."

"You see, Lizzie. Now I'm interested."

"Why?"

"The Stewmaker is in town. You're going to need a plumber."

They were all gathered in the war room back at the Post Office and Red had his hands in his pockets as he paced leisurely, in full Reddington monologue mode.

"The Stewmaker is a true blacklister. The only fellow to engage when one has a particular sort of
disposal problem. He's a chemical expert who turns his victims into chemical stew, thus the nom de guerre. No DNA. No nothing. He makes corporeal problems literally disappear. But it's much more than the proficiency of his tradecraft that gets him on the list. He's a trophy collector. Remembrances of his victims. Memori morti." Red paused, his eyes seeming distant before he shook himself and continued. "Now, you've lost your witness and with him your case. But the Stewmaker is the key to so much more. He's served the needs of international syndicates, repressive regimes, anyone with a need and the means to pay. The Stewmaker knows where all the bodies are buried. He's got the answers to hundreds of unsolved murders."

"So, how do we get him?" Ressler asked gruffly.

"He's notoriously cautious. I don't even know who he is or where he bases his operation. And believe me, I've tried to find him."

"Lorca knows. If not his name, he knows how to make contact." Lizzie spoke up. Red turned to face her and smiled at her, his head cocked in a carefree way.

"Yes. I suggest you encourage Mr. Lorca to share that information. The Stewmaker is obviously here now, but he won't be for long. And if you let him slip away, he'll be as gone as his victims and you'll never see him again."

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Lizzie took an agent's hand as she climbed out of the armored vehicle, looking around at the motorcade of SUV's and glanced up as her hair whipped around her from the wind caused by the blades of the hovering helicopter.

Turning around, Lizzie addressed Lorca as he was assisted out of the armored truck.

"Once I turn you over to Homeland, it's beyond my ability to help you!" She yelled over the roar of the helicopter.

"You've helped me enough, Agent Keen. You've disrupted my business, my life. You've embarrassed me, my family. You think you know me, with your profiles? You have no idea."

Lizzie pursed her lips and was about to reply before everything exploded. She felt weightless as her body was lifted from the ground before she plummeted back down painfully. Groaning, she could vaguely hear the sounds of gunfire over the ringing in her ears before she felt a quick pinch in her neck and the entire world went dark.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

"We just got the surveillance footage from the airport." Cooper stated and began playing the footage of the explosion and subsequent events.

Red had to turn his head away at the sight of her lifeless body being heaped into the back of a black van, a sack placed over her head.

"What did you know about the transport attack? How did he know where to strike? I swear to God, if you had anything to do with –"

Red had never wanted to smack the shit out of Agent Ressler more than he did in that moment. "What you're forgetting is we want the same thing, Agent Ressler." In his barely suppressed rage, Red didn't care what the FBI inferred from that. But Lorca had taken his daughter and he was going to enjoy every moment of his revenge.
If he were honest with himself, the last 20 years had been about revenge. Keeping Lizzie safe… but also revenge. No one could hold a grudge like Red.

"Why would he kidnap Agent Keen? What's his play here?" Cooper questioned Red.

Red ground his teeth, wanting nothing more than to get out of the Post Office and actually do something. "I have a contract with Lorca to personally hand him a new identity."

"That's never gonna happen." Ressler snorted.

Red's eyes blazed as he looked over at Agent Ressler. "Your witness is dead, you lost Lorca, and he took Agent Keen. I'd say my meeting with Lorca might be the equivalent of you falling on your ass and landing in a pile of Christmas."

"We'll need time to set up a sting." Cooper said to Red, subtly standing between him and Ressler in an attempt to stave off Ressler's impending doom.

"He's been evading capture for years. He'll be more on guard than ever. Any change of plans, and we'll lose him. I meet with Lorca alone."

"An FBI agent's life is in jeopardy." Ressler interjected.

"There's no bargaining here!" Red shouted before taking a deep breath. "When confronting complex equations, the simplest solution is most often the correct one. You lost her. I can find her. It's that simple."

"I'm coming with you."

Red stared at Ressler for a moment, imagining a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. "Then understand I take no responsibility for your safety. And the FBI backs off. No surveillance, no wires, or you can find what's left of Agent Keen yourselves." His rage was a simmering pool and he felt physically sick at his own last words but appearances must be kept …if they weren't completely obliterated by his obvious rage. Apparently his poker face failed where Lizzie was involved. That could be a problem.

\/\/\/\/

"As soon as you have information on Agent Keen, I'll get backup, and we'll take him." Ressler attempted to order Red as they sat in the car on the way to their meeting with Lorca.

"No. I'm going to make him feel safe. Lorca's going to walk, and you're going to have to just trust me."

"Lorca's not going anywhere. And I'll never trust you."

"You know why? Because after tracking me for years, you've come up with one undeniable truth. I only do what's good for me. And that is a person you can trust, Donald. Now let's go. Lorca will have questions about you. You'll need breviloquent answers."

\/\/\/\/

They were escorted to the back room of the restaurant which appeared almost bear except for Lorca and his men. Lorca sat at a small table eating a steak as he watched them come in.

"Mr. Lorca, I'm Raymond Reddington."
"I didn't expect two of you." Lorca stated, his eyes moving between both Red and Ressler.

"Oh, this is Special Agent Donald Ressler of the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Lorca's man immediately jumps Ressler and wrestles him to his knees, placing a knife at his throat as he held Ressler's arms at an odd angle behind him.

"Whoa, whoa, what it must be open season on the FBI. I like it." Lorca laughed.

"He insisted, dying to meet you." Red put on his best charm as he laughed, gazing at the scene before him as if it were a nativity Christmas play put on by adorable children.

Lorca spoke to one of his men in Spanish.

"What's he saying?" Ressler grunted as he tried to free himself from his captor's hold.

"He's telling his man to be ready to cut off your head."

"You want to tell me why I shouldn't?" Lorca asked with unrestrained anger. "One chance. Make it a good one."

"Better start talking, Donald." Red laughed.

"Red!" Ressler shouted.

"Kill him." Lorca ordered his man.

Within moments, Ressler had freed one of his arms, elbowing the man who held him in the kidney to wind him before twisting his own body as he held onto the guy's arm, causing him to fly over his shoulder into a heap on the floor. Standing up with a huff, Ressler glared at Red.

"Aah! He's also a wonderful dancer." Red acted as though he were watching an uproarious comedy hour.

"How do you think Red got you a new ID? New passports? Established Interpol data background? New history, false prints? That's all me." Ressler pointed at his own chest. "I'm not the guy you kill, Hector. I'm the guy you pay. And if I don't show up for dinner tonight, you're dead by morning."

"Is this true?" Lorca directed his question at Red.

Red had to admit, Ressler was rather good at this sort of thing. He still didn't have to like him though. "It is indeed. Crooked as a Corsican highway. He's an asset. So if you're gonna kill my inside man, the least you could do is thank him first." Red then unzipped the leather folio he'd brought in with him containing all of Lorca's necessary documents. "Your new life. I hope it's an interesting one. I've also arranged a flight to take you to Venezuela. You just need to sit tight for at least 12 hours."

"No. I'm leaving now, tonight."


"I don't know."
"In any event, the city's locked down. I can't have you getting busted with my fingerprints all over you. When I arrange transport, it's flawless. I won't compromise my people."

"Every sat tracking system, every surveillance camera, every law–enforcement officer in this town is looking for you. No way you're getting out of here anytime soon." Ressler agreed with Red, trying to drive the point home.

"So just sit tight. Take your new identity, catch a ride on my plane, and let me clean up your mess."

Lorca huffed out a laugh. "Full–service provider, huh?"

"Yes. So, where is the man holding the agent?"

"You have a problem with me disposing of this bitch? Agent Keen will soon disappear. That is the price for taking everything I have."

He was going to have to die. Even if it meant he lost his favorite favorite jet and pilot. Hector Lorca was never going to reach his intended destination.

"See, that's the problem right there. You let your emotions get the best of you, which is how people wind up in jail, Hector. Stupid people. I need the name and location of the man holding Elizabeth Keen."

"Are you sure it is not you who's acting on emotion? It sounds personal." Lorca taunted.

Red laughed as he looked from Lorca to Ressler then back again. "You got me. It is personal. I want your man. So let me spell it out for you. You get away. Agent Ressler here saves Agent Keen. He looks good. And everyone feels better about themselves. I need a name. Now." Red stared at Lorca, his eyes unflinching and his lips pursed.

"I don't have a name. And I have no idea where he took her."

"Then good luck to you, Mr. Lorca." Red zipped up the folio and began to walk away, Ressler following after.

"I have a contact. That is all." Lorca called out, just as they reached the door.

\\\\

Red was standing in the war room of the Post Office, his eyes grazing over the clear boards which were plastered with all of the relevant evidence for the Stewmaker case. He tried not to think of his Lizzie as being just another piece of evidence.

Thankfully, one of the phones rang, cutting off his dark thoughts.

"Tell me about the suspect." Cooper answered the call, putting the phone on speaker.

"Got a contact from Lorca, but it's through a mailbox rental place in G–Town." Ressler's voice echoed through out the war room.

"Name of the mailbox renter was an alias Bill Conners. We found his driver's license at the DMV and matched his fingerprints to chemical purchases in Maryland. The Stewmaker has a name Stanley R. Kornish. Runs a dental practice in Kitzmiller Maryland. Not 100%, but Kornish is definitely person of interest number one." Meera's voice picked up right where Ressler had left off.

"I hope you're on your way to Kitzmiller." Cooper ordered/ questioned.
"We are."

As Cooper ended the phone call, Red stopped in front of a board and gazed at a small evidence bag. K-9 hair. Snatching the baggie from the board and placing it in the inside pocket of his coat as he walked over to Dembe.

"Time to go." He murmured darkly as he walked passed him, knowing Dembe would follow.

\/

Red sat in the backseat of his car with Luli as Dembe drove, speeding down the highway.

"Dogs are not our whole life, but they do make some lives whole. Dembe, would you dial the Maryland State Office of Animal Control, please?"

Red's leg bounced nervously, a habit he had thought he'd broken himself of years ago. "Come on." He whispered anxiously.

"Maryland Animal Control. This is Diana. Can I help you?" A voice came over the car's speaker system.

"Yes. H–Hello, Diana. This is Stanley Kornish. I'm in a bit of a panic." Red made his voice go slightly higher and nasally. "My dog has gotten out, and I've lost my cellphone with the tracking code. I was wondering if I might bother you for the code and if you could reboot the application for this mobile device. He's an emotional support dog. Please hurry. My heart, it's pounding, and I'm having trouble breathing." Red clutched his chest as though the woman on the other line could see him.

\/

"My name is Elizabeth. I have a name. I'm a person. I have a husband. I want you to know who I am." Lizzie tried to humanize herself to her captor. She was blindfolded and being led through, what she imagined were the woods – judging by the amount of debris she was tripping over and the hushed animal sounds around them.

\/

"Who are you? I deserve that at least, since you're going to kill me. I mean, you understand decency, don't you? At the very least, I should know the name of the person who's going to take my life. I know the name they call you out there. It's disparaging, disrespectful. But it's not who you are, is it? It's not how you feel about yourself." Lizzie turned her head uselessly, her vision still obstructed by the satin blindfold. She now sat in a chair of some sort, her arms tied behind her with thick zip ties.

"What name are you referring to?" The man finally spoke.

"You don't know?"

The man finally lowered her blindfold and Lizzie finally got a view of him. Man. Late 50's maybe early 60's. Bald.

"What name?"

"They call you the Stewmaker because of the chemicals you use to dissolve human bodies."
"What about family? You seem like a father. You have kids? A son?" His steps faltered as he headed towards the back room which contained fluorescent lights and a huge metal tub which didn't look unlike a trough. "A son, then. How old is he? How old is your son?"

"He's 11. My son. He's 11." He clutched his hand to his chest, as if he were any average, doting father. "I married late. She's a n–nice woman."

"I knew it. A caring father."

"What about you? Are you a mother?"

"...No."

"That's good." He seemed relieved. "I was- I was asked to make you suffer. I'm I'm sorry. It's my job." He takes a long needle from a tray in the fluorescent room and walks back towards Lizzie.

"It's my job to read people. And you're not a killer. You're glad I'm not a mother so that you don't have to live with the guilt of taking a mother away from her child."

"I'm a lot of things, Liz. There's a nerve cluster just under the shoulder muscle. Just wait. The pain should be quite intense."

Lizzie screamed in agony as her entire arm was set on fire as he inserted the needle.

"We're getting very close, Dembe. Pull in at the next shop. We're gonna need meat."

He was walking around the cabin naked, walking in and out of the fluorescent room as he started making his…cocktail in the metal tub. Lizzie couldn't help but notice the chemical burns all over his body.

"Tell me, how does it work? How do you make them disappear so perfectly?"

"It is perfect, isn't it?" He smiled proudly before injecting her in the neck.

"What did you give me?" Lizzie asked, trying to swallow down her panic at the remembrance of pain that he'd caused with a needle.

"A sedative. It'll eventually cause paralysis, yet maintain your sensitivity to pain." He then looked over at the dog who laid underneath the table. "Hey, you don't have to watch this. Go on. Why don't you go play? Go."

"Why are you doing this?! You don't take life. You clean up death."

"Everything changes. Everything evolves. This is my evolution."

"You know what I think? I think this idea of you vanishing people to aid nature is a lie. I think you're trying to dissolve something else. Your past, maybe?" Lizzie had finally broken out of the zip ties. "Whatever the horrible thing was that twisted you up inside and made you into the freak that you are!" She threw her body against his, knocking him over and sending him head first into the wall and ran for it.
Scrambling through the woods, Lizzie kept looking behind her, expecting him to catch up to her at any moment. It gradually became harder for her to keep her footing as she ran until she finally tripped over a branch and fell, rolling down a hill, unable to gather the coordination to stop herself as the paralytic began to take effect. She finally came to a stop underneath a tree. Groaning, she pushed herself in an army crawl until her back leaned against the tree, listening for any sounds, any signs that he had followed her.

Then she heard the dog barking behind her.

\\\\

She was back in that damn wheelchair. Her head throbbed where he'd clobbered her in the woods to haul her back here. She could feel the sting of scratches all over her back and arms. He must have dragged her. She ignored his annoyed grumblings as he finished making his chemical concoction.

"You know, I was wrong about you. You're not perfect." She murmured, looking over at his shoulder, unable to stop the smile at the sight of her father sneaking up behind the Stewmaker. He must have noticed her distraction as he began to turn around. But just as he did, Red clocked him across the head with a metal pipe. Lizzie promptly allowed herself to finally pass out, knowing everything was going to be okay.

\\\\

When she awoke, blinking her eyes repeatedly to try to make things come into focus, she saw her dad crouched before her, his left hand holding her own as the right caressed the side of her head, running his fingers through her hair gently. "Hello, Lizzie. The effects will dissipate soon. You're gonna be fine." Red stood and kissed the crown of her head before turning the wheelchair around so that her back was to the fluorescent room where the Stewmaker was tied up, balanced on the edge of the tub. Lizzie tried to move, dread filling her as her dad began to speak to the Stewmaker.

"Okay. Shall we get started? A farmer comes home one day to find that almost everything that gives meaning to his life is gone. Crops are burned, animals slaughtered, bodies and broken pieces of his life strewn about. Everything that he loved, taken from him. His children. One can only imagine the pit of despair, the hours of Job–like lamentations, the burden of existence. He makes a promise to himself in those dark hours. A life's work erupts from his knotted mind. Years go by. His suffering becomes complicated. One day he stops. The farmer, who is no longer a farmer sees the wreckage he's left in his wake. It is now he who burns. It is he who slaughters. And he knows, in his heart, he must pay. Doesn't he, Stanley?"

"No dad. He couldn't help it." Lizzie murmured as she continually fought the effects of the drugs.

"Maybe you're right. Maybe he could change. Maybe he's not damaged beyond repair. Maybe he could make amends to all those that he's hurt so terribly. Or maybe not."

The next thing Lizzie could hear was a great splash and the unmistakable sizzle of a body being liquefied. Her eyes growing in horror at the sounds of what her father had just done.

Red was flipping through a book of photos while Lizzie sat silently, flexing her fingers slowly and noting her progress with detached interest as the drugs wore off. Red slyly removed one of the photos, it was of a young woman, dated December 1990. Just as he placed the photo in the inner pocket of his jacket, the door to the cabin slams open and Ressler walks in with several nameless agents.
"Where's Kornish?" Ressler asked, putting his gun down as he deemed that there was no threat.

"We've had a little incident." He replied jovially. "Agent Keen needs medical attention."

"How did you get in here?" Meera questioned from the doorway.

Red merely smiled benignly at her. "That's a pretty blouse."

Ressler crouched down in front of Lizzie and took her pulse, looked at her eyes to check their dilation. "Get a medic in here now!"

Ressler held Lizzie close to him as he tried to help her to the waiting ambulance – the trail being too rough for a wheelchair to be of any use. As the ambulance came into sight, everything became too much for Lizzie. Ressler had to act fast to catch her as her legs fell out from beneath her. Great wracking sobs took over Lizzie's body as the events played repeatedly in her head. The unbearable pain the Stewmaker had inflicted upon her over and over. The sizzle of his body disintegrating. Her father, the farmer. Lizzie's arms wrapped tighter around Ressler's shoulders as she continued to sob.

She wasn't sure how long it took her to calm down but eventually the things that Ressler was saying finally came into focus.

"It's all over now. It's over now. It's okay. Everything's okay." Ressler was gently running his fingers through her hair. "You're okay now."

Lizzie sat in the ambulance, knowing in some sort of detached way that she probably looked like a zombie but couldn't bring herself to care. She was in shock, damn it.

"Here." Lizzie looked up to see Red holding out the photo album to her. "It's horrifying. But at least you can give peace of mind to some of the families."

Lizzie lifted up her arms weakly and took it from him before fumbling her way through climbing fully into the ambulance and sitting on the bench.

"You're no better than him." She murmured. "You're a monster."

Red was grinding his jaw so hard, she was sure his teeth were turning to dust. "Yes."

"How do you deal with that?"

"By saving your life."

Lizzie stared at him as tears began to stream down her face once more.

"The book I just gave agent Keen should help to put Lorca or many of his kind away for a nice long time." Red spoke to Ressler whose head had just popped around the ambulance door.

"Yeah, but Lorca got away." Ressler replied gruffly.

"Cost of doing business." Red shrugged.

"No, you're not just gonna let him go. He was offensive. You didn't like that."
Red smiled, his head cocked to one side as he nodded in acknowledgement. "He is on my jet."

Ressler nodded, the two coming to a shaky accord, and walked away. As Red began to close the ambulance doors, Lizzie finally spoke up.

"Please come."

"I'm sorry?" Red paused, his hand still on the door.

Lizzie licked her lips, taking a breath, then another to try and fortify herself enough to speak despite the fact that she was so damn tired and everything just hurt.

"Please – after all the times I had to go to the ER as a kid… falling from the tree, that time when I got food poisoning – please, just once, I need you there. I need you to come with me."

Red stared at her for some time. She could understand why he'd be a little shocked that she'd still want him to comfort her right after calling him a monster. But to Lizzie, it was just voicing what she already knew. He was a monster. But he was also her dad. And tonight he saved her. She wasn't sure what that meant about her state of mind. But she could deal with that later.

"I was there after—"

"Please."

She smiled as he hoisted himself into the ambulance, coming to sit next to her on the bench. Lizzie quickly put her feet up on the bench beside her as she leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. As his arm came to rest on her shoulder, drawing her in closer to him, Lizzie finally closed her eyes to sleep.

\///\///

Thankfully, Lizzie had been let out of the ER rather quickly, only keeping her long enough to give her a …fairly clean bill of health and to ensure all of the drugs were flushed out of her system with the aid of an IV drip. Red never left her side the entire time, holding her hand as he sat in one of the uncomfortable hospital chairs, telling her stories of his travels as she dozed restlessly.

\///\///

Much later that evening, Lizzie was home, running a bath. As she balanced on the edge of the tub in her favorite silk robe, she stared at the rapidly filling tub. She didn't want to take a bath. The thought made her seize up with fear, her mind flashing back to the cabin. But that's why she knew she needed to do it. Tom was downstairs, believing that she just needed a quiet soak to relax when in reality she was upstairs having a mild panic attack at the prospect of facing her fears. Then she heard a knock at the door just before the door opened, admitting Tom into the room. So much for the "quiet soak" pretense.

"I–I know things have been a little weird between us lately. I think what we were taking about, getting out of town for a few days I think we could really use it. " Tom said, scratching the back of his head as he sat next to her on the edge of the tub. "So I booked it. It's just three nights back at that place we loved, the, uh, Tellamy Cove Inn. You know, it has that restaurant that you like and it might be fun." Tom handed Lizzie a pamphlet and Lizzie took it, unable to stop the smile from spreading on his face. Dammit. He was being so sweet right now. She couldn't stand it.

"Yeah?" She murmured simply as she leafed through the brochure.
"You're gonna get through this. I promise." He whispered, placing a kiss on the top of her head.

Lizzie turned a page and saw a photo of the front of a lovely looking hotel. The Angel Station Hotel.
Chapter 22

Tom rolled over in their bed and saw that she was awake.

"What's going on? You're acting funny."

"Nothing." Lizzie shook her head slowly, gazing over at him.

"Okay. Tell me. Tell me." Tom shifted to his side, holding himself up on his elbow.

"I need to ask you about something, and I need you to tell me the truth."

"Of course. What is it?"

Lizzie reached over to her bedside table and picked up the brochure for Boston he'd given to her the other night, opens it to the page that had the blurb about the Angel Station Hotel and showed it to him.

"I don't get it." Tom said, looking it over.

"A man was shot and killed in that hotel." Lizzie bit her lip.

"Okay. So, what's the question?"

"Were you involved?" Lizzie lifted herself up onto her elbows, uncomfortable with his height advantage.

"I–in in what?"

"The murder."

Before her sleep addled brain could catch up to what was happening, Tom was holding her down and she immediately tried to buck him off. "You're not going anywhere. Liz. Stop! The people that I work for are very powerful. Now, I need you to tell me everything that you know."

"I don't know anything. You're hurting me!" Lizzie attempted to punch him but his hands on her biceps, holding her down, didn't allow her to put much force behind it.

"Damn it, Lizzy! Do not lie to me!" His hands were at her throat now.

"I don't know anything! I swear!" She screamed, her fists pounding against his chest and arms as she struggled beneath him.

"Yeah, well, I wish that I believed you!" His hands tightened.

Lizzie woke up with a gasp.

///

"Aah!" Lizzie groaned as both Tom and Hudson jumped onto the bed, waking her back up from the sleep she felt she had only just gotten back to.

"Rise and shine. The day is waiting. Let's go, let's go, let's go!" He was always so damn chipper in the morning.
"Oh, God. I hate you right now."

"Do you? Wake up, wake up, wake up. Get her, Hudson! Get her!" Hudson bounced on the bed, attacking the covers that Lizzie laid underneath.

"Stop it, both of you! Ouch!" Lizzie laughed.

Tom laid down beside her, a small smile on his face. "I know that you've had a rough few nights, but today is gonna be a really great day."

Lizzie stared at him in confusion, wracking her brain for ideas but coming up empty. "Why?"

"Well, I have a doctor's appointment." He stated slyly.

"You hate doctors."

"Yeah, but it's not for me. It's an ultrasound for our baby."

Lizzie was stunned for a moment. "I thought Jeni was having second thoughts."

"Yeah, she said we're the only married couple she knows who don't totally hate each other, so she's giving us a baby."

"That's – that's great news." Lizzie enthused, well, tried to anyway.

"It's amazing! When you get home from work tonight, you are finally gonna see what this little monster looks like."

"Wait. I'm not invited?"

"I just know how busy you get. But call if you can't make it."

"Oh, God. Oh, God." She wasn't sure when the exact moment was that she had begun to feel so hesitant about the idea of adopting a baby with Tom, but until she got some answers, she wasn't sure she could do this anymore.

"It's so good to see things finally getting back to normal around here." Tom leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Mm!" That was all the agreement she could muster.

Lizzie sat at her desk at the Post Office, looking up information on the Angel Station murder in Boston when Ressler walked in. She quickly closed her laptop, hiding her legal pad underneath a stack of papers as he set a huge box of case files down on her desk with a none-too-gentle thunk.

"I've been ordered to include you in the oversight committee brief on Reddington next week."

"Cooper told me. Here's the profile I prepared on him." Lizzie reached over to the far corner of her desk and handed Ressler a manila folder.

"Have I told you yet I don't place much stock in profiling? And by 'much,' I mean 'none.' It's never once helped me solve a case. You know what has? – Hm? – Facts." Ressler stood at the other side of her desk, looking down at Lizzie, his hands at his hips, causing his unbuttoned suit jacket to flare out at the sides.
"Yeah. I also prepared a profile on you." Lizzie opened an empty folder and pretended to read.
"'Uptight, fueled by an inner rage,' 'capable of the occasional moment of tenderness, which likely brings on the desire to stay up all night watching Asian porn.'"

Ressler huffed. "Not even close."

"Huh. How about this? You don't trust me. You think I'm tainted somehow. Maybe a traitor. You resent the fact that Reddington wants to work directly with me instead of you." She smirked at the sight of Ressler's lips thinning in obvious discomfiture. "Speak of the devil. It's the devil." Lizzie stated, picking up her phone as it rang, the caller ID read "Nick's Pizza."

:\:\:\:\-----------------------------------:\:\:\:\

"What is this place?" Lizzie walked into Red's latest safe house, looking around the living room that was covered in papers and books from floor to ceiling.

"Something of a hideaway. It used to be home to one of the finest American writers who ever lived – Fredrick Hemstead."

"Never heard of him." Lizzie shook her head from where she stood on the other side of the coffee table as Red reclined on the couch that looked like it belonged in the 60's – one of those itchy thread ones that was a terrible mixture of browns and puke green.

"No, you haven't. Nobody has. Dear Fredrick was waiting tables when we first met." Red tossed the manuscript he'd been reading onto the coffee table. "Strange little man, built like a fireplug. He was living here with his mother until she died. Poor Fredrick couldn't afford to stay on, so I bought the place for him." Red picked up a glass mug of a clear, muggy liquid. "Sadly, Fredrick died without ever being published, but this place is chock-full of his work Manuscripts, poems, unsent letters, and lots and lots of this." Red took a swig of the drink, sighing in obvious distaste as it burned down his throat.

"What is that?"

"No earthly idea. Some sort of distilled alcohol, I think. There's bottles of the stuff stashed everywhere. Would you like me to pour you a few fingers?" Red gestured to a side table with the hand that held his drink.

Lizzie shook her head, shifting on her feet impatiently. "Why am I here?"

"Have you ever wondered how criminals who know they can't trust one another are still able to conduct business with each other?" Red finally placed the drink down on the end table next to the couch.

"They replace trust with fear and the threat of violence."

"The next target on the blacklist is a physical embodiment of both. He's known as the Courier, and his involvement in a transaction virtually guarantees success. Once he's hired to make a delivery, he can't be bribed, he can't be stopped. If either a party attempts to double–cross the other, he kills them both. The perfect middleman for an imperfect world."

Lizzie put her hands in the pockets of her jacket and rolled her eyes. She'd driven an hour out of town for this? "Cooper's not gonna sanction a black op against the U.P.S. driver of crime."

"He will when you tell him the Courier is scheduled to deliver a package worth $20 million. At that price, it could be anything from a genetically engineered virus to a very important person's head in
a bag."

Now Lizzie was interested. "Does he have a name?"

"I'm sure he does. I don't know it."

Lizzie stared at her dad for a moment and shook her head in exasperation. "Skip to the part where you tell me how you expect us to find him."

"I know the man he's planning on delivering the package to. An Iranian spy named Hamid Soroush."

"Where are they making the exchange?"

"At the Winston farmer's market in..." Red squinted at his watch. "...2 hours and 45 minutes."

After an eventful afternoon which included a shoot out at a outdoor market and a car chase, the agents and Red were gathered in the war room, gazing at a screen which displayed the courier patiently waiting in one of the Post Office's interrogation rooms.

"We found nothing at the farmer's market, nothing in his vehicle, nothing on him. What was he supposed to be delivering?" Cooper looked to Red expectantly.

"I don't know, Harold. Might it be conceivable your people actually missed something?"

"You're not telling us everything." Lizzie's wounded pride forced her to speak up. After all, she was one of Cooper's people and her dad just insinuated that they – that she had failed.

"Let me put your mind at ease. I'm never telling you everything." Red gazed at her benignly before switching his gaze back to Cooper. "I did my job here. I gave you a Blacklister. There he sits." Red gestured carelessly towards the screen that still displayed the Courier handcuffed to a table.

"Why did he kill Soroush?" Cooper questioned.

"Obviously, he spotted one of your agents, and poor Soroush paid the price."

Lizzie sighed in annoyance. He was doing it again, mocking the task force which she was a part of.

"There's a knife wound in his chest, scars all over his body. You know how he got them?"

"That's interesting. I always wondered if the stories were true. I think you may need to call a doctor."

They had called in a doctor who had, after examining the man, told them that the Courier had congenital anhidrosis. A rare genetic disorder that made him incapable of feeling pain. They had then asked him to remove what they believed he had hidden in his chest wound.

The team stood around watching the video from the chip the Doctor had found.

"My name My name My name is Seth Is Seth Nelson. W–why are you doing this? Please – "

Cooper paused the video. "That's the only thing on the chip taken from his chest?"
"Newspaper's from yesterday. Time stamp on the video file is 4:29 this morning. It's a proof–of–life video." Lizzie replied.

"The oxygen mask, the tanks – Wherever this guy is, his hours are numbered." Ressler spoke up, staring at the screen which had Seth Nelson's face frozen in fear.

"We didn't find a package because there wasn't one, sir. Soroush was putting up $20 million for this guy. We just stopped him from delivering a ransom payment." Lizzie looked over at Cooper in distress, wracked with guilt. Maybe her dad was correct. It seemed as though they had royally botched this one. Shaking herself, Lizzie continued. "We got a hit when we ran his name and face through the DMV servers. Seth Nelson lives in Maryland with his parents, works tech support for a cable company."

Ressler pointed at the screen where the video was still paused on Seth Nelson's face. "Assuming each oxygen cylinder was full, he has maybe 20 hours before his air runs out."

"Ultrasound machine. I want to know what other surprises the Courier has hiding inside him. I also want to know why anyone thinks this kid is worth $20 million." Cooper ordered.

"He's probably worth more." Meera spoke up from where she sat behind them, gazing at a computer screen. "My CIA sources just confirmed he's an NSA analyst, one of their best and only one of three people allowed to write and access the security protocols and software. If he's coerced into working for a foreign power or criminal network, the damage would be catastrophic."

"We need to make the Courier talk. There must be something he wants." Lizzie wracked her brain wondering what a man who couldn't feel pain would fear.

"The guy's a psychopath." Ressler scoffed.

"Luckily, we happen to have our own psychopath."

Lizzie had to swallow the sudden tightness in her throat as Cooper called her dad a psychopath. She knew him better than anyone. Had tweaked his profile to perfection ever since she began learning how to profile.

\\\\

Red sat at the dining room table of Hemstead's house, another manuscript in his hand, while Lizzie stood in front of him as he laughed. "This is hilarious. Fredrick wrote to the editor of the Washington Post almost every day – thank you – " Red interrupted himself as Luli walked in and handed him a cup of tea. Wearing nothing but a men's dress shirt. "About any and every subject. Listen to this one. 'Dear Mr. Bradley, what is up with all the rabbits – '"

"Are you and…" Lizzie pointed at him and the back of Luli's retreating back.

Red laughed again, "No dear, I promise. She just finds them more comfortable. Buys them herself." Lizzie nodded, glad to have dodged that awkward bullet. "Besides, I would never flaunt such a relationship in front of you. There is a reason you've never met any of my… lady friends. I can never have a serious relationship with my lifestyle, not really. I've tried. Didn't work out." Red's eyes went distant for a moment before he shook himself, gave Lizzie one of his grins and took a sip of his tea.

Rather than dissecting the sad state of her father's romantic life or letting her curiosity get the best of her, Lizzie plowed on to the reason she was here. "I need to know what you're not telling me about the Courier."
"And what do I get in return?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes, a small smile of fond exasperation anointing her face. "My gratitude."

"Tell me what you've learned about your husband."

Lizzie bit her lip, unsure if she was prepared for the sudden shift in conversation. "The gun that I found in the box is connected to an open homicide."

"Of whom?"

"It's classified. I can't read the file." Lizzie shifted restlessly on her feet.

"I imagine you've found ways around that particular obstacle." He daintily took another sip of his tea before placing it on the saucer.

"I know it happened in Boston last year. I think it was a Russian tourist who was murdered Victor Fokin."

Red re-crossed his legs, twining his fingers together as he settled them on his knee. "You lived in New York at the time. Why would you think your husband would be in Boston?"

"Because I was there with him. He supposedly had a job interview, and we made it into a small vacation."

Red didn't speak as he appeared to ruminate on this information, before quickly changing the subject back to the matter at hand. "A few years ago, some of my associates encountered the Courier in an opium den in Cairo. He killed two of them. If he still has a taste for the poppy, there's a man who may be able to help us."

"You're talking about a drug dealer." Lizzie's brow creased in consternation.

"I'm talking about a friend, a philosopher who practices an ancient ritual going back thousands of years. There's a good chance he could be helpful in locating the Courier's safe house."

Lizzie huffed in annoyance. "All I care about is finding Seth. Call your friend. I want the Courier's safe-house address." Lizzie went to exit the room but was stopped by her father's next words.

"Thank you." It was barely above a whisper.

Lizzie turned back around to face him. "For what?"

"For always being honest with me. In my life, I don't encounter that frequently."

Lizzie bit her lip, her mind warring with her until her feet seemed to make the decision for her, carrying her over to where he sat. She bent down and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Bye Dad. 'Til next time."

She quickly spun back around, heading towards the door, unable to see the wistful smile on his face. She did however, hear his reply.

"Until next time, Sweetheart."
Everyone stood around as Meera flipped through the surveillance photos they had found in the Courier's – Tommy Phelps' – house.

"Her name's Laurence Dechambou. She's ex-French intelligence. She now makes a handsome living selling secrets, mostly of a technological nature. I really don't understand any of it. But she's clearly stepping up on this one, trying to make a legacy for herself. She owns that nightclub. Last time I was there, we had a great deal of fun, until she tried to strangle me with her stocking."

"I'll get a warrant. You'll have it by the time you get there." Cooper's gruff voice answered.

"She won't talk, and even if she did, what would you expect her to say?"

"She may know Seth's location." Ressler stated as if he were speaking to a five year old.

"She won't." Red gave his I-would-like-to-murder-you-but-I'll-save-it-for-later smile.

"She's the only lead we have. We arrest her and take our chances."

"This is a bad idea, Harold."

"Actually, there may be another option." Meera spoke up. "She had to hand over Seth to the Courier somewhere. We find the location, we might get lucky. There could be security-cam or ATM footage of the exchange."

"And we use it to track the Courier's movements last night. That could lead to Seth." Liz stated, quickly catching onto where Meera's thoughts were heading.

"And why would she tell you that, again?" Red cut in.

"She doesn't have to. She's still expecting her money. We send someone in as the Courier, tell her the exchange was a setup, the deal's off, she can pick up Seth where she dropped him off." 

"And we follow her to the drop–off point." Ressler rocked back on his feet just enough to lean against the table behind him.

"If you really want her to talk, I should meet with her." Red addressed Cooper.

"Every time you 'meet,' someone ends up dead." Ressler pointed out.

Red shrugged. "We've gotten off to a rocky start."

"You've killed three people." Cooper reminded him.

Red's eyebrows raised and he put his hands up, placating. "I'm not perfect."

"If we did this, we'd be operating under the assumption that Dechambou has never met the Courier face–to–face." Cooper addressed his team once more.

"It's too risky."

"He's right." Lizzie agreed with Red's assertion.

"Let me go. I can do this." Ressler announced gruffly, unwilling to back down.

Everyone waited as Cooper mulled it over. "First sign this is going south, I want that club swarmed."
"Or just bend over any available piece of furniture and let her slap you on the ass. She loves that."

As everyone's backs were turned as they started to head towards their respective offices, Lizzie smacked Red on the arm. God, did he never stop?

She ignored his small grumble of pain as her phone began to ring.

"Oh, my God. Tom. Oh, God. He's gonna kill me." Lizzie answered the call. "I'm so sorry."

"You need to come home. Okay?" Lizzie's lips pursed at the sound of Tom's righteous anger. "I canceled the ultrasound. – Liz?"

"I can't do this right now." Lizzie refused to look up at Red who she knew was stood by her side, listening.

"Look, I don't I don't care what's going on at work, okay? You and I need to talk. Something incredibly important came up."

"Tom—"

"I don't care! You and I need to talk about something, and it's more important."

"I promise we'll talk as long as you like, but later."

"This is an emergen –"

Lizzie hung up the phone.

/\/\/\

Red stood in the shadows of the courtyard behind Dechambou's club, watching as she poured herself a few fingers of bourbon.

"Better make it a double." Red murmured, stepping out of the shadows, causing Dechambou to spin around to face him.

"If this is about that incident in Paris—"

"Oh, we'll always have Paris." He mocked.

"What do you want?"

"So many things. But right now, I want some information. Where is the NSA agent?" Red walked towards her, his hands in the pockets of his trousers.

"I have no idea. He was handed off to the Courier."

"Yes. And he's been compromised. Who do you think he'll blame for that?"

She quickly knocked back her drink and set the glass down on the bar. "Not me. The Iranian must have been working with the FBI."

"Laurence, the Iranian is dead, and you're next. You know that."

"I did nothing wrong." Dechambou whispered vehemently.

"The world is rarely a fair place. That's why it needs people like me. I'll get you out of the country
and guarantee your safety. There's a private jet awaiting your arrival right now. In exchange, you give me the location where you dropped the kid off last night."

"He's worth $20 million." She huffed, disbelieving that he would expect her to walk away from that.

"That $20 million is about to die. This is not a negotiation."

"How dare you? I don't care who you are. And I'm not going to let you swoop in at the last minute and profit from a mistake made by somebody I hardly know."

"Oh, he knows you. He knows where you live, where you work, where you play. He knows you better than I do, and I know where that lovely little freckle is." Red let his eyes wander down her body. "I give you a day and a half before he finds you. Try to be brave." He turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Wait. I will help you."

\\\\

"How much air does he have left?"

"Thirty minutes, tops." Lizzie answered as they hunched over a map of the area surrounding the drop off point Dechambou had told them about.

"With Dembe driving, we might make it just in time to see him die. If we find our NSA friend and he's still alive, he might prove helpful." Red stated, walking towards the elevator to leave the Post Office.

"You want Seth for your own reasons." Lizzie followed after him, knowing Dembe was right behind her.

"So should you."

\\\\

They arrived at the junk yard and Lizzie and Dembe immediately began to sweep the place with their flashlights before all three of them began opening all of the junked fridges and freezers that lay around.

"He's in the dirt." Red finally said, sifting curiously through the dirt with his foot.

"What?"

Red looked around him as he spoke. "The refrigerator. It's a coffin. The Courier buries things under his skin." Red lifted up a plastic panel that appeared to be placed there as a marker. "He's in the dirt right here."

All three of them got to their knees and began to dig. Not too far below the surface, they found the refrigerator. Red quickly opened it up and he and Dembe jumped in to lift Seth out.

Lizzie quickly removed the mask from his face. "He's not breathing." She murmured as she checked for signs of life.

"Move, Elizabeth." Dembe said softly, crouching beside Seth and beginning CPR.
"I died once in Marrakech Two and a half minutes. You wouldn't believe what I saw on the other side." Lizzie looked up at her dad in horror. How could he drop a bomb like that now?!

Her attention was quickly drawn back at the sound of Seth sputtering and gasping for breath.

\/

As Seth is being loaded into the ambulance, Red leans over to whisper in his ear before pulling away, just as Lizzie walks up.

"Seth. We called your parents. They're gonna meet you at the hospital."

"H–how can I ever repay you?"

"I'm sure we'll think of something." Red answered jovially just as Seth was loaded up and the doors of the ambulance were shut.

"Don't even think about it."

"What?" Red asked, giving her his best 'I'm innocent' face. "The boy wishes to express gratitude. I'm merely playing my part in the ritual."

\/

"Thank you." Lizzie murmured as she sat at her desk and quickly signed off on the package the delivery man held.

Ripping open the envelope once he left, she opened up a file that had a post it note attacked – 'The answers you seek – Dad' was written in red ink. Looking at the files, Lizzie quickly realized what they were. They were the unredacted case files for the Angel Station murder.

After going through the files multiple times, Lizzie sat there, frozen as she looked at one of the surveillance photos that were taken of the suspect. It was Tom.

\/

"This man, the young NSA agent. He allowed you access to the classified networks?" Newton Phillips asked, looking out the window of the Hemstead house before gazing over at the back of Red's head where he sat on the sofa.

"He did." Red murmured, taking a sip of the ghastly alcoholic beverage that dear Frederick apparently loved so much.

"And I understand this was a one-time offer."

"Yes." Red whispered tiredly, already knowing where this was going.

"The right question, and we could've made the world tremble. Finally found our adversary. Why did you waste it on the girl?"

Red pursed his lips. Logically, he knew that Newton didn't know Lizzie was his daughter. That was privileged information that he, quite frankly, hadn't earned yet. Despite being his glorified secretary. "Not 'wasted,' my friend. Circumstances are far more complex than we ever imagined. I'm betting on the long play. The future."

"Your future's arriving now." Newton murmured.
Red's brow quirked. Hmm. Maybe Newton knew a bit more than he thought. Red pushed that from his mind, saving it for another time as he gazed up at Lizzie, a small smile on his face. He gestured for her to sit just as he sat up and poured her a finger of Hemstead's distilled alcohol and handed it to her just as he sat back down.

Recognizing that she wasn't going to speak as she barely held it together, he gazed out the window and smiled. "Funny all these wonderful manuscripts, and my favorite thing about this place is still the view from the sofa. I love how the light breaks through the trees." He closed his eyes, soaking up the warmth of the evening sun shining through the window.

"Dad—" Lizzie let out a choked sob as she curled into his side.

He was quick to wrap his arm around her, placing his drink on the end table. "Shh Lizzie, it will be alright. You will get through this. I promise. It will be fine."

\\\

Later that night, Lizzie cautiously walked into her house, hanging her purse on the coat rack just before walking down the hallway.

"Tom!" Lizzie called out yet received no reply. She slowly walked into the dining room and found him sitting in a chair, waiting for her.

"We need to talk." She murmured hesitantly.

"That's funny. I was just gonna say the same thing to you." He leaned over and reached behind him, dragging the wooden "go box" with all the money, the passports, and the gun, in front of him.
Alright, so I've stripped the guts of this episode to its bare bones, (though the chapter ended up being just as long, if not longer than the others) but that's because it is the start of my major time line edits so... this gon' be good! Hopefully. Maybe. I hope you like it. And as always... reviews fuel me!

Lizzie wasn't sure how she ever thought she could have normal. Her entire life was so far removed from normal that it abnormal was her normal. Suppose that's why she was always waiting for the other shoe to drop whenever she got a dose of it. Normal just doesn't belong in her life.

Evidence 1, she's currently walking into the Post Office with her husband handcuffed with a sack over his head. And no, there was no roleplaying and this wasn't their bedroom.

Evidence 2, she had turned him in. Her own husband. They had fought over the box. He had actually accused her of being the one to make the go box. The nerve of him to accuse her of that. Besides, her go box that she'd made for them was in a storage facility with both of their passports and enough money for both of them to live well for a few years. Honestly, why would she make a go box with passports just for him?

Evidence 3, What? Her life's not enough of a shit storm already for you? Ok fine, her father was the Concierge of Crime.

Now that she thought about it, that one should probably have been number 1.

/

The door closed behind her as she walked into Cooper's office, smiling nervously as she sat down in the chair in front of his desk.

"When this all started, when Reddington turned himself in and asked for you, I was skeptical, suspicious. But I'll be honest." Cooper leaned forward at his desk, clasping his hands together as he leaned on his elbows. "You've done good work. And I've come to believe that you were just as surprised as the rest of us when he picked you. But now this. I need you to help me understand what's going on here."

"The gun, the money, and passports were in my house. A hatch in the floor."

"The gun was used in an unsolved homicide."

"Yes."

"You pulled a ballistics report."

Lizzie leaned forward, her leg beginning to bounce. "Tom is my husband. I brought him here, to you, for help, to find answers. I want to know who killed that FSB agent as much... no... more
than you do. If we can solve that murder –"

"You're not gonna do anything. Until this matter is resolved, I'm putting you on leave."

"What? No. Tom is here." Lizzie gestured out the window of his office, at the war room below.

"Agent Keen. Go home."

```
Lizzie and Red sat on opposite sides of a bench near the White House. As Red leisurely sat back, his arm slung over the back of the bench, Lizzie's eyes never stopped moving.

"People think it matters who occupies that house. It doesn't. Multinational corporations and criminals run the world." Red said wistfully, as if speaking of the good old days.

"I thought we were here to talk about Tom."

"You've obviously heard of corporate espionage – companies trying to beat other companies to be the first hand on the dollar. But what if it were taken a few steps further? In 1982, seven people in Chicago were killed by an over–the–counter drug laced with potassium cyanide. The company's market share went from 35 to 8. It was never determined how the drug was poisoned, but I will tell you someone was hired to do that. Remember those tire recalls, Chernobyl? Deliberate and malevolent actions taken by corporations to protect their vital interests. Nothing happens by chance. That's why I'm here, Lizzie. Because there's a woman Gina Zanetakos."

Lizzie was quiet for a moment, just to ensure his monologue was done before speaking. "I don't know who that is."

"Gina Zanetakos is a corporate terrorist And frankly, she's the best of the bunch. Lizzie, if you want to find the truth about your husband, then you need to find Gina."

"Why? Does she know Tom?"

"Because she's Tom's lover."

```

"I fail to see how suspicions about her husband affect our arrangement, Harold." Red stated, looking out at the war room from Cooper's office.

"Agent Keen is on leave."

"Well, then, lives will be lost. What if I were to deliver to you a terrorist, not your run–of–the–mill ideologue answering to bearded men in caves, but someone entirely different less predictable and far more dangerous."

"I'd say delivering criminals to me is your job."

"My job is my business, Harold. Delivering criminals to you is a hobby, a diversion, one that may become tiresome, in which case we could always reminisce about that unfortunate incident in Kuwait."

Cooper huffed quietly under his breath. "Are you threatening me, Red?"

"I am. Hardly the time to let morals stand in the way of your upward mobility, Agent Cooper."
According to Reddington, her real name is Gina Zanetakos. Nearly a year ago, she reached out to him as Shubie Hartwell. She wanted Red to broker a deal to assassinate a supreme court judge who was the swing vote in a case that could have cost her corporate clients billions." Lizzie stated to the room at large as she gazed at the screens displaying everything they had on Gina Zanetakos.

"Custom documents indicate Shubie Hartwell entered the country yesterday. We've got a credit card in her name that was last used under an hour ago. Purchased two cocktails at the bar in the Key Hotel." Aram spoke without looking up from his computer screen.

"Call the hotel manager. Have him start pulling security tape. See who she was having drinks with. Agent Keen?" Cooper had noticed that she wasn't exactly paying attention as he gave his marching orders.

"Uh, I feel like I've seen her before."

"She's not calling you back." Ressler grumped as Lizzie hung up her phone, having called Meera to ask her for news on Tom and gotten her voicemail. "This is the door? I'll take the key. Step back, please." Ressler ordered the poor hotel manager. "She shouldn't even have told you what she told you."

"And why is that?"

"Because you could be an accessory for all we know."

Oh c'mon, just one little punch? A love tap. Right across his little Captain America face.

"Okay, we're working on a current address for Zanetakos." Aram tapped away at his keyboard as he spoke, forcing everyone to crowd around his work station if they wanted to hear him. "Her phone provided a treasure trove of messages. She was in frequent contact with a multinational company called the Hanar Group. But more worrisome is a message that came in today around three hours ago. A call that originated from Berlin."

Aram pressed a few buttons and the message began playing through out the war room.

"Change of plans. Had to use Cobalt 60. Still good to go."

"Cobalt 60? They're talking about a dirty bomb here." Ressler's face contorted in shock, probably mimicking the faces of everyone around him. No one had expected that this was how their day was going to go.

"But what's the target?" Lizzie asked the question on everyone's mind.

Red and Lizzie strolled around one of the many monuments in D.C. All of these clandestine meetings were really starting to get to her.

"We believe Zanetakos is planning to detonate a dirty bomb somewhere in the central time zone of the United States."

"Why would she want to do that, Lizzie?"
"Somebody hired this woman. She killed a man today, Nadeem Idris. He was an attaché at the Turkish Embassy. Looks like they were having an affair. We suspect it was a means to an end."

"Have you found the connection to your husband?"

"We have looked through all of Zanetakos' phone messages, all her records. There wasn't a single message from Tom." Lizzie combed her hair back with her fingers, blowing out a long suffering sigh.

"Perhaps they exchanged letters."

"There's nothing between them. My husband is innocent. Why are you doing this? If there's something I should know, just tell me! Why all this cloak and dagger?"

\\\\

Tom looked up as Meera entered the room. "Did you talk to Burris?"

"Please take a seat." Meera walked over and took a seat herself.

Tom chuckled as he obeyed and sat down. "Okay. He backed me up, though, right?" Tom looked down at the photo that Meera had just slid across the table. "Okay, who is this?"

"You don't know?"

"No."

"That's Walter Burris, the headmaster at the Rothwell School."

Tom stood up abruptly from his chair, combing his fingers through his hair anxiously. "W- what is this, some kind of trick? Did this guy say he met with me? Because I didn't meet with him. And if he says that he met with me, then he's lying. He is lying to you. Because I've never seen this guy before in my life, not once."

"He's being set up." Lizzie murmured from where she stood in the observation room.

"Look, uh, I met with a man who claimed to be Walter Burris. For 45 minutes, he interviewed me. Look, is Lizzie back there?" Tom pointed to the one-way mirror.

"I need you to stay seated." Meera pointed to the chair that Tom had nearly tipped over as he stood.

"Look, I didn't do anything, okay? You have to believe me. All I did was walk out of a hotel, and someone took a picture, okay? Someone is doing this to me!"

"The picture." Lizzie murmured before running out of the observation room.

She ran to the evidence board and took down the photo of Tom outside Angel Station. Looking to the corner of the photo, Lizzie notices Gina Zanetakos wearing a brown wig as she headed towards the hotel. That's where Lizzie had seen her before. This photo.

\\\\

Ressler and Liz entered the apparent apartment of Gina Zanetakos with an FBI squad, knocking down the door and yelling "FBI!" No really, they were really great at surprise parties.

A cursory walk through of the empty found them several high powered weapons and many burner
phones. Lizzie sat down in a chair in the corner to go through some of the photos they'd found when she noticed a vent cover had been removed. Leaning down, Lizzie opened the vent and finds a wooden go box with a symbol just like Tom's. Opening it up, she found the same staples for a go box as was in Tom's – a pistol, money, and passports. Also included in her go box were photos of apparent targets – one of whom was Victor Fokin.

"Ressler. Victor Fokin, the FSB agent. She was watching him. So she could kill him, not Tom. She's an assassin." Lizzie showed Ressler the photo.

Before Ressler could reply, another agent helping with the search walked over. "Guys, you might want to check this out. Found this by her bed." When Lizzie looked over, he was showing them a picture of Tom.

After everything that had happened in the last couple of months, she still hoped her dad was wrong. Yet as she looked at the photo, Lizzie felt as if the room had suddenly become a vacuum.

"Give us a minute." Ressler murmured to the agent before taking the photo out of Lizzie's hands. When had it gotten there? "This is evidence." He stated, putting it to the side. "Listen, Keen, whatever you think this may mean, I admire what you're doing, standing up for your husband, but I think we both know it's time for you to protect yourself."

\\\\

Lizzie approached Red and sat next to him on the steps of a canopy in another nameless D.C. park. They sat there silently for a few minutes, people watching. Red was waiting patiently for her to speak as Lizzie failed at keeping the tears at bay.

"I didn't know where else to go. We found a picture of Tom in her house. He said he doesn't know her, but clearly he does. So much is happening, and I just don't know how to process it all." Lizzie angrily wiped a few tears from her cheeks. "I mean, a part of me thinks that you're manipulating this whole thing and you're trying to ruin my life. But I know you wouldn't do that, you're a lot of things, but I know you would never do that to me. But if I'm wrong about Tom – If he isn't who – I don't think I can handle any of it without him. I feel like I'm drowning, like I don't know what's real or who I can trust.

"You can trust me." Red looked over at her, his eyes solemn, and his mouth turned down in a frown. He hated seeing her like this. Hated that it was due, in large part to him. But she needed to find the truth. He needed to make her find the truth.

"I needed you to be wrong about him." She said in barely suppressed anguish.

Red grabbed her hand tightly in his and placed his head atop hers when she leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder.

\\\\

"No. Hakim, that is not the problem. Listen to me. Shipping is my business. Once I receive payment, the merchandise ships. That's the deal. According to my man in Houston, the payment's not there. It's been diverted to New Orleans, which is entirely unacceptable. Well, I don't care if the wedding is Saturday. All I care about is my payment. Hakim, this conversation is over." Red hung up the phone and tossed it to Dembe. "Hello, Lizzie. What can I do for you?" Lizzie silently handed him a picture of the bomb maker and he immediately let out a boisterous laugh. "Maxwell Ruddiger. Tremendous bomb maker. Haphazard as hell, terrible drinker, but he gets the job done."
"Zanetakos made a wire payment to him a few weeks ago."

Red nodded in understanding. "So he's the link. Ruddiger can get you to Zanetakos, and she'll get you to Tom."

"Can you help me find him?"

"It's a sedan. The car is the bomb. Contamination radius of over five miles." Ruddiger slurred as he sat at his work bench in Germany. Red had been plying him with alcohol for the past hour and was finally getting somewhere.

"When will it detonate?"

Ruddiger glanced up at the clock and chuckled. "Nineteen hours. Don't know where."

"Then we'll have to ask Gina. Call her. I just need to know where she is." Red nodded to Dembe and he silently took out a small envelope with a burner phone, handing it to Ruddiger. "This will never come back on you." Red murmured.

"That woman was the link! She was the only proof that my husband is innocent! And now she's what? Dying? Lying unconscious in some hospital?" Lizzie shouted as she paced Cooper's office.

"She's in surgery." Ressler argued, seemingly having had enough of Lizzie's dramatics.

"Have we forgotten that there's a bomb out there?"

"I haven't forgotten anything. I've been here for seven years. You've been here for seven weeks." Ressler hissed.

"We have less than four hours." Lizzie stared at Ressler in a clear challenge. Or maybe she was just imagining a giant red bullseye on his right cheek. She had a mean right hook. Her brother could attest to that.

"You think we don't know that?"

"What, is Zanetakos gonna come out of surgery by then? Because that was the only lead we have!"

"I told you to calm down." Cooper had had enough of both of their dramatics.

Looking over at her boss, Lizzie sighed and plopped into a chair. "The bomb – What do you know?"

"We know what you know." Ressler grumped. "It's built into a car, German–made. It's dirty."

"Well, do you know why Zanetakos killed Nadeem Idris in that hotel or how the Hanar Group is connected, – who their enemies are?"

"The investors." Cooper replied

"What do you mean, the investors?"

"The company stock is at an all–time low. They're in trouble, dragged down by a 48% drop in the
"What division?" Lizzie questioned, looking between Cooper and Ressler.

"Shipping. They operate a port in New Orleans."

"New Orleans – What do you know about it?" Lizzie had speed dialed her dad's burner phone as soon as she left Cooper's office.

She received a laugh in reply. "Quite a lot. What do you have in mind?"

"You were on the phone. That guy – Someone was getting married. You were talking. Something about New Orleans and the ports." Lizzie tried to lead him towards what she wanted as she walked down the hallways of the Post Office.

"Yes."

"You told the man on the phone your payment was diverted. Why?"

"It happens every once in a while, but this was...unprecedented. An associate of mine in New Orleans was advising illicit traffic in the Gulf to be rerouted to New Orleans."

"The Hanar Group hired Zanetakos."

"They're a majority owner of a port in New Orleans." Red replied, scratching his head.

"Where was your payment diverted from?"

"Houston."

"That's the target. New Orleans and Houston are the two biggest ports in the Gulf. If Houston were to close because of radioactive contamination, all traffic would have to be diverted to New Orleans. Hanar's profits would soar. They'd be the only game in the Gulf." Lizzie quickly hung up on him and turned back around in search of Cooper and Ressler.

"That's my girl." Red murmured as he tossed the phone to Dembe.

Lizzie looked around the port in desperation as one of the bomb squad guys walked up to them.

"We've been through five sections and found nothing. This port is 25 miles long. It will take us weeks to inspect it all."

"We've got less than an hour." Ressler stated as if everyone weren't already checking their watches every five seconds.

"We're missing something." Lizzie combed her fingers through her hair, tugging gently. "The Hanar Group. They hire Zanetakos. She contracted Ruddiger to build a bomb. But something's missing."

"Nadeem Idris." Ressler murmured, attempting to help her connect the dots.

"What ships have been in or out of here in the last week from Turkey?" Lizzie directed her question
at the harbor master.

"None."

"Why would Zanetakos need a low–level Turkish diplomat to get a car bomb into the country?" Ressler questioned Lizzie.

Lizzie bit her lip in thought for a moment. "Because it's illegal to search diplomatic cargo. With his help, Zanetakos was able to get the car in without inspection." Lizzie pointed at the harbor master to gain his attention again. "Check the manifests for all incoming ships for any items signed by Nadeem Idris."

They all stood around a brand new Mercedes that just happened to be a dirty bomb set to blow in less than 15 minutes.

"It's re–fabricated. I've never seen anything like it. The bomb's not just inside the car. It is the car." The bomb tech attempted to explain.

"Well, we've got minutes here." Captain America sometimes liked to moonlight as Captain Obvious.

"What we've got is a big-ass problem." Retorted the Techie before walking over to his colleagues.

Everyone watched as the car was lowered to the ground, checking their watches.

"This isn't gonna work." Ressler murmured.

"It'll work." Lizzie tried to placate him though she was just as anxious as him.

"It's not gonna work. We got less than a minute. We're running out of time."

Lizzie watched, her mouth agape as Ressler ran to the car and promptly turned it on, speeding it down the port. She held her breath as he spun the wheel to send it careening into the ocean before jumping out just in time. The world seemed to slow as everyone counted down in their heads until… a dull boom and a large splash signaled the bomb detonation.

Okay, Lizzie had to admit. That was really freaking cool. Ressler may have just moved up a few notches in her cool book.

"Because there was no airborne exposure, the NRC is saying that contamination was contained, which is the only reason why the U.S. attorney is considering a plea agreement in exchange for your cooperation – Your full cooperation. Is that clear?" Ressler questioned Gina. He, Meera, and Lizzie were all crowded into her hospital room.

"Yes."

"Your prints are on a nine–millimeter used to assassinate Victor Fokin in Boston last June. Did you kill him?" Meera asked quietly.

"Yes."
"Why?"

"Someone didn't want him to talk."

"Go on." Ressler coaxed when it seemed as though she didn't wish to continue.

"He was a Russian agent defecting to the U.S. Somebody didn't want him spilling secrets."

"What secrets?" Ressler pressed.

"Fokin had information about the route Chechen guerrillas were using to move their supplies to their soldiers on the Russian border. The guy who hired me was making millions providing those supplies. His name is Raymond Reddington."

Lizzie froze for a moment. That couldn't be true. If it was, her father was going to have a fat lip.

"Do you know Tom Keen? We found this picture of him in your apartment."

"Never seen him before."

When Lizzie saw Tom walking through the war room, she quickly ran up to him, hugging him around his neck.

Just as they're about to leave, Tom does a double take as he gazes at one of the evidence boards.

"Tom?" Lizzie questioned as he walked over to it.

"That's him who I met with." Tom pointed to the photo of Newton "Grey" Philips, Red's man. "That's the guy who interviewed me for the job."

"Please do come in." Red muttered as Lizzie barged into his safe house.

"You and I – We're done." Lizzie spat out.

"I heard about Tom." Red murmured, his face transformed by fatigue into that of a much older man.

"Yeah. Zanetakos confessed."

Red cocked his head slightly. "Or took the fall."

"The passports? Forged. The money in the box? Traced to an offshore account of yours."

"I can only lead you to the truth. I can't make you believe it."

"The truth is that you're a sick, twisted man. This, your need to weasel your way in, take over my entire life, needs to end– You put Tom's picture in Zanetakos' apartment."

"No." Red stated firmly.

"You hired her to kill Victor Fokin. You set my husband up by having your errand boy lure him to Boston.”
"Is that what Tom said?"

"I don't understand why you would do this, any of it! Go to hell."

Lizzie stormed out of the room and out of the house. She didn't see as Red laid his head against the back of the chair, his face contorted in anguish as he scratched at the top of his head, the tic under his left eye going mad.

Red didn't see as Dembe followed Lizzie out of the house.

"Elizabeth, wait."

Lizzie ignored him as she stomped to her car, fumbling with the keys. Dropping them, she stood only to have her arm grabbed gently by Dembe to turn her around.

"Elizabeth, listen to me. Please."

"There's nothing you can say, Dembe! He's gone too far this time!" Lizzie's rage made her words whip between them.

"He is your father, Elizabeth. If you trust nothing else about him, trust that. He is trying to show you what you need to see in the only way he knows how."

Lizzie stared up at Dembe for several moments, her face relaxing from fury to confusion as she saw the earnest truth in his eyes.

"I need to understand."

Red startled at the sound of her voice, whipping around from where he had been leaning against the window pane, planning to drown himself in the hefty amount of whiskey he'd just poured.

"Lizzie—"

"I need to understand why you manufactured this whole… circus. Please Dad. I know you're trying to tell me something, I get that. But I need you to spell it out for me." Lizzie walked over to him and took his hand, leading him to the couch. Lizzie sat down, bringing one of her knees up to face him as he sat down next to her with a sigh.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart… this is…you're not going to like it."

"I'm fairly sure whatever you're going to say will be a lot better than the fact that you manufactured this whole thing to try and plant a seed of doubt in my head about my husband. Which, by the way, is probably the most insane, off the wall thing you've ever done."

"Well, there was that time—"

"Shut up, Dembe." Lizzie and Red both spoke at the same time, causing Dembe to laugh as he left the room to give them some privacy.

Red sat there a moment, gathering his thoughts. "I did not manufacture all of it. I promise, Tom and Gina did have a relationship. I did not plant that photo in her home."
Lizzie swallowed, nodding her head for him to continue.

"Yes, the money was traceable to me, the passports were forged by one of my people, and that was my man, Grey at the hotel meeting with Tom."

"You're really not helping your own case, Dad."

"I hired him, Lizzie." Red whispered in a rush. "I had sent Grey there to buy him off, get him to leave."

"What?"

"Tom...though I highly doubt that is his real name, was hired to be one of your watchers back when you were in college."

Lizzie stood up and began pacing the room, her arms crossed over her chest as if to shield her.

"Lizzie, you knew I had people watching you. But something happened, Sweetheart. He betrayed us. He was never supposed to make contact."

Lizzie looked over at him, trying to gauge the truth of his words.

"I would never let one of my men do that – get close to you in such a way. I can only assume that he got a better offer from someone else."

"And you just... what? Allowed me to fall in love with him? To marry him?" Lizzie screeched, on the verge of hysteria as tears streamed down her face.

"I had no choice, Lizzie! You didn't exactly take too kindly to my taking measures the last time your relationship went south, and that boy beat the shit out of you!" Red's voice raised as he stood up from the couch. "I've been trying to find out who he works for with no luck. Three years, Lizzie, and not even a whisper. That just doesn't happen. Whoever it is, Lizzie, they're extremely dangerous."

"So what? You just let me continue on with my normal pretenses while some assassin spy slept next to me?" Lizzie couldn't hide the revulsion on her face and quickly spun around, turning her back to him.

"It's why I'm here now, Lizzie." Red reached out his arms in supplication though she couldn't see it. "It's what I've been trying to get you to understand for the last couple of months! Something is happening, Lizzie. Something huge. I'm sorry. I have done the best I could with this impossible situation. Sweetheart, please look at me."

God, he sounded so damn sad. Lizzie turned slowly, gnawing on her bottom lip as she did so. Dammit, he looked just as sad as he sounded.

"I'm sorry, Sweetheart. Truly I am. I did what I thought was best and I realize that it only made it worse. I'm so sorry."

Lizzie stared at him for a few moment and when he took a hesitant step towards her, she held up one hand as the other crossed over her chest. "I just... give me a minute to be really pissed at you." Lizzie folded both arms over her chest once more and stood there, her hip cocked to one side. "Jesus Christ, Dad. You... and then he..." Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair. "Never again, you hear me?" Lizzie pointed at him, but quickly looked away the sight of her anxious father, shifting from foot to foot and biting his bottom lip - the family tell which he had supposedly gotten rid of
years ago. She swallowed the guilt at the knowledge that she was the one to bring it back, because dammit, she wanted to be angry for a little while.

"Never again. I've come to terms with the fact that I always have watchers, I even might admit that they make me feel a little tiny bit safer. But if one of them betrays us ever again, you tell me. You intervene. Got it?"

They both stood still as they evaluated the situation until finally, Red nodded his head once in acquiescence. Lizzie bit her lip as her eyes skated over his face before nodding her head shakily. He gave her a bright smile before taking two giant steps and wrapping her up in a hug. Unfolding her arms, Lizzie returned the hug with just as much force.

"I'm so sorry, Lizzie, so sorry."

"I know, Dad." She murmured into his shoulder.

After some time, they finally broke apart and Lizzie wiped her cheeks, careful to get under her eyes as she was sure that by now she had some serious raccoon eyes.

"So what do I do?"

Red sighed as he looked down at her, a small frown on his face. "We need to find out who he works for. You need to play house, Lizzie."
Hey Guys! Your reviews have been AMAZING! I'm so happy ya'll like it! I love you all!

Some of you said that it's like watching the show again but from a different perspective – with subtle differences. Which is awesome, because that's what I was hoping to do...but the differences are going to become less and less subtle and the time line on certain…events will be accelerating. A lot.

"You're going to have to play house, Lizzie."

Lizzie stared at her dad in growing horror as she realized the implications of what he was saying. "I can't. Please, don't ask me to do this."

Red sucked his teeth, looking away as the corners of his eyes pinched in guilt. "I'm sorry Lizzie, I must. Until we find out what his end game is –what his employer's end game is, we have to keep him close."

"Keep your friends close –"

"And your enemies closer, yes." Red finished the phrase for her.

Lizzie looked away, sitting back down on the couch and resting her head against the back of the couch, unwilling to look at her dad as she felt the familiar sting of her eyes filling with tears. "Dad..."

Red sighed as he sat down beside her. "You'll also have to hate me for a little while as well. Shouldn't be too difficult for you, just draw on your teenage years. Our relationship was rather angsty then. Should be no problem at all for you." Red cut over her, unable to bear the thought of exactly what he was asking her to do, asking her to continue her fake marriage.

"What? Why?"

"Because as far as the F.B.I. knows, I just attempted to frame your husband and turn you against him." Red took a sip of the terrible alcoholic concoction of Hemstead's, laying his arm across the back of the couch. "Now, me being me, my world view may be a bit eschewed, however I don't believe that most people would find that a very forgivable thing for one person to do to another."

Despite the tears slowly rolling down her face, Lizzie snorted softly in amusement.

Red smiled at her, proud that he was still able to put a smile on her face.

"If we're in the Post Office or either of us are near one of your little F.B.I. friends, we must assume we're being overheard."
"What is this?"

Lizzie turned around from where she sat, her legs folded beneath her on a dining room chair. She had been gazing at paint samples and now held them up to show to Tom.

"Café au lait unless you like the dark nut better. But don't decide yet."

"I'm sorry. Let's start over. Why is our dining room no longer dine-able?" Tom chuckled, looking around at the dining room which had apparently been turned into the show room of a Home Depot.

"We're remodeling." Lizzie threw him a smile before looking back at the paint samples. If she was going to play house, she damn well better get a new one.

It also may help that Dembe aided her in stealing one of her father's pre-paid credit cards. She may have forgiven him but that doesn't mean he didn't owe her big time. Daddy dearest was going to foot the bill for this one.

"Clearly, and we're doing it at 7:00 a.m." Tom smirked at her, glancing down at his watch.

"Well, the guy at the hardware store said to hang the samples in the morning so that you can see what they look like throughout the day. What do you think?"

"I like this one." Tom pointed to one of the swatches she already had hanging on the wall.

"Grandma's Pumpkins?"

"Grandma's what?" He snorted.

"I know it's ridiculous." Lizzie laughed as she hugged him from behind before climbing on his back. Was she laying it on too thick? She hoped she wasn't laying it on too thick. "Oh, I'm just so sick of this room." She murmured, kissing his cheek and refraining from making a face at the scratchiness of his beard. She'd never really liked that feeling.

"Why? I like this room."

"It's not the room. It's just that someone invaded our lives, our house. They put that stupid box in the floor."

"It doesn't matter anymore." Tom wrapped his arms around her as she hopped off him and stood in front of him.

"They made me believe you were a monster." Lizzie wrapped her arms around his neck, moving closer to him. "I doubted you. I doubted us."

"Yeah, we're past it." Tom rested his head on her shoulder and she kissed his ear. "We're gonna be fine. And I don't think that we need to destroy the dining room. I think that we just need —"

"— to move?" Lizzie asked excitedly. Knowing her dad, the amount that was probably on that card could totally cover the cost of a mid-priced home in D.C.

"I was gonna say we need time, but, uh, it's good to know where your head's at." He chuckled, scratching at his beard.

Lizzie's phone began to ring. She quickly walked over to the kitchen counter and grabbed it.
"Keen."

"Turn on the TV." Ressler's voice came through the earpiece.

"Babe, can you turn the TV on?" Lizzie said to Tom who quickly nodded and grabbed the remote.

"Which channel?" Lizzie aimed the question at her phone.

"Any channel."

Tom clicked the TV on and a newscaster could immediately be heard:

"This is the scene at D.C.'s Red Line Station. Details are still sketchy, but rescue teams and emergency personnel are arriving on the –"

Lizzie stood in the war room with the rest of the team, trying to collate information on what had happened when she noticed a tech walking up to them and standing awkwardly, waiting to be addressed. She quickly nodded her head to him to let him know she was listening.

"Excuse me. We've got a caller into the tip line. The person claims they can I.D. our suspect."

Lizzie made a grabbing motion and the man quickly handed over the phone he'd been holding.

"This is Special Agent Keen."

"Agent Keen, I have a tip. You're a winter, not an autumn. Stop wearing olive."

Of course it was. Who could it be other than her father. "You know, I don't have time for this."

"You're not the one who had to listen to that God-awful hold music for 7 minutes, which wouldn't have been necessary if you'd take my calls." Red interrupted himself, clearly talking to someone he was with. "It's a little snug. Don't you think, Martin?"

Oh dear lord, her father was at his tailor's, getting fitted for another one of his glamorous suits.

"You know, as much as I love our little talks, you're holding up a line for people that might have actual information."

"This isn't a social call. I can identify the man you're looking for, Lizzie."

"Okay. Who is he?"

"Phones are so impersonal. Why don't we meet for show and tell in 30 minutes? Dembe will forward you a location. If you care to hear me out, wonderful. Otherwise, good luck with your case."

He was clearly enjoying pretending to be having a tiff with her a little too much.

Lizzie felt that the old run-down tailor's that she was currently in said a lot about her father – nothing she didn't know, of course, but it still spoke volumes. He was comfortable in any environment – whether it was a slum or a five-star hotel. He loved fancy suits but knew that quality didn't necessarily match the price tag. He'd rather get a delicious dumpling from Chinatown than
an expensive five course meal that still left him hungry afterwards.

Lizzie stood next to her brother as they watched her dad pick out fabrics.

"The man you're looking for is named Frederick Barnes, a former defense research scientist out of ARPAX Systems in Annapolis." Red looked at the tailor, Martín, and pointed to a navy fabric with light grey pinstripes and nodded. "You may not be familiar with his name, but you're likely familiar with his work in biochemical agents such as cytochlorin, black phosphorus, paratoxin. Barnes headed the project team that developed all of them. But he was more than just a research scientist. He was gifted, a savant of government-sanctioned mass killing."

"What do you mean, 'was'?"

"Five years ago, the man quit his job, sold his house, and entered the free market. Started selling his creations to the highest bidder autocrats, terrorists, me."

"Betraying your country and auctioning off its secrets. Where have I heard that before?" Again, she forgave him, that didn't mean she forgot.

Red let out an unpleasant laugh that sent shivers down Lizzie's spine. "You want to compare him to me? Be my guest. I'm perfectly comfortable with what I am. But, please, make no mistake – Frederick Barnes is a very special animal, one with the tools and know-how to kill thousands and thousands of people all at once. What he's lacked until now has been the desire."

Lizzie swallowed, realizing she may have gone a bit far that time. She leaned closer to him, acting as if she was inspecting the fabrics, discretely placing her hand in his and squeezing, hoping he got the message. I'm sorry. "So, what's changed?"

Red squeezed back. Apology accepted. Neither let go of the other's hand. "Well, that's the question. Barnes has always operated with a certain level of detachment – always the designer, the seller, never the delivery agent of his own weapons. But if Barnes is now willing to use his work to kill indiscriminately, then he is, quite literally, the most dangerous man in the world."

\\\

Lizzie and Ressler had just gotten back to the post office after speaking with Dr. Buckner – the doctor in charge of investigating the attacks and the outbreaks of Kurz. She had told them that Barnes was using Strontium 90 – a radioactive isotope – to deliver the pathogen.

Lizzie, Ressler, and Meera all stood, crowded into Cooper's office while Cooper sat behind his desk and Red sat in front of it, his legs crossed with his fedora resting jauntily on his knee.

"Strontium 90 isn't something you can just pick up at your local piggly wiggly. It's a waste by-product of nuclear reactors: toxic, highly regulated. There's only a handful of people in the world who can procure it in sizable quantities."

"Let me guess you happen to know one of them." Ressler asked, as usual, unable to - or maybe just unwilling to mask his utter disdain as he spoke to Red.

"Actually, I happen to know three of them the first of whom was apprehended by Russian authorities last month, the second, vaporized by a drone in Quetta, courtesy of your colleagues in the five-sided foxhole." Red looked passively at Ressler as he spoke.

"And the third?" Meera questioned.
"Is likely Barnes' supplier."

"Cut to it – I want a name."

Red rolled his eyes at Cooper's misplaced expectation that he could order him around. "I'm afraid it wouldn't do you any good. The FBI has no jurisdiction where he operates. In any case, I've already set a meeting with him for this afternoon."

"And what makes you think he knows how to find Barnes?" Lizzie asked quickly, recognizing the warning signs of Cooper about to blow his top off.

"He knows how to get paid by him. That should be sufficient."

"And he's just gonna willingly hand over this information?"

"Well cross that bridge when we get there, Donald. Look, we're wasting precious time. You want to catch a mass murderer before he strikes again, and for that to happen, I need to catch a plane." Red stood up as he spoke and left the office, Lizzie quickly following after him as he headed towards the elevator.

Red slowed his gait to let her catch up to him and gave her a small nod. "That's my que."

"You should come, Lizzie. We could have a therapy session on the way, talk out our problems. Have you ever been to Cuba?"

"I'm sorry. All my tropical wear's in the wash." Lizzie murmured sarcastically as they stood waiting for the elevator to arrive.

"You'd look positively radiant in a Guayabera dress. I know a little shop in Reston. We could stop before our flight."

"There is no 'our flight.'" She muttered angrily as she walked into the elevator, jamming her finger at the correct button.

"You have something more pressing than finding your suspect?"

"Actually, I was able to track down Barnes' old research partner, so I'm hoping she can fill in some of the missing pieces."

"So, I guess you're on your own." Red nodded his head and an awkward moment of silence invaded the elevator. "I'm sorry you're upset with me."

God he was good. He was a master at lying as close to the truth as possible. They'd been over this, they had to act as if he had tried to frame Tom. That didn't mean he wasn't genuinely sorry about something else – mainly hiring Tom in the first place.

"That would imply I care enough to be angry." She was going to have to apologize later for that one. Maybe she'd stop at that millinery shop he loved so much and buy him a new fedora – something to match the new suit.

"I might do the same in your position. It's easier to blame me for framing your husband than face the truth of what he is."

Well, she'd already been there and done that hadn't she? It's easier to believe your father than your husband. Especially when you find a box full of passports with said husband's face on them.
"Tom teaches 4th grade. He's overworked and underpaid and still wakes up every morning with a smile on his face. You know why? Because he knows nothing of the terrible world you and I live in. End of story."

"Oh, that's not the end of the story. I'm confident you'll come to see that. But in the meantime, we need to find a way to move past this. Because for me, there's just no fun in it unless you're there. And if there's no fun to be had, I'm not interested."

Lizzie rolled her eyes at her father's back as he exited the elevator before her. They walk down the fire escape exit of the Post Office and Dembe is waiting for them at the bottom, their car idling in the alley.

Lizzie quickly waved goodbye to Dembe as she crossed the street to one of the fleet SUV's. Because what's less conspicuous than several black SUV's parked outside of a supposedly empty warehouse?

\\\

"We should probably get going if you want to make Havana by noon." Dembe murmured to Red as he stood there, watching Lizzie leave as he ground his teeth slightly.

After a moment, Red finally nodded his head before sliding into the car. Dembe quickly closed the door behind him before climbing into the driver's seat.

Red slouched down and laid his head on Luli's shoulder where she sat next to him in the backseat. "Quick, say something nice to me. It's been a dreadful morning."

She gave one of her small smiles. "Would good news suffice? You wanted to know if it ever went on the market?"

Red Sat up, immediately knowing what she was referring to and took the leather portfolio she held, looking over the paperwork. "Is it really for sale – ?"

"I take that to mean you'd like me to move forward with the purchase?"

"Hmm. Perhaps this day can be salvaged after all." Red murmured before nodding decisively.

\\\

Liz and Ressler left Mr and Mrs Forrester's home having found out that their son, Ethan, has Kurz and is actually Frederick Barnes' son.

"That's why Barnes is killing. He wants to infect enough people with Kurz disease that it gets on the public's radar." Lizzie said as they walked to their car.

"Why?"

"Because then it can't be ignored anymore. The more people that die, the more attention the disease gets." She said earnestly, trying to make Ressler understand.

"And the more profitable it will be to invest research dollars. Putting aside how insane this sounds, if you're right, Barnes is just getting started."

\\\

Dembe sat in the car outside Manny Soto's base of operations in Cuba while Red spoke to the man
about his recent sell of Stronium 90. He typed away at the laptop sitting next to him in the bucket seat of the old car, prepping the tracer for when Red was ready.

"Bueno." Dembe quietly answers his phone.

"I've secured the funds on the purchase. I'm ready to proceed on Red's word." Luli's voice came over the line.

Dembe smiled softly, knowing how badly Raymond needed this. "Good. I'll let him know once he's done with Soto."

A little while later, Red slid into the backseat of the car.

"Did he take the bait?" Dembe questioned, looking at Red through the rear view mirror.

"Like a trout to a butterworm. He should be calling Barnes any minute."

Barely a moment later, a phone number begins scrawling across the laptop screen set next to Dembe.

"Call's going through now." Dembe's voice softly rumbled.

"Good, run the trace."

"What do you need?" Lizzie balanced her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she rummaged through some files on her desk.

"A bottle of beer and a pork sandwich. How about you? What do you need? How about Barnes' location?" Red asked as he lounged back in the supple leather seats of their current car as he and Dembe headed back to the airport.

Lizzie chased after Barnes, trying to push her way through the crowd of people rushing towards the doors to get out of the courthouse, yelling with futility for the people around her to move out of the way, for Barnes to stop. Just as she gets close to him, Barnes wrestles a gun out of a security guard's holster and holds it to the poor man's head, backing out of the entrance to the courthouse and into the bright sunshine.

"I'm only gonna say this once: drop the gun." Lizzie hoped her voice didn't tremble as much as her hands were as she attempted to aim her gun at Barnes.

"Either you accidentally dialed the wrong number. Or you're calling because you've hit a dead end. So, which is it?" Red answered his phone as he sipped a beer, looking out the window of his jet.

"Barnes got away, and the trail's dried up." Lizzie murmured, sitting on the steps in one of the numerous hallways of the Post Office she had sought out in hopes of some modicum of privacy.

Red chuckled with disdain. "You g-men are top shelf. Let me guess. Ressler slipped on a banana peel?"
"Do you know how to find him?"

"I'm not a gumball machine, Lizzie. You don't get to just twist the handle whenever you want a treat. We can't keep doing this little waltz."

Lizzie stared at her phone, wracking her brain to remember the last time that he had hung up on her. Never. He had never hung up on her. God, he really knew how to sell a story.

She called him back.

"Don't hang up." Some of her anguish apparently leaked out as there was a small pause before Red spoke again.

"I'm listening."

"The reason Barnes is still out there is because I let him slip away. I couldn't take the shot and I…I couldn't take the shot. It's only a matter of time before he kills again and when he does, that will be on me. So, please, I need your help."

There was another moment of silence before she heard him sigh tiredly in her ear. "I saw in the coverage there was a survivor from the Arlington attack. You should assume Barnes knows that, as well."

"Which means what?"

"Has he been to see her yet?"

"Uh, no." It was said as more of a question as Lizzie couldn't figure out where he was going with this.

"Are you sure?"

"Why would he?"

"Barnes may be a scientist, but he's also a killer. And in that line of work, a survivor is considered unfinished business."

---

Red is leaning against a black Mercedes as Lizzie walks out of Mr. and Mrs. Forrester's home which was now currently a crime scene – as can be attested to by the many FBI SUV's, cop cars, and ambulance.

"What are you doing here?" Lizzie asked as she walked over to him.

"I brought you a souvenir. What's your feeling about guava?" Red asked, holding out a paper bag.

"Anxiety." She deadpanned.

Red chortled merrily as he handed her the bag. "Oh, you're in for a treat. I take it from the coroner's van that Barnes is no longer with us. Pity."

Lizzie looked up at her father, disbelieving. "Tell that to the families of the people he murdered."

"Every cause has more than one effect, Lizzie. Say what you will about Frederick, but someone who's willing to burn the world down to protect the one person they care about – That's a man I
understand."

Lizzie stared at her father in equal parts horror and wonder. To know that he loved her so much was both frightening and...powerful. No wonder she had such a shit track record with men. Who the hell could compare to that? Man, did she need to see a shrink.

As Red kept glancing from her to the fleet of cars parked on the Forresters' lawn, Lizzie assumed she'd been quiet for a bit too long. Oh, right...they had to play their parts.

"Is that supposed to be directed at me?" Lizzie was rather proud of how quickly she'd been able to flip the switch in her head to spew her words venomously. If all else failed, she could probably do well in Hollywood.

Red let out a bark of a laugh. "Aren't you presumptuous?"

"Is that how you somehow justify your actions, by some misguided notion of protecting me? From whom? My husband, I suppose. I don't need your protection."

Red bit the inside of his cheek. "Maybe not."

Lizzie sighed, glancing away into the near distance before looking back at Red. "But I do need you to do this job. I've accepted that. And believe it or not, I appreciate what you do for the bureau. And at work, you and I are partners. But that's where this relationship needs to end at work. I don't want you in my personal life. I don't know how to make that clear."

"You know the problem with drawing lines in the sand?" Red smirked and waved his hand in the air gently. "With a breath of air, they disappear. You may not like me. You may not understand how or why I do what I do. But I'm here because you want answers to questions you haven't even thought of yet. Now, if that doesn't matter to you, the solution is simple I get in this car and I disappear."

"You have a deal with the government. You have a tracking device in your neck."

"You don't believe Raymond Reddington could cease to exist in 60 seconds? I offer that particular package to clients."

"You're offering to walk away?" True panic began to leak into her voice. He wouldn't actually end this for the sake of keeping "in-character" would he?

"I'm not going to beg you to allow me the privilege of helping you. So, say the word, and I'm gone. Tell me to go, Lizzie..." Lizzie opened and closed her mouth, frozen, unable to speak. "Then I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

Well, she guessed, it seemed as though they were no longer fighting.

/\/\/

Lizzie was able to go home at a surprisingly decent hour that night – Cooper having let them leave the paperwork until tomorrow. As she hung up her coat and threw her keys on the table, she walked down the hallway only to stop when she noticed Tom, sitting on the floor of the dining room with nothing but a lamp sitting next to him as he ate Chinese food.

"What is this?" Lizzie asked, looking around.

"We're remodeling." Tom stated as if it was obvious which...okay, it was.
"Clearly." She snorted as she sat down next to him on the floor and grabbed one of the containers of food.

"Long day?"

"You have no idea." Lizzie groaned, resting her head on his shoulder. It was getting more exhausting by the second. She was so tired of pretending.

"It's killing you, isn't it?" Tom huffed good naturedly.

"Did you really get rid of all our stuff?" Lizzie asked, lifting her head to look at their now barren dining room.

"Do you seriously not remember?"

"What?" God, not this again. Not the 'does-Lizzie-remember-some-obscure-date-or-moment' game. He was such a girl sometimes.

"Wow, okay. It was Friday night. We'd just driven in from Rochester and picked up the keys to this place, but our furniture wasn't coming until Sunday. So, we drove to the store, and we got Ike."

"Oh, yeah, the lamp." Lizzie laughed, feebly pointing at the lamp that sat next to Tom. Ok, yes, it was a rather good memory.

"Remember, that 'a' was scratched off the finish? Poor guy was in the clearance bin."

"And on the way back, we stopped at that little Chinese place and got takeout. That was our first night in this place."

"Yeah. That's all we had." She said, smiling over at him.

"It's all we ever needed. Just you, me, and Ike."

And then he was staring at her with those damn eyes and he was her husband and she had to play house.

Tom leaned forward and kissed her softly.

As the kiss became more heated and Lizzie swung her leg over to sit on his lap, her stomach roiled.

Later that night, Lizzie flushed the toilet in their en suite bathroom and wiped her mouth with a towel, not bothering to wipe the tear tracks. They were a lost cause as her eyes just wouldn't stop leaking. Opening the door to the bathroom, Lizzie quickly tiptoed into their bedroom. Making a bee line for her bed side table, Lizzie grabbed her cell phone and went downstairs.

In the kitchen, Lizzie leaned against the counter and dialed. Unable to hold herself up any longer as her strength left her, she slid to the floor.

As soon as she heard Dembe's voice, she choked on a sob.

"Elizabeth?"

She couldn't breathe.
"Elizabeth? What is wrong?"

Lizzie tried to speak, really she did. But all that came out was another sob before she began to cough, choking on the sudden over abundance of saliva and snot.

"Elizabeth? Hold on, I will get Raymond. We will be there s—"

"No!" She cried out, finally finding her voice at the idea of her dad coming to the rescue on this one. "No. Just…I really need my big brother." Lizzie choked out.

There was a minute of silence where Lizzie began to wonder if he was going to refuse.

"Okay, alright Elizabeth. Meet me at the park on 25th and Broad Street. Can you do that?"

"Yea.." Lizzie cleared her throat, standing up. "Yes."

They hung up soon after and Lizzie wiped her face. She could do this. She could hold it together for the next 10 minutes.

Hurrying up the stairs, Lizzie walked into the bedroom she shared with Tom.

"Babe? Everything alright?"

Pausing mid stride, Lizzie winced at the sound of Tom's sleepy mumble, she nodded her head even though he probably couldn't see it without his glasses and well, because it was dark.

"Yea, I just got called back in. Go to sleep."

Lizzie whispered, hoping he didn't notice that she had just grabbed jeans and one of her oversized sweaters out of her dresser before hurrying out of their room. She could get changed in the living room.

Lizzie pulled into the small parking lot for the park and sighed at the sight of Dembe's car. As she parked and turned off her lights, she saw Dembe climb out and head towards a bench. She soon followed after him, shoving her keys into her purse as she choked, her sobs renewing with vigor. She was proud of herself. She'd made it a whole 15 minutes.

Lizzie walked quickly over to Dembe where he had stood once more from the bench once he noticed how distraught she still was.

"Elizabeth?"

Lizzie nearly head butted his chest, unwilling to slow down as she dived into him, wrapping her arms around his abdomen and holding on with all her strength, her tears flowing freely as she cried into his shoulder. Her strength seemed to fail her as the weight of what had just happened seemed to slam into her.

Dembe held onto her as he felt her going slack, quickly guiding her to sit down on the bench.

"Please Elizabeth, what is wrong?"

Lizzie shook her head, unable to answer through her tears.

"Elizabeth, what has happened? Is it Tom? Did he do something?"
She could only nod.

"Has he hurt you?"

Lizzie froze, unsure how to respond. Did he hurt her? Had she done this to herself? She didn't know, everything was just so jumbled.

"I will kill him." Dembe spat vehemently, having taken her silence as answer enough.

Shocked into action by the anger in Dembe's usually placid voice, Lizzie shook her head.

"No, Dembe. It…I don't know."

"You must explain to me Elizabeth. What happened." It was no longer a question.

"I had to play house." Her voice was pathetic, even to her ears. "I got home and he had gotten Chinese and removed all of the furniture… tried to recreate our first night at our house." Lizzie gulped air. "And then he…we…" Lizzie leaned over to the other side of the bench and vomited, sobbing as the acidic taste invaded her mouth once more.

"I can't do this, Dembe. I can't!"

"Shh, calm Elizabeth. Do not fret." He murmured as he held her hair back for her, just in case. "You will come stay with us tonight. You cannot go back there."

Lizzie nodded pathetically, allowing him to pull her to a standing position once it was clear she wasn't at risk of throwing up again.

"But what about Dad?" She questioned as he led her to his car, one hand around her shoulders and the other holding onto her hand.

"We will talk to him. Do not worry. Everything will be alright."

"It doesn't feel like it." She murmured as he helped her into the passenger seat of his car.

"Have Raymond and I ever failed at making it better?"

Lizzie looked over at him and smiled bitterly. "Well, there was that one time you hired a spy to watch me and then he betrayed you and married me, literally causing me to sleep with the enemy."

Dembe winced, realizing he really rather put his foot in it on that one.

\\\\

"Lizzie?"

She looked up at the sound of her Dad's concern as she and Dembe walked into their hotel room. Of course he was up, the man never slept. She had been hoping he'd be asleep and this could wait until morning. But apparently she looked as good as she felt and he walked towards her, his arms outstretched.

Lizzie's bottom lip trembled and she offered no resistance as her dad pulled her into a tight hug.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Lizzie shook her head against Red's shoulder.
"Darling, if I don't know, I can't make it better."

A sob escaped her as he led her over to the couch.

"Please, Lizzie. You're frightening me." Red sighed, running his fingers through her hair as she cuddled into his side. Realizing he would get no answers from Lizzie, Red looked up at Dembe.

"She went home to her husband, Raymond."

"So? That's perfectly nor—oh Christ." Red brought both arms around Lizzie and squeezed her to him. "I'm so sorry, Lizzie. I didn't...you don't have to go back there. You'll stay with us. Don't worry, Sweetheart." He murmured, kissing the top of Lizzie's head as her sobs gathered in strength.

"You will never have to do that again, Darling. I promise."

Red began to rock her, humming the Anniversary Waltz lowly.

Lizzie felt a slight dip in the couch as Dembe sat down on her other side, grabbing her hand in comfort.

In that moment, she didn't think she'd ever loved them more.

\\\\

Lizzie woke to sunlight streaming in the room and sleep crusties in her eyes which she quickly rubbed out with her palm. Stretching luxuriously in the cloud that the hotel called a bed, which Dembe had graciously given up in favor of the couch for her, Lizzie smiled at the warmth of the sunshine as it streaked across her bed.

Lizzie lay there at peace until the events of last night caught up with her. Groaning, she ducked her head under the blankets and curled into a ball, not wanting to face the day.

"Rise and shine, sleepy head!"

Lizzie groaned at the sound of her father's voice muffled through the door. A quick knock was all the warning she received before he walked in.

"C'mon Lizzie, I know you're awake Sweetheart."

After a moment, the smell of coffee enticed her to fold the blanket away from her head.

"There you are, good morning Lizzie."

Red smiled down at her softly. Lizzie sat up groggily and allowed him to set the breakfast tray he'd brought in down over her lap.

"Mmm coffee." She murmured, taking a large gulp. Of course it was exactly as she liked it – coffee with her creamer and more sugar than was healthy.

"Thank you." She whispered around the lip of the mug before taking another sip.

Red patted her hand comfortingly as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

"If you're willing, Lizzie, there is something I'd very much like to show you.

\\\\
Lizzie's brow furrowed as they drove up to the slightly run-down yet seemingly innocuous home with a realtor's sign in the front yard. Throwing a glance at Dembe, he shook his head discreetly in the rearview mirror. Right, don't talk. Let Dad speak first. She read the message loud and clear.

Once she agreed to come with him today, her Dad's mood had quieted and he seemed to grow anxious. She had decided to remain quiet, a decision which apparently had to be put into effect for a little while longer. Clearly her dad had something he needed to show her, needed to tell her. She just had to be patient.

Walking into the house, Lizzie looked around with her dad, not noticing as Dembe went to work, walking into the basement with a hardware bag.

"Strange. I remember it being bigger." Red murmured.

"I don't understand. What's so special about this place, Dad?" Lizzie finally questioned.

Red paused, running his hands along the bannister that led up to the second floor before looking back at her, his eyes sorrowful. "This was my house, Lizzie. This was the house I shared with my wife and…and your big sister."

Lizzie stared at her dad in shock. Her mind was racing with the emotional can of worms he had just opened. She had always wondered what her sister would have been like, would they have ever met or would Red have kept her hidden from his little family. But here they were, standing in his family home. He had asked her here. He needed her here. Lizzie tamped down on what this meant to her and took her dad's hand and let him lead her around the house.

In the kitchen, he paused, staring at a wall before releasing his vice-like grip on her hand and walking over to the paneled walls. Looking it up and down for a moment, as if sizing it up, Red grasped some of the paneling and ripped it off with a small crack. He stared at the small bit of wall that now appeared for so long that Lizzie walked over hesitantly to see what he was staring at.

Tears began to fall down her face at the sight of the height marks, paired with various ages. It stopped at 8 ½ years old. It finally hit her. Her sister had died in this house.

"Oh dad. I'm so sorry."

She didn't think she'd ever said that. His other family – her sister, had always been a distant thing for her, more like a story than any sort of reality.

Red simply nodded. That's all he could do, not trusting himself to speak as he walked into the living room. Standing at the bay window, he remembered his eldest daughter, his little Jenny, playing with bubbles in the front yard, her curly blond hair cascading messily down her back.

Lizzie took his hand in hers once more as she stood next to him, watching as a bittersweet, heartbroken expression stretched across his face.

"It's lovely." She murmured, resting her head on his shoulder.

"No, it's not, but it used to be."

"Time to go." Lizzie startled and whirled around to where Dembe stood.

"Did you prepare everything the way I asked?" Red hadn't turned, staring fixedly out the window.

"Yes Raymond." Dembe murmured, leaving the room. Red and Lizzie followed soon after.
As they got to the car, Red and Lizzie turned to look at it once more before sliding into the car.

"This place must hold a lot of memories for you." She murmured as they pulled away from the curb.

"I spend every day trying to forget what happened here. This should help." He murmured, leaning his head against the back of the seat, his hand still holding tightly to hers.

Lizzie looked to him, a question furrowing her brow before a deep concussive *boom* caused her to whip her head back to gaze behind them, out the rear window, to see the house they'd just exited engulfed in flames.

"Holy shit, Dad."
Chapter 25

So... I wasn't going to post this one this weekend but then I realized that next up is Anslo Garrick! (Woot!) So, more than likely that will be two chapters on its own and since I tend to prefer posting two chapters each weekend, I didn't think you guys would enjoy me posting this one and then the first part of the Anslo Garrick chapters next week and then leave you hanging so... here ya go! Don't ever let it be said that I leave ya'll hanging too long on a cliffie! I plan for this stuff.

"Lizzie, are you sure? You don't have to do this. We can find another way."

"No, I…I'll be fine. I can do this. I just.. I won't do uh...that with him. I can't." Lizzie shuddered and Red walked up to her, wrapping his arms around her.

"If you need me or Dembe, don't hesitate to call."

Lizzie nodded against his chest before stepping back and wiping her eyes. "I know. And thanks."

Lizzie looked at Red then over at Dembe. "I don't think I could do this without you both." Lizzie said as she slowly headed to the door. "Love you guys."

/

The television was on in the kitchen as they got ready for work.

"A cargo plane bound for Los Angeles … sources say it exploded just 90 seconds after takeoff here in Washington."

"Hey, you see this?" Tom asked, nodding at the TV.

"Huh?" Lizzie questioned, not looking up from where she was preparing her mug of coffee.

"Plane crash."

Lizzie finally turned around, a sinking feeling telling her she was going to have a long day.

"The debris and the eyewitness accounts say it looks like a bomb. Investigators on the ground as to the nature of the explosion." The broadcaster announced.

Lizzie sighed just before her cell began to ring. Her brow furrowed in confusion. He usually never calls at this time.

"It's my Pop…” She murmured to Tom before answering.

"Eyewitness reports are claiming that this could be the result of a terr–“ Lizzie grabbed the remote and turned the TV off.

"Hey…Is everything okay?" Lizzie answered the phone.

"What, I can't call my daughter unless there's something wrong?"
Lizzie winced as she heard his muffled coughs over the phone. "How you feeling?"

"Oh, you know me. Picture of health."

"Something's wrong." Lizzie bit her lip.

"Yeah, this 12–year–old who claims to be an oncologist wants to run another series of tests."

"You're in the hospital? I'm coming." Her voice took on an urgent tone, causing Tom to perk up in alert next to her. She ignored him. She was unable to look at him without shivering in disgust.

"No, you're not. I'm fine. Listen, butterball, i- it's under control. I got teams of medical people here. Their teams have teams. I'm fine."

Lizzie waited until his latest bout of hacking coughs finished. "When are these tests happening?"

"Today. Soon as the doc finishes her Martini." Sam grumped.

"No jokes." Lizzie huffed, annoyed at her Pop's stubborn nature. "If this is serious, I want to be there."

"It's not."

"Don't say that just 'cause you don't want to bother me. You're my Pop. You're allowed to bother me."

"It's just a test, Lizzie."

Lizzie gave up, noting his exasperated tone. "Okay. Leave your phone on and call me as soon as it's done, okay?"

"All right."

"Pop, I love you."

"I love you, too."

\/
\/
\/

"Absolutely not. I'm not giving you access to the FBI's ViCAP system."

Lizzie stood quietly at the back of Cooper's office, trying not to interfere in the little stare down that was currently happening between her boss and her dad.

"Then you'll just have to find another criminal to talk to Elizabeth Keen and make fun of Agent Ressler."

"We have an agreement."

"Yes, the agreement is for me to bring cases to you. It doesn't work the other way around. I'm not your consultant. I have no interest in cases that I have no interest in." Red stood up, his placid face showing he was bored with this conversation. "Personally, I think my proposal was incredibly fair. You have got to give to get, Harold."

"You're asking me to go beyond the terms of our agreement."
"If you want me to help you with this case, I will, but I need something extra to sweeten the deal. Rest assured, granting me access to ViCAP will benefit you just as much as it does me."

"Does this mean you know who took down that cargo plane?"

Red threw back his head and laughed, clearly at Cooper expense. "You're speaking as if an individual is responsible for this. It's far bigger than you might think. It's a movement. Do we have a deal?"

\\\\

Lizzie and Ressler were heading to their vehicle, leaving the site where the plane went down. They had just found out that both Roger Gard, the cargo operator who loaded the bomb onto the plane, and Arthur Denning, the employee of the fertilizer plant were the same person.

Lizzie dialed the familiar number before putting her phone to her ear. Climbing into the car, Lizzie sighed as Sam's phone went to voicemail.

"Hey. I know you don't want to call me because you don't want to freak me out, but F.Y.I., not calling me freaks me out, so call me. Uh, I– I just want to know about the tests. I love you."

\\\\

Luli and Mary, a housewife by day and counterfeiter by night, sat at a fold out table in Mary's garage as Red lounged back in a picnic chair, reading a tabloid.

"Malaysia is the future, Mary. A whole new world is waiting there. They are starting a production line." Luli enthused as she placed the counterfeited bills in the automatic counter as Mary pulled them down from the drying racks.

"I am not moving to Malaysia."

"I understand, but with your skills in a market like Kuala Lumpur –"

"I find it so reassuring the movie stars, the pop singers they really are just like the rest of us." Red didn't look up from his tabloid as he made it known that he was there, still listening.

"Mr. Reddington, I told you, I'm not interested in anything outside Fairfax County. Caleb's in school. He's 9. I'm treasurer of the PTA, for God's sakes. I can't just leave." Mary swept her hand in an arch as if to say "look at all that I've got going for me here." Unfortunately for her, her argument was hampered by the large crack in the foundational wall and a pile of laundry that smelled like football season.

"Mary, darling, you would thrive in Malaysia, and Caleb would love it. Those thieving little monkeys near Batu Caves are absolute rascals." At the sound of the door to the garage opening, Red turned around and quickly hid his shock at seeing Lizzie walk in.

"Molly!" He shouted in pleasant surprise as he stood to greet her. "What are you doing here? You're a little early. We're not ready yet." Red turned to back to Mary. "One of our most trusted couriers. Please excuse us."

Red quickly ushered Lizzie out of the garage and into Mary's backyard.

"You have a suburban housewife printing fake money out of her garage." Lizzie asked, incredulous.
"Mary is an artist. She has a tremendous gift."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "I've been calling your people all morning. Luli didn't pick up."

"Luli didn't pick up because we are busy."

Lizzie's eyes narrowed. That sounded an awful lot like a reprimand. "Well, then you should have dug that chip out of your damn neck."

Red shook his head, a small smile gracing his face. God she was a spitfire. "Well, you're here now, so what's on your mind?" He asks as he meanders over to the swing set and sits down on one of them.

"We searched the home address listed for both suspects and were able to pull some prints. They belong to Nathaniel Wolff."

Red laughed as he began to slowly pump his legs to get the swing moving. "I never tire of being correct." He said, shaking his head. He had told the F.B.I. that Nathaniel Wolff was behind the General Ludd movement. But did anyone believe him? Of course not. Honestly, they treated him like a criminal sometimes.

"Someone changed his face."

"I understand Sam isn't well."

"Excuse me?" Lizzie was completely thrown by the change in topic.

"The cancer. It's come back?" Red murmured in concern as he looked up at her.

"Pop's fine. He's just ... Who the hell told you that?" How could he know? She had just found out that morning.

Red looked at her solemnly as he continued swinging. "You should be there with him, Lizzie."

"I can't play this game with you, not now."

"Dr. Maltz."

"What?"

"Abraham Maltz. The best surgeon for this sort of business." When Lizzie didn't jump into action he repeated the name, louder. "Maltz!" So maybe he yelled it a little bit.

\_/\_/\

Red and Lizzie were walking down the hallway of a swanky office building.

"Before we do this, let me be clear I have somewhere that I desperately need to be today, so this needs to happen quickly. You need to follow my lead. Dr. Maltz is not on the blacklist. He's an asset I need to protect."

"You want me to protect some plastic surgeon who might be linked to a terrorist organization?" Lizzie asked, unbelieving of what her father was asking of her.

"Yes." He stated simply before opening the door to Dr. Maltz office and opening his arms in greeting as they walked in. The first that Lizzie saw was the supposed Dr. Maltz getting a pedicure.
"Abraham!"

"Raymond. What brings you in?" The Doctor greeted Raymond as if they were old friends.

"I don't know how you do it." Red shook his head as he watched the man file away at Maltz's toes. "I had that done once. I couldn't bear the tickling. How are you? We need to talk, in private."

"Yeah, sure." Maltz said, moving to stand up. "Give us a minute, please?" Maltz directed his pedicurist to the door. "Ray, look at you. You look great. I mean, the elasticity is amazing. You been juicing?" Maltz scrutinized Red's face as if it were a painting in an art gallery.

"Beets, mostly. Some celery, carrots, a lot of ginger. The kale makes me dyspeptic." Red rubbed his stomach.

Maltz seemed to finally notice Lizzie and took a step away from Red. "And what's a beautiful young woman like you doing with this vulture?"

"Trust me, it's not by choice." She responded, her sarcasm in full force today.

"So, Nathaniel Wolff – you gave him a new face. I need to find him."

Maltz lifted his hands in supplication. "You know I would help you if I could, Raymond."

"I do, and I thank you for that, Abraham. Normally, I wouldn't impose, but this is a personal matter of some urgency."

"You know my business. You know the rules. It's all about confidentiality."

"Absolutely. This conversation should never leave this office."

Maltz's lips thinned as his patience did the same. "I just got done with six hours of surgery, and you walk in – I mean, I don't know you – " He pointed at Lizzie then at Red, "or why you think you can come in here and ask questions about my clients. Red, help me out."

"My name is Special Agent Elizabeth Keen. I'm with the FBI. Mr. Reddington is working with us, helping us to capture high-value targets, and Nathaniel Wolff is one of them. I need to find Wolff, and I know you can help us."

Maltz looked to Red, aghast. "Wait a minute. You're an informant now? How dare you come in this –"

Lizzie spoke over him, cutting him off. "Did you hear me? I said I need his new name. Give it to me, or I'll have the Miami field office tear your practice apart faster than you can say 'tummy tuck.'"

Maltz sighed in aggravation, recognizing when he's cornered. "Bradley Holland. Okay? That's the name he goes under now – Bradley Holland."

Red took a step back, putting his weight on one leg as if to lean away from Maltz in disgust. "Abraham! I refer important clients to you, people who are vital to my business, people whose livelihood depends on your confidentiality, and you roll over like a cockapoo wanting his belly scratched?"

"You said this guy was solid!" Lizzie shouted in consternation.

"What? Wait a minute." Poor, confused Maltz.
"Some woman who claims to be an FBI agent-" Red swept his arm behind him, pointing at Lizzie. 
"-makes a few ham-fisted threats, and you hand over one of your own clients? That's dirty pool. 
God forbid this little incident ever gets back to poor Nathaniel Wolff."

"Red, I don't know what's going on here!" Poor, confused, desperate Maltz. 

Red put his hand on his hip. "What other secrets have you just given away?"

"Nothing!"

Red leaned in to stage whisper. "Who knows about the work I've had done?"

"Nobody, truthfully! You know me!" Maltz implored.

"I brought Christina to you specifically for your discretion and expertise. I assured her you were 
trustworthy."

"I'm sorry."

Red shook his head. "I was wrong. Shame on you, Abraham. I know another doctor. Let's go." Red 
quickly directed Lizzie out of the office, Maltz's voice trailing after them.

"No, Red. We we could make this right. You know me. I would never give out a name of any 
client!"

The moment the door closed behind them, Red and Lizzie high fived, grinning at each other.

"I'll say it again, Lizzie. We make a great team."

Lizzie and Ressler were on their way to the Reagan airport where they got a hit on Wolff's latest 
alias – Bradley Holland. Apparently he was a pilot now. They were discussing the case as they 
drove when Lizzie's phone interrupted.

"Tom." She answered the call.

"Liz, Aunt June called."

"I'm sorry." Lizzie sighed. She could not deal with this right now. "Now's not a good time."

"Uh, she said your dad hasn't exactly been telling you the truth. Apparently, he's a little sicker than 
he's been letting on."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Aunt June gets indigestion and thinks she's having a stroke."

"The cancer's spread to his liver." Tom announced abruptly.

Lizzie sat up in her seat, garnering an askance look from Ressler as he continued driving. "What? 
No, he was just going in for a few tests."

"Apparently, it's a little more serious than that, and Aunt June thinks that we need to be there, like, 
now."

"I can't." Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair. "I– Oh, my God. I got to call him."
"No, he's in surgery. Listen, I'm on the next flight out of Dulles, and I got Ellie to watch Hudson."

"So surgery for what? Have you talked to his oncologist?"

"No, I talked to June, and you're right. She's probably overreacting. But if you can't go now, then, uh – then let me book you the 6:15 tomorrow morning, and you'll be in Nebraska by noon. Okay? Lizzie, okay?"

"Okay."

Lizzie hung up the phone and stared out the window.

"You all right?" The amount of sympathy in Ressler's voice surprised her and though she was grateful, all she could do was nod.

A few moments later, Ressler's phone rang and he reached to answer it, listening intently before hanging up.

"We got him. Deadheading to Denver, flight 1143."

The tires of the SUV squealed as they came to a stop on the airport tarmac a fair distance away from the plane that was flight 1143.

"Lock off this runway! Clear that terminal! I want everyone out of here now!" Ressler started yelling at any and all who would listen as they hopped out of the car.

"We need emergency vehicles on standby. Bomb squad's en route. I want every bag –" Lizzie began speaking to airport security when she was knocked off her feet by the sudden concussive blast as the plane blew up.

One month. She just wanted one month where things didn't go boom in her face.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Lizzie walked up to Cooper where he stood, staring at a screen in the war room.

"Sir? I have a family emergency. My father's sick. I need to catch a flight."

"Not an option."

"I know the timing is terrible –"

"All flights are grounded."

"What? Why?" Lizzie's stomach dropped. She had to get home. She had to get to Sam.

"General Ludd. FBI headquarters received a manifesto." Cooper hit play and the video he'd been watching began again.

"We are General Ludd. Our uprising against the undue influence of corporations on our government has begun. Today marks the beginning of a war. Our enemy? The oligarchs of corporate America, who have destroyed the middle class on whose backs this country was built. Our fight is for the soul of this country. There will be protests, violent uprisings, planes will fall from the skies. The corrupt corporate giants will be brought to their knees. So, as it begins, ask yourself: Are you General Ludd?"
"The F.A.A. has implemented 9/11 protocol. All planes are grounded until further notice."

Red sat at Sam's bedside as they both laughed. "Oh, my God. I've never been more scared of a woman in my life. She was thrilling in bed. What a pair of legs. I think she played field hockey in college." Sam laughs at Red's story though it quickly turned to a coughing fit. Red leaned forward and grabbed the cup of water sitting at Sam's bedside and helped him to drink it.

"I've missed that laugh." Red murmured softly as he took Sam's hand in his. "You look like hell."

Sam's only response was another choked laugh.

"I've finally gotten the chance to just be with her, Sam. I don't have to worry about staying too long, I can just… be there." Red smiled wistfully. "You should see her at work, Sam. There's a fire inside she got from you. She's volatile. Unpredictable. Soft then hard then – "He laughed, shaking his head. "Soft again. Stronger than she knows. You gave her an incredible gift, Sam. You gave me a wonderful gift, taking her in and loving her as your own."

"They've given me six weeks." Sam muttered. "For what? So I can lay here and watch them take me apart? I wish they'd said six hours. And I told them, I said, 'you can get rid of those damn machines. Go monitor somebody who's actually got vital signs.'"

They both laughed, though Red's was a bit forced.

"I need you to do this for me, Red."

"No."

"Red, please. help me go out the way I want to."

"You can't ask me to do this, Sam." Red sucked his teeth as the tic under his eye began to twitch.

Lizzie ducked into an empty hallway at the Post Office when she heard her phone going off.

"Pop, thank God. I was so worried. What's going on? Tom just spoke with Aunt June."

"It's me, Lizzie." Red's voice came over the line, thick and deep."

"What? What's going on? Are you there?"

"Lizzie, he's asked me…" Red choked on his words and Lizzie realized he must be crying.  

"Dad? Dad, what's going on, you're scaring me."

"He's in a lot of pain, Lizzie." His voice was barely a whisper.  

"What? No. He was just going in for some tests." Lizzie leaned against the wall, placing a hand on her knee to keep them from going out beneath her.

"He's asked me to help him, Lizzie.”

Lizzie was silent as it finally hit her, what he was implying.
"Don't you dare. Don't you fucking dare." She said darkly and heard more choking breaths on the other line.

"I can't deny him this, Lizzie. Not this."

Lizzie breathed out shakily as tears began to cascade down her face.

"God, Dad… I can't… I don't…"

"I know, Sweetheart. I know."

Lizzie bit her lip. "Can you at least wait – "

"Don't ask that, Lizzie. This is hard for all of us but he's in so much pain, Lizzie. You can't ask that of him."

Lizzie didn't bother suppressing her sob. "Put him on. I need to talk… I need to say goodbye."

Lizzie heard rustling and the sound of a door opening and closing followed by low murmurs.

"Lizzie."

At the sound of Sam's voice, Lizzie began to sob in earnest.

"Papa." She whispered brokenly.

"Look – I'm sorry to bring you so late to the party, but – About three months ago, I wasn't feeling so great." Lizzie heaved in a breath, trying to calm down so she could hear his gravelly voice over the line. "So I went to the doc, and, uh she said the cancer came back and spread everywhere. They're not givin' me much longer and frankly Butterball, I'm tapped out. I should've told you the truth. I should've been honest with you from the get–go. But I couldn't. I was trying to protect you."

Ignoring her Dad's words from earlier, Lizzie began to plead with Sam. "I can't… I need to say goodbye! This isn't enough!"

"I'm sorry, Darlin'. But it's gonna have to be. You've got your Dad and Dembe. They'll get you through this. Besides, what's that you and your dad are always saying? This isn't goodbye, Butterball."

"It's 'til next time." She sobbed, willing herself to save her freak out about the unfairness of it all until later.

"'Til next time, Butterball. I love you."

"I love you too, Papa."

\/

Red murmured his thanks as he picked up his coffee, placing a hefty tip in the jar atop the counter of the coffee truck parked outside of the hospital.

"Mind if I sit?" He questioned, walking up to the small table that sat out in the sun.

Tom looked up and Red smirked as he froze for a moment before quickly recovering. "No, go right ahead." Tom gestured to the seat opposite him as he folded the newspaper he'd been reading back up. "Visiting someone?"
Red nodded. "A friend. He died today."

"Oh."

"Yourself?"

"I, uh, came here to see my father-in-law. But I– I– I didn't get here in time." Tom looked away and Red wanted to pummel the pseudo-sympathy right off his boy-next-door face.

"Oh, my. I'm terribly sorry. It's hard to not say goodbye. I have lost so many people. Never seems to get any easier."

"I don't know what I'm gonna say to my wife." Tom shook his head looking away in apparent distress. How dare the little shit. "I've been sitting here for I don't know how long trying to figure out how to tell her. My wife and her dad, they had something. He took her in when she was four years old, adopted her and raised her as a single parent. She's gonna be heartbroken."

"Yes." Red said gravely, staring at Tom until he was forced to look back at him by the sheer awkwardness of the gaze. "It'll undoubtedly take some time. But I'm sure she'll be fine." Red's gaze hardened. "He'll always be there with her, standing in the shadows to keep her safe, laughing with her in the light, watching through her eyes all those who get close. He'll always be there. She will be fine."

There was a tense silence before Tom smiled almost shyly. "I hope you're right."

"I know I am."

After the phone call, it had taken Lizzie a herculean effort and lots of cold water splashed on her face in the women's bathroom for her to regain some semblance of control. She wasn't calm, she was the furthest from calm she'd ever been but she'd learned from the best how to not let anyone see you sweat. Her life was falling down around her. Her husband was a spy, her Pop was dying of cancer – dying by the hands of her Dad. And she had to play it cool and catch terrorists. God she needed a drink.

"This was never about the money. Wolff's people hit that truck for something far more valuable than the cash." She stated to the team as they stood around in the war room.

She and Ressler had just arrived back from chasing after Wolff after he used another alias to steal an armored vehicle with hundreds of millions of dollars and minting materials for the hundred-dollar bill in a safe in the back.

"There was a safe on the truck. In it was a hard drive containing software upgrades for the new hundred-dollar bill – proprietary algorithms, plate design, watermarks, encoding techniques. Every last hair on Ben Franklin's eyelash is on that drive. Luckily, we got to him before he could access the safe." Ressler stated, his hands on his hips and his feet planted shoulder width apart in his signature Captain America stance.

"Any indication where Wolff may be?" Cooper questioned.

"We put out an APB. All major roads, trains, buses, and ports have been secured. With planes still grounded, flying out isn't an option." Meera answered.

"That's not exactly true." Lizzie murmured as if speaking to herself as an idea struck her.
"Lizzie." Red answered his phone hesitantly, unsure of what awaited him on the other line.

"You obviously can still fly, right? Your tracker puts you seven miles above Illinois."

Ahh so we're completely ignoring the two-ton elephant in the room. Got it. "If you know what corners to cut, yes, everything is possible."

"Wolff wanted us to ground those planes so he could steal the blueprints for the new hundred-dollar bill. He's escaping by plane. Nobody's watching the sky."

"My guess is you're half right."

"So if you were him, where would you fly from?"

"Where was Wolff last seen?"

"Wall Street."

Red huffed out a small laugh. "How fitting. Let me look into the matter. I'll see what I can find."

They hung up quickly and Red looked behind him. "Dembe, tell Edward we're making an unscheduled stop."

Wolff hopped out of his car and walked across the tarmac of the small airport in upstate New York where Red leaned against the small plane which would be Wolff’s getaway vehicle.

"Hey. Ready to go?"

"Oh, I'm not your pilot. He went for a stroll." Red laughed, walking towards Wolff.

"Well, get him back." Wolff shifted on his feet as he gazed around them, unaware of Dembe until he held a gun to his head.

"Years ago, I used to smuggle small shipments of Oaxaca-highland gold into this airstrip. Beautiful space. Bumpy as hell. You know, Mr. Wolff, I admire your commitment. Others may doubt you, may think your revolutionary talk is just that talk to cover your grief but I think not. You really do want this country's financial system to fail. And if I'm not mistaken, you've come up with an ingenious way to make that happen."

"Who are you?" Wolff questioned.

Red completely ignored him. "No doubt, the feds are congratulating themselves this very minute for recovering the blueprint they assume is real, but you and I know it's not. It's a fake."

"How do you know that?"

"You swapped the drives, gave the feds a counterfeit. If the mint uses it, billions of dollars of counterfeit currency will be circulated, bankrupting this country."

"And you're gonna, what – stop me? Turn me in?"

Dembe cocked his gun and Red laughed.
"I'm gonna rob you. Because unlike you, I happen to believe in capitalism. I like money. I like the lifestyle it affords me. I like the things that happen when you give it away. What becomes of you and General Ludd once you board that plane is none of my concern though it is worth noting that a true luddite would burn the plane rather than fly in it. But whatever. Your irony. At any rate, have a safe flight. And buckle up. This runway is a bitch."

Red and Dembe walked away, back to the hangar where their jet awaited.

"You got the tail number?"

"Yes, Raymond."

"Good. Send it to Lizzie."

Lizzie stood and watched as her Pop's casket was lowered into the ground, everything a blob of browns and greens with one bright spot where she'd placed a bouquet of flowers on the coffin. She didn't bother wiping away the tears so she could see. Why did she want to see? She just had to be there, had to exist beside her Pop just one last time. All the other funeral-goers had left a while ago but she just couldn't bring herself to leave him.

"Lizzie." Tom came up behind her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Lizzie quickly side stepped, resisting the urge to shiver and making it appear as if she were heading to the car. His touch made her skin crawl.

Finally wiping her eyes, Lizzie looked up and paused at the sight of Red and Dembe, leaning against a black Rolls on the side of the road leading out of the cemetery. They'd come. She couldn't believe they had come.

"Lizzie,"

"Can you go get the car?" Lizzie interrupted whatever Tom was about to say.

There was silence as Lizzie stared at her Dad and brother, unknowing of the fact that her father wasn't staring back at her but rather at Tom in an obvious challenge.

"Yea, sure. Take as long as you need." Tom murmured before scuttling away.

Unable to bring herself to care who was watching, Lizzie ran down the hill towards her Dad and Dembe, not slowing down as she ran directly into her dad's arms. As he engulfed her in a hug, Lizzie clung to him with one arm as she cried, reaching out blindly until she felt Dembe's hand in her own and squeezed.

"Shh Lizzie, we'll be okay. We'll get through this." Red whispered as he carded his fingers through her hair, kissing the crown of her forehead.

Lizzie turned her head to look at her brother and squeezed his hand once more as she saw him looking to the top of the hill where Sam's grave stood, a single tear tracing its way down his cheek.

"You get one bite of the apple." Cooper warned Red before exiting his own office and leaving Red to use his computer.
Red took opened the red envelope he'd gotten as payment from Wujing and entered the numbers that were found on the single piece of paper within the envelop into the ViCAP system. A picture of a pretty young woman by the name "Lucy Brooks" appeared and he smiled grimly at the screen.

Lizzie walked into the garage of Mary-the-counterfeiter once more and was quickly and silently ushered back outside by Red.

"I should've known when you agreed to help us catch Wolff that you would take something for yourself. We didn't think he could access the safe on the truck, but he did. And he swapped the original drive for a counterfeit, and when we arrested him, he didn't have it."

Red didn't say anything for a moment as he gazed at Lizzie, sizing her up to try and deduce how she was doing. "How are you holding up? This is going to be a difficult time. The best way to keep the memory of Sam alive is to talk about him. Tell me some stories." Red gestured grandly towards the swing set in Mary's yard and walked over, sitting on one of the swings and smiled as Lizzie did the same. They sat in silence for a moment, gently swinging back in forth until Lizzie finally started telling him the story when she'd fallen out of a tree while trying to save a cat.

They both knew he'd heard it before. He heard about it over the phone the night it happened. But it felt good to remember together.

They sat out in that yard, swinging and chatting for hours. Just reminiscing about the good times with Sam until their conversation dwindled into a comfortable silence and dusk began to settle in.

"Are you still staying at that hotel?" Lizzie asked, looking down at her feet.

"Yes." He murmured, unsure of where this was going.

"Good. Um... can I stay there tonight? I think I want to take you up on your offer. I can't stay in that house." Lizzie took a deep breath. "I can't deal with him pretending to be the caring husband, acting like he gives a damn while I'm mourning Sam. His touch... I have to shower with scalding hot water until my skin turns red just to wipe the memory of it off me, knowing that I have to crawl into bed with him at night." Lizzie looked over at her dad. "I can't do it. I'm not strong enough."

"No. No, Lizzie. Don't ever say that. You are the strongest woman I know, Sweetheart." Red reached over and grabbed her hand, coaxing her fingers away from the chain of her swing and holding them in his. "This is an impossible situation, Lizzie. I know that. And I will be forever sorry for being the cause of it. We will figure this out Lizzie. We will find another way. I don't want you going back there."

Lizzie nodded, squeezing her Dad's hand as she attempted a smile. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me for being your father, Lizzie. Just let me. I haven't gotten to be your father enough over the years."
Yup, that's right folks. The entire Anslo Garrick debacle in one chapter. My fingers are sore. I hope you like it!

Lizzie sat on the living room floor of her dad's opulent hotel room as the early morning light danced across her legs. It was day five of living with her dad – which is quite a novel experience itself. Whenever he visited as a kid, it was just that – a visit. But now she was living with him, moving from safe house to safe house with him. It was weird. A good sort of weird. It was… normal.

Red had left yesterday for a trip to Germany for "business" and she was finally going through the boxes of stuff they'd brought back from Nebraska after Pop's funeral. Lizzie shoved the box full of Sam's old t-shirts to the side and drew another one closer to inspect its contents. Opening it up, Lizzie smiled as she lifted several Polaroids out. Shuffling through pictures of Sam together with Lizzie and Dembe, Lizzie sniffled as a small smile crossed her face.

Setting the pictures aside, Lizzie let out a chuckle as she picked up her old stuffed rabbit. God, she used to carry that thing around everywhere – and it stayed on her bed for much longer than was probably healthy. She didn't pack the singed little rabbit away until she was off to college.

Running her fingers over the stuffed animal, Lizzie frowned as she saw some fraying at the neck where it appeared as the time and mildew – probably from Sam's basement – had eaten away at some of the stitching. Feeling around for more tears, Lizzie felt a lump in the center of the rabbit. As a kid, she remembered her dad telling her that it was the rabbit's heart then as a teen, it had sat at the end of her bed, mostly forgotten.

Lizzie picked at the stitching until a small incision which had apparently been expertly sewn back over was revealed. Reaching in, Lizzie felt around inside of the fuzz until she was able to pull out a little black box. Holding it in her hands, Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. Had it always been there?

\\\

Red laughed as he sat at the end of a long table table in a beer hall somewhere in Munich. He'd just finished a toast when he happened to look up, his eyes widening marginally before he stood up quickly.

"Donald!" Red walked over to Ressler and gave him a big bear hug. "There you are. I told you I'd pick you up at the airport." He took Ressler by the arm and walked him over to the table. "The cab ride must have cost you a fortune. Guten tag, alles." Red looked over at his German associates and, upon noting their confusion, Red gestured towards Ressler "Oh, this is Donald. He's my man at the State Department. He's been extremely helpful in all our endeavors here. But the poor fellow has to walk a terrible tightrope every single day." Red laughed, and Ressler chuckled along with him, playing along. "I feel obliged to get him drunk once in a while, – so I invited him down to celebrate."
Once introductions were made, Red quickly excused them and pulled Ressler to the side, away from prying eyes and ears.

"Celebrate what, Red?" Ressler gave Red a little judgmental side eyed glance.

"Free trade, Donald. Free trade. Honestly, this damn chip. What the hell do you want?" Red questioned, rubbing the spot on his neck where he knew the DARPA tracking chip was located.

"Keen needs you."

"Then why isn't she here?"

"You mean why didn't she fly to Munich on 10 minutes' notice?"

Red gave him an annoyed glance. No one likes a sarcastic Captain America. "You made the trip." He deadpanned.

"She's been detained."

"By whom?" Red had always prided himself on his poker face. He would be dead if he didn't excel at withholding his inner turmoil. In that moment, he was quite confident that he didn't give away his panic as a million and one tortuous scenarios played out in his head.

"The situation's above my security clearance. I was just given the job of locating you."

"No, you said she's been detained. Is she in danger?"

"There's a jet on the tarmac at Munich International."

Yes, thank you for that non-answer you little shit. "My plane's faster." Red grumbled, heading towards the door without a second glance.

\\\

Lizzie eventually placed the small box back into the bunny and closed it back inside the box, making a mental note to sew it back up.

Looking down at her phone at the sound of it vibrating across the floor, Lizzie groaned. It was Tom. Again. He'd been calling and texting her all week. She was avoiding him like a coward. In her defense, since apparently he was some sort of assassin-spy, it wasn't really a conversation she felt safe having alone with him. "Oh hey Tom, I don't believe that you're just a fourth grade teacher. I know Raymond Reddington hired you. Why? Oh because he's my dad. And I want a divorce." Yea, no thanks.

Once her phone went to voicemail, Lizzie picked it up and checked the time. Groaning as she stood, Lizzie headed into the bathroom to get ready for work.

\\\

Red knew there was something fishy going on when they arrived at the post office and were surrounded by an escort of nameless agents. When they got off the elevator and Ressler immediately threw cuffs on Red, he knew he'd been duped. By Ressler. Dear God, he would never live this down. Looking to the right, Red shook his head at Dembe when he noticed he was beginning to fight off the agent trying to cuff him. He knew Luli wouldn't fight, it wasn't her style so he didn't even deign to look back at her.
"Donald, what the hell are you doing?"

"Taking you into protective custody."

"Where's Agent Keen?"

"I lied to you, Red. You must be slipping."

"I must be." Yep, never living this down. He was already going over in his head all of the things he could buy Luli and Dembe to make them pretend this never happened.

"Everybody, out." Cooper ordered as he walked into the war room. He and Red had a bit of a stare down as all the personnel left and their escort left as well – taking Dembe and Luli with them.

Waiting until it was only Cooper, Ressler, Meera, and himself, Red finally spoke. "Why am I in handcuffs, Harold? You're violating our arrangement."

"There's an imminent threat to your life." Ressler answered.

Red threw his head back and laughed. "That condition is a constant."

"We have credible intelligence that you're being targeted for assassination. My contacts at the CIA were sitting on an Egyptian sleeper cell. They intercepted communication between them and an informant called Wells." Meera replied. Honestly, he was speaking to Cooper. Why did he continually let his agents speak for him?

"Hilton Wells?"

"You obviously know him." Meera appeared shocked that Red would know of a CIA informant.

"You obviously don't. Hilton Wells doesn't speak with the Egyptians. He hasn't since he aligned himself with Mubarak during the Arab Spring."

"I can show you the transcripts." It was cute when the devoted agent got her panties in a twist.

"With all due respect, if the intel were worth having, then I would have it."

"There's a price on your head."

Red laughed, shaking his head in disdain. "There's a running price on my head, Agent Ressler."

"Anslo Garrick?"

That got Red's attention. He stared at Ressler as the possible scenarios flashed through his head and began to make plans and contingency plans and plans for his contingency plans. "Listen to me. If this intel was disseminated, it was done so directly to you. It's canned, which means Anslo Garrick intends to attack this facility."

"Oh, you think he wanted us to bring you here?" What he wouldn't give to smack the arrogant little Captain America smirk right off his face sometimes. There was a time and a place for sarcasm. When you're about to have your ass handed to you by a criminal para military group was not the time.

"What do I think? I think we have a songbird in our midst, and until I find out who's singing, I don't trust anyone because someone helped to bring him here."
"To a black site. Why?"

"Because I'm asymmetrical." Red's frustration leaked out of his vocal chords. "I don't need visas, passports, travel documents. Give me a bug-out bag and 30 seconds, and I'm on my way to anywhere in the world. Garrick knows this. He needs me contained, landlocked. So he fed you phony intel to trigger your security protocol and now you've done exactly as he wished. He got you to bring me here so that he could attack this facility."

Ressler, Cooper, and Meera all looked back and forth at each other, worry finally beginning to appear on their face. "He doesn't even know this place exists." Ressler said, his voice slightly unsure.

Red snorted in derision. "All he does is extract people from places that don't exist, places exactly like this. Garrick exfils high-level detainees always by considerable force. He liberated Mahmoud Al Azok from an Alcatraz–like CIA black site in the Bering Sea."

"That was Shining Path, a splinter cell. Azok has ties to a Caribbean money launderer." Meera spoke up.

"No." Red shook his head. "That was Garrick, paid by that same Peruvian money launderer to make it appear as though Shining Path broke him out. It was Garrick. He almost exclusively works with a group of heavily armed, highly skilled mercenaries who call themselves The Wild Bunch – former flag wavers made over in Frankenstein–like fashion into bloodless, country-less killers. Garrick is not a precision instrument. He's a blunt-force object and seemingly immune to bullets. I can attest to this first-hand having put one in his head years ago at point-blank range. Harold, this building is about to be breached."

\\\\

Lizzie got into the black site and smiled, making small talk with the security guard as he checked out her credentials even though he saw her everyday. She nodded her head goodbye and got into the elevator. Lizzie sighed, pushing the button and leaning against the wall, already looking forward to the long soak she was going to have in the Jacuzzi back at the hotel that evening. There were definite perks to having the Concierge of Crime as a father.

A small smile graced her face seconds before the elevator stopped.

\\\\

Red looked around as the lights went out and they were plunged into darkness.

"They're in."

\\\\

"Hello?" Lizzie shouted into the intercom, holding down the button.

\\\\

"Initiate full facility lockdown." Cooper yelled to anyone who was listening as the war room buzzed with activity and agents once more.

"Telecom is dead. I have no signal." One of the techies answered.

Cooper's lips thinned before he gave a small nod to Ressler.
"Get me out of these damn cuffs." Red's voice deepened, warning of dire consequences if they didn't do as asked.

"You're going into the box until the threat is neutralized." Ressler stated as he grabbed Red by the arm and began to hustle him away.

"Neutralized? Harold, do not make a stand. Get your people the hell out of here." Red yelled behind him.

\\\\

Lizzie tried the intercom again. "Hello? Hello?!!"

Getting no response, Lizzie sighed then froze at the distant sound of gunfire. After a moment, she jumped into action, looking up at the ceiling of the elevator. If she was going to get out, that was how.

Removing her boot, Lizzie reached up and hit a flimsy light panel until it popped out of its place. Using the toe of her boot, she slid it out of the way, hearing it skitter across the top of the elevator. Removing her other boot, Lizzie took several jumps until finally, she was able to grasp onto the top of the elevator. Using her feet to help gain purchase, Lizzie climbed out.

\\\\

"I don't think you appreciate the sheer firepower that has entered this building."

"Shut up." Ressler hustled Red down another hallway as they both looked around them, the echo of gunfire dancing across the walls.

"He means to take me, Agent Ressler, and kill anyone in his way or in his wake. This isn't about digging in. This is about escape."

Ressler stopped, pulling at Red as he held his arm, craning his neck as if to help himself hear better. "Wait."

"Why not let them have me, Donald? I'll likely be tortured for weeks and left to rot until they finally deign to put a bullet in my skull. Wouldn't that please you?" Red questioned, surreptitiously looking around them.

Ressler stood still a few moments longer until he felt it was safe to continue towards the box. "You're an adjunct informant for the FBI, Reddington. That means you're my responsibility. That means I fight for your life regardless of how badly I want to take it."

One of Garrick's men came around the corner a few feet in front of them. Red and Ressler both propped themselves against the wall, as flat as possible as Ressler shot back.

Screaming in pain, Ressler fell to the ground, clutching at his left upper thigh which now resembled pureed beets. Firing off a few rounds as he clenched his jaw in pain, Ressler got off a lucky shot, killing the nameless man.

Ignoring Ressler as he writhed on the floor in pain, Red awkwardly crawled over to him, stealing the handcuff keys from his belt. Unlocking the cuffs with ease, Red stole Ressler's gun, stood up and walked over to the dead man.

"Don't, Reddington. Don't leave me unarmed."
Before he could come up with a witty come back, more of Garrick's men appeared at the top of the staircase down the hall. Red crouched down and took the dead man's ammo vest and shotgun as he traded fire with the men on the staircase. Grabbing a flash grenade from the pocket of the vest, Red threw it into the stairwell and sprayed the area with shotgun rounds for good measure.

"Donald, you and I aren't done just yet."

"Aaaah! Aaah!" Ressler screeched in agony as Red grabbed him by the collar of his Kevlar vest.

Thankfully they were close to the detainment room which contained the box. Ressler was a heavy little bugger. Red dragged him over to the security keypad unit on the wall and lifted him up to enter the keycode and place his hand on the fingerprint scanner.

Shooting out the glass of the evac box, Red took out all of the medical supplies he could carry. As Ressler stumbled to the Box, the sirens blaring as it slowly closed back up, Red walked backwards, his face like stone as he covered Ressler and his escape into their glass fortress, Garrick's men walking forward, firing at them until the door shuts with a clang.

Red smiled placidly, as a man in a ski mask stood in front of the box. The man dramatically took off the mask, revealing his horribly disfigured face and milky blind eye.

"Hello, Red." The man's British accent was played down by the way that one half of his face was frozen in a grimace, spittle constantly streaming out its side.

Grasping Ressler under his arms, Red hefted him up, causing him to cry out.

"We're going up."

With a grunt, Red gets Donald onto the metal camp bed. He folds his own jacket and puts it under Ressler's head, then turns to look at Garrick.

"Red Red, did you really think there was a distance you could cover or a hole deep enough that you could hide in? There is nowhere in this world that I cannot reach you, Red. Fortification be damned. I heard you made yourself some sweet little immunity deal, Red. I heard that you fitted the FBI with strings, and now they hang upon your hip like a hatchet. Not bad. Prudent. But they can't keep you safe from someone like me, Red, someone who sat in blackness for five years. Five years thinking about the pain I was going to inflict on you while slowly breaking your will, your body, and finally your mind. That day is here, my friend. And it will end with your screams, as God is my witness."

This was turning out to be a rather terrible day. The only consolation was the fact that Lizzie hadn't made it to the office yet before the incursion.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Dropping down into the armory from where she'd been climbing in the ceiling, Lizzie landed in a crouch. Looking around her to check the coast was clear, she walked over to a cabinet and retrieved a bandage, hissing at the sting, Lizzie wrapped her bleeding hand where she'd cut it against a sharp corner in the air ducts.

Finding a radio in the room, Lizzie quickly turns it on and Cooper's voice fills the room.

"Closed comms. Closed comms. Go to EMR-designation channel. 'Hatchling.' Codify, 'Hatchling.'"

"Hatchling–5591–abstract."
"Keen?"

"I'm here, sir." Lizzie sighed. She never thought she'd be so happy to hear her boss's voice.

"Do not attempt any form of ingress. Hostiles have the high ground."

"I'm already inside."

"Have you been captured? Are you injured?"

Lizzie was touched by his genuine concern. "Neither. Where are you?"

"Barricaded inside the armory. Ressler and Reddington are unaccounted for, presumed down."

No. no no no no no no. No.

///\/

"What are you feeling in your extremities? – What do you feel?" Red sat in a metal chair next to Ressler's ...bed, for lack of a better word. Tearing open the package of a gauze pad, Red placed it over Ressler's wound.

"Not much. My fingers are numb. My face is getting cold."

"Shock is setting in." Red mumbled as he tore open another gauze pad and placed it over Ressler's wound as well.

"How much blood have I lost?"

"More than a thimbleful." Red began tightly yet messily wrapping medical tape around Ressler's leg in order to keep the gauze pads in place.

"What about my leg?" Ressler tried to hold himself up on his elbows to get a look.

"Lay down. Lay down. Donald, never let it be said that I valued a Zegna Venticinque tie over a human life, even yours." Red stated, removing his tie and placed it under Ressler's leg, close to his groin then made a single knot. "Take up a handful of your own tie." Red removed the magazine from Ressler's pistol and began tying it within a second knot in the tie around Ressler's leg. This is gonna be hugely unpleasant and very painful. Bite down. All right?"

"Yeah." Ressler loosened his tie and shoved the knot into his mouth.

Red twisted the magazine, tightening the makeshift tourniquet around Ressler's leg painfully as the man's own tie muffled the sounds of his screams. Once he deemed it tight enough, Red ensured that the tourniquet would not unwind.

Red grabbed Ressler's hand which had begun to hang limply at his side. "Keep pressure on it. Just keep pressure on it." He murmured as he placed Ressler's hand over his wound. Ressler seemed to get the message as he tightened his hold around the wound despite the pain.

"I don't like his chances, Red." Red spared a glance at Garrick as the man began to speak. He had pulled up a chair on the other side of the glass, right next to the bed on which Ressler lay. "That leg looks like minced beef. All you have to do to save Agent Ressler's life is come out, Red."

Garrick swung his head to look over at Ressler with his one good eye. "Don – We never met in person, Don, but if you'd done your job back in Brussels in '08, I wouldn't be here now." He switched his view back to Red. "Agent Ressler here ran that little kick murder squad tried to clip
you in Waterloo Station, Red. I gave him your train number, your itinerary. All Little Donnie here had to do was supply the bullet, but no. Bungled! And now, as fate has a great fondness for moments like these, here we are. And it is you, Red, that can spare or end Agent Ressler's life."

"You know, Anslo, I'm looking at you, and I got to say I'm really surprised. With the access you now have to top-notch plastic surgeons, why you haven't done something anything about that horrific scar. I mean, how do you wake up to that staring back at you in the mirror every morning? But you know what? It's not the scar. It's really the eye. But, hey, lucky you. I normally carried Hydra-Shok hollow points. I was trying out a new series of center-fire wadcutters that week. It's probably the only thing that saved your life, really – Me switching ammo. Think about that little irony now every time you randomly find your reflection or are reminded of that unfortunate thing I've done to your face." Red laughed. "Think about it."

"You trashed a one-of-a-kind partnership."

"We were never partners, Anslo. You violated whatever trust I had in you. So, naturally, I did what I always did – And beat you. And you did what you always did – Got beaten by me." Also stood up from his chair and walked to the front of the box. Raising his hand, he began firing, his bullets ricocheting, sending his men running for cover although judging by the screams of pain, a couple of them didn't make it. "True to form, Anslo. Why take time to think when it's so much easier to shoot? This glass was developed by DARPA for secure cover and housing in combat zones. That .45 might as well be a spit straw."

Garrick glared at Red before looking over at one of his men and motioning him forward.

"Oh, good, Red. I've brought a whole picnic basket to this party." Garrick motioned over to the man who was carefully placing a brick of C4 against the door to the box. "And, little pig, little pig, you are going to let me come in."

\///\

Lizzie flattened herself against the wall, prepping herself before going around the corner and leaving cover. "Okay, let's go. Oh, calm, calm, calm. Come on, come on, come on. Use your training. Use your training. Just like Pop and Dad taught you. Be fluid. Be fluid."

Lizzie entered an office just as Cooper's voice came over the comm. "Command down. Command down. Armory overrun. Repeat, armory overrun." Lizzie bit her lip, realization dawning that it was all up to her now. No big deal, right?

She heard a patter as if something had fallen at the end of the hall. Looking around desperately, Lizzie noticed a plastic bottle sitting on the table and smirked.

\///\

"Help! Please, help! Help! Can someone help me? Please, help!" Lizzie watched from the shadows as Garrick's man came jogging in at the sound of Lizzie's recorded voice playing in a loop on her cell phone. Stepping up behind the man as he rounds the desk, Lizzie points her pistol at the back of his head, the plastic bottle scotch taped around the muzzle.

"Lower your gun to your side. Now reach across your body with your right hand and remove your tactical belt. Any sudden or aggressive movements, and I will kill you."

The man slowly began reaching as if to remove his belt, the moment his movements became sharp, as if pulling a knife, Lizzie shot him in the head, causing the man to fall forward onto the table and
sending things crashing off of it. Lizzie winced at the noise. Well, her makeshift silencer was a bit moot now.

\\n
"We don't have enough explosives." One of Garrick's men murmured nervously.

"What?" Garrick turned his head, pointing to his good ear.

"We don't have enough explosives, not according to the specs we pulled up on this thing."

Groaning in aggravation, Garrick grabbed his radio and pressed the comm button. "Tabletop to blue wolf. Send a short chalk back to the armory. We're a little light on bang here. So you bring me back every piece of explosive ordnance that they have."

Meanwhile, in the box, Red had two fingers to the pulse point on Ressler's wrist while he counted down the seconds on his watch. "Donald, I'm gonna quietly cross my fingers before I ask, but what blood type are you?"

"B-negative." Ressler murmured drowsily.

Shaking his head, Red laughed. "And you thought we had nothing in common. There's only 2% of us, you know?" Red began putting the equipment he'd need onto the bed beside Ressler and rolled up his sleeve.

"What are you doing?"

"You need a blood transfusion. Or we're gonna have to open that door, which will likely be the end of both of us."

"Give me a gun. These bastards want to go. Let's go."

Red laughed, pushing Donald back down as the man made a pathetic attempt to sit up. "The concept of a last stand sounds so heroically romantic, doesn't it, Donald? But there's a good reason why we didn't see what happened to Butch and Sundance. Being riddled by bullets and left to rot under a scorching Bolivian sky does not a sequel make. And if you've surmised nothing about me by now, know this. I'm gonna be around for the sequel." Red wrapped the blue Velcro band of the arm tourniquet around his arm and made sure it was tight.

"You're really gonna do a field transfusion?" Ressler's brow furrowed in confusion as he watched Red place one of the small tourniquets around his upper arm as well.

"Oh, come now, Donald. Think how much smarter you'll be afterwards."

"Why the hell are you doing this? It's pretty obvious I hate your guts, and I can't imagine you hold a whole lot of warmth for me, especially after hearing about Brussels."

"I knew about Brussels."

"Then why save me?"

"Because that's what you do when someone is dying in front of you. Allies today, enemies tomorrow. The world is a complex place, further complicated by man's fickle nature." Red deftly inserted a needle into both his and Ressler's arms and watched dispassionately as his blood began to flow towards Ressler through the thin tube connecting them. "Years ago, I saved a man's life
under a beautiful old cedar tree in Lebanon. A month later, he tried to kill me in a hotel in Damascus. I understood. Allegiances shift. A month later I broke his neck with a shower caddy. It's this job today, another one tomorrow. That needle in your arm becomes the one in your neck. It's just that fast."

Garrick sat back down at the chair he'd pulled up beside them on the outside of the box. "Do you remember that Road Runner cartoon where the Coyote makes the mountain of TNT and gunpowder barrels? And blows himself sky–high?"

"Yes, Anslo. Is that what you're doing out there? Is this to be mass suicide by explosion, I hope?"

"No. We'll be fine out here, Red. But with these charges rigged to blow inward, I can't say the same about you. It's no matter. I intend to thoroughly torture the hell out of whatever's left of you. Oh, come on! Play with me!" Garrick banged his head against the box in frustration when Red refused to be riled by him. "I'd give that leg up as a lost cause by now, wouldn't you? If sepsis hasn't set in by now, Donnie, it will. And then your body will slowly start to poison its own blood supply. Including that little keg tap that Reddington's giving you right now. Drip, drip, Don. Drip, drip, drip."

Red's lips thinned slightly as he watched Ressler close his eyes, as if trying to shut out everything around him.

\(///\)

Lizzie makes her way through the armory, placing ammo and everything else she may need into the pockets of the dead man's Kevlar vest she'd stolen. Grabbing a silencer, Lizzie screwed it onto the muzzle of her gun. Pausing at the sound of footsteps, Lizzie backed up against one of the shelving units. Drawing her gun up closer to her, Lizzie held her breath at the sound of movement right beside her. Taking a breath, she spun and took the shot. The only sound heard was the din of a metal box falling the ground as the dead man fell.

" Raines? Raines? Respond now or I'm gonna shoot. In three–two–one." Another man's voice came from a few aisles over." Creeping closer, silent on her bare feet, Lizzie crept up right behind him.

"Tabletop to Chalk One, where's my bang? Let's go. I've got a box to blow up."

"Tell him you're on your way back. Tell him anything other than that, and you're lying with your buddy." Lizzie murmured, a clear threat in her silky dark voice as she held her gun to the man's head and with the other, grabbed his radio, pushing down on the button.

"Chalk One to Tabletop, we're on our way back now."

"That's good." Before he could go on the offensive, Lizzie pistol whipped the man, knocking him out.

Spinning around at the sound of a gasp, Lizzie aims her gun.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. Agent Keen, it's me." Aram held his hands up, eyeing Lizzie's gun nervously.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She asked, immediately bringing her gun back down to her side.

"I could ask you the same. Where did you come from?"
"I snuck in. What are you doing?"

"Trying to restore the telecom so we can call in the cavalry."

"Where is everyone?"

"Captured."

"Where's Red and Ressler?"

"I think Ressler's in bad shape."

Ok, that sucks, but what about my dad? "Any idea who hit this facility?"

"Um, someone called Garrick. He's disabled telecom, simplex, and duplex signals."

"How long before you can restore the telecom?" Lizzie asked as they made their way through the halls, not wanting to stay in one place for too long.

"I haven't been able to hack around it. They are jamming the signal internally."

"How?"

"Uh, based on just the waveform readings and the wattage output, it's, uh, something powerful, uh, but portable."

"Where would they place it?"

"All the uplink and communication relays are in the sub garage."

"Could you reset the telecom if the jammers were disabled?"

"It would automatically reset, yeah."

Good. You got a weapon?"

"Uh, yeah. Why?"

"'Cause we're gonna go find those jammers."

"We"?" Aram asked, shifting on his feet.

"Yes. You and I in the plural." The man made her want to pinch his cheeks most days but right now she didn't have time for his piss-my-pants-in-fear routine.

"Uh, but I—I—I thought I'm waiting for the signal so we can call the cavalry."

"We are the cavalry. Give me your gun." Lizzie put out her hand in wait.

"Um, I—I've only shot at paper." Aram fumbled with his holster before handing his gun over to Lizzie. She expertly checked the mag to make sure he had ammo then cocked the gun, handing it back to them.

"Pretend they're paper."

///
"Donald! Donald!" Red shook Ressler gently by the shoulder as the man began to fade in and out of consciousness. "Feeling any wittier yet? Any strange cravings for Beluga caviar or Marcel Proust?"

Ressler rolled his eyes. "I know you don't think much of me, but you don't get assigned a case file like yours unless you pass muster."

Red pursed his lips. "May I ask you something with the hope that you won't take offense?"

"You already know it's gonna offend me. Ask anyway."

"What happened to Audrey Bidwell?"

Ressler froze, staring at Red, most likely wondering how the hell Red knew about Audrey. His lips thinned as he realized who he was talking to. "She left me."

"You were engaged."

"To her, yeah. It was my engagement with you that ended that relationship. Five years, I chased you. Five years trying to make my name. Look where it's gotten me." Ressler looked away from Red and so couldn't see as lips pursed, an almost guilty expression crossing his face. He did feel bad for the guy. Sort of. Didn't mean he had to like him though. The man had a terrible propensity for banana peels.

\///\ 

"Chalk Two to Tabletop, one dead, one down." A voice came loudly over Garrick's comm.

"We have an enemy within. We have a monkey wrench running around in here somewhere. Find them." Garrick instructed his men.

\///\///\ 

"How did you know about my ex?"

"I know a great many things about you, Donald."

Ressler shook his head tiredly. "Right. It's the core of your business. Information. Misinformation. I don't know how you did it, Reddington. Forsaking the flag, abandoning your country."

"We become who we are." Red replied gruffly. "We can't judge a book by its cover but you can by its first few chapters and, most certainly, by its last."

"So, what's it all about, then, the Blacklist? Revenge?"

Red chuckled darkly. "Oh, revenge is too easy and over so quickly. I would hope for more than that."

Ressler closed his eyes, shaking his head slowly. "We're not gonna live through this."

"I think we will."

"How?"

Red was silent for a moment as he sucked the inside of his cheek. "Have you ever sailed across an ocean, Donald?"
Ressler's face winced in confusion at the quick change of subject. "No."

"On a sailboat surrounded by sea with no land in sight?" Red's voice dropped half an octave lower as his gaze was drawn to the near distance. "Without even the possibility of sighting land for days to come? To stand at the helm of your destiny. I want that one more time. I want to be in the Piazza del Campo in Sienna, to feel the surge as ... I want another meal in Paris at L'Ambroisie in the Place des Vosges. I want another bottle of wine." Red smiled softly. "And then another."

He paused, chewing on the inside of his cheek. "I want the warmth of a woman in a cool set of sheets. One more night of jazz at the Vanguard. I want to stand on summits and smoke Cubans and feel the sun on my face for as long as I can. Walk on the wall again. Climb the tower. Ride the river. Stare at the frescos. I want to sit in the garden and read one more good book. Most of all, I want to see my daughter again. And I want to sleep. I want to sleep like I slept when I was a boy. Give me that. Just one time. That's why I won't allow that punk out --" Red swung his head as if to point outside at Garrick. " -- there to get the best of me, let alone the last of me."

Ressler closes his eyes as a tear rolls down his cheek, turning his head away from Red so that he couldn't see. Red pretended he hadn't.

As the sound level in the room increased, Red looked up to see Cooper, Meera, Luli, Dembe, and a few other agents being led into the center of the room, their hands tied behind them.

"What do you want?" Cooper questioned Garrick, speaking for the whole group.

"This isn't about what I want, Assistant Director Cooper. No. What I've wanted, I've simply taken. This is about what I need. And what I need is access to that box."

"Then let's start with what I need, which is all of my people released right now."

Garrick let out a breathy laugh. "You're not in charge, Harold."

"No. But I am the man who can get you into that box."

"And if I go in there and start kneecapping your people one by one until you give me what I want?"

Cooper's back straightened and he jut out his chin. "Then you're not getting Reddington."

Garrick stared at him, his face turned so that he could more easily see him with his good eye. "No. I'm going to bet someone other than you can get me into that box."

"Then place that bet."

Garrick leveled his gun at Cooper's head.

"There you go again, Anslo, using a pistol in place of a brain. You gonna put a bullet in the head of the man who can hand you mine?"

"I think someone's trying to save your life." Garrick stage whispered to Cooper.

"Hardly." Red scoffed. "I have little to no use for that man. But before you shoot him, be absolutely certain that I'm not outsmarting you. We know how frequently that's happened in the past. It would be a shame if in killing him you denied yourself of the prize that you came here for." Garrick didn't appear to be listening. "Anslo!" Red raised his voice, forcing Garrick to look at him. "How long do you think you can hold out here before half of Quantico's graduating class rappels down on top of you?"
"Red, this time you are quite simply mistaken." Garrick walked slowly towards the box. "The question really is, how long are you going to hold out? Are you really going to let Agent Ressler there just expire? Are you really going to let me put Assistant Director Cooper's head all over that wall? How many people are going to die here today, Reddington?"

At that moment, Ressler cried out, bringing Red's attention back to him. Red came to his side and sat back down in his seat.

"What's happening?" Ressler choked out.

"Your heart is pumping harder and harder, trying to compensate for blood loss." Red murmured, checking Ressler's pulse. "And that shotgun blast broke your leg. I think it also partially ruptured your femoral artery."

"Partially?"

"You would have bled out by now if the hole were any bigger." Red stated as he cut the gauze off of Ressler's leg. "But now I have to close it."

"Close it how?"

"By cauterizing it." Red stated, grabbing supplies from where he'd set them on the floor. "I'm gonna have to cut open your leg to get at the artery and then sprinkle some combustible compound on it – and ignite it."

Ressler shook his head violently. "Mm, mnh–mnh. Mnh–mnh."

"Donald, if you don't tell them how to open that door, I have to do this, or you will die." Red stared grimly at Ressler as he sat back down, supplies in hand.

Ressler slammed his head back against the metal bed and sucked his teeth. "Then do it."

"Grab ahold of the bench back there and don't let go." Red began pouring rubbing alcohol over a hunting knife. "I'm gonna cut as fast as I can, but I can't have you trying to stop me once I start, okay?"

"Yeah."

"This is gonna hurt." Red murmured. Just before he began cutting, he saw Ressler stuff his tie back in his mouth before grasping desperately for the edge of the bed.

"Aaaaah!"

"Hold still, Donald. This will be over in a second." Red concentrated intently on what he was doing. Though, he supposed, Ressler's leg couldn't get much more mangled than it already was. Thankfully, Ressler passed out from the pain rather quickly.

Red carefully sprinkled some of the compound into the wound before lighting a match and placing it against the powder in Ressler's leg. With a flash and the smell of burnt flesh, Ressler wound was cauterized.

Disliking not having Red's full attention, Garrick grabbed Luli, causing her to cry out as he dragged her over to the box, gaining Red's attention. Red stood and walked over to the front of the box as Garrick forced Luli to her knees and stood behind her, pointing his gun at the back of her head.
"– 10, 9 –"

"Harold! Open the box now!"

"– 8 –"

"Give him the code!" Red growled.

"No."

"– 7 –"

"Anslo, my people can help you."

"– 6 –"

"Cooper can get you in here."

"– 5 –"

"Put that gun to his head." Red pointed angrily at Cooper.

"– 4, 3 –"

"For once in your life, stop and think!"

"– 2,1."

Red blinks as Luli's blood stained the entire door of the box.

/\/\/

Lizzie smashes another signal jammer on the ground, smiling at another small victory which is short lived as a noise causes her to spin around. Blinding pain flashes across her face just before everything turns black.

/\/\/

Garrick directs his men holding Dembe to bring him forward. "Red, I don't have to explain what happens now, do I?" Garrick shoves at Dembe's shoulder. "Down." Dembe shrugs him off life a fly but got to his knees anyway, of his own will. "Would you prefer that I did the countdown? Because I wasn't that keen, frankly. You open the box, or Dembe dies."


"Wait is over, Red. People are dying now."

"Ressler. Ressler!" Red smacks Ressler, trying to make him wake up.

"Raymond." Dembe speaks up, his soft voice resigned.

"Ressler! Ressler!" Red yells as he continues to hit Ressler.

Ressler murmurs slightly before falling unconscious once more.

"Raymond!" Dembe shouts, forcing Red to look at him. "Ours is a friendship forged once in this
life and again in the next. Goodbye, my brother."

Red walked over, placing his hand on the glass. "Harold, open this box. I'll give you anything."

Dembe began to murmur a prayer in Arabic. Red's face crumpled in devastation as he began to cite the prayer along with him.

"Stay on your knees!" Garrick pushed down on Dembe's shoulder as he attempted to stand, knocking him back down to his knees. As Dembe and Red continued to pray in harmony, Dembe attempted to stand once more, only for Garrick to push him down again. "Stay on your knees! Stay on your knees."

Red slid to his knees so that he is on eye level with Dembe, gazing at his best friend, his brother through the droplets and smears of Luli's blood on the glass.

"Goodbye, Raymond." Dembe smiled softly.

"Open the box!" Red screamed.

\\\\
"Come on…Yes!" Aram murmured to himself as he sat in the hallway, attempting to get a signal with his cell phone now that all the jammers were destroyed.

"North Arlington Furniture Warehouse. Can I help you?"

"Uh – Hatchling 5591."

Aram walked over to where he was to meet Lizzie once they destroyed all of the jammers. "I got the signal out, but I need a dispatch co-" Aram finally looked up from his phone to see Garrick's man standing over Lizzie's body. "-Dispatch code Cavalry's on their way. You're about to get your ass kicked off the planet, pal." Aram recovered from his shock rather quickly.

"Want to bet I can drop you before you can get one shot off with that pistol?" Garrick's man questioned with a small smirk.

\\\\
Well, I'm gonna kill him now, aren't I, Red?" Garrick goes unanswered as Red and Dembe continue to recite their prayer, Dembe smiling softly, peacefully as Red struggled to hold it together.

Red flinched, closing his eyes at the sound of a gun shot.

"Go!"

He heard Garrick yell and opened his eyes to see Dembe smiling back at him. Smirking back, Red stood just in time to see some of Garrick's men take off to where the shot had originated from.

\\\\
"Wow. I killed him." Aram stared down at the gun in his hand in shock.

"We need to move now! Aram!" Lizzie shouted, grabbing Aram's hand. "Listen to me. We need to move now!"

Just as they started to run, the heard the sound of several guns cocking.
"Hold it!"

\[
\text{/
\\\\
\text{Lizzie walked placidly beside her captor, refusing to give them the pleasure of watching her struggle. She merely walked along as the man held her by the elbow, her hands tied behind her. As they walked down the stairs into the room that held the box, Lizzie looked over at the box and smiled in relief at the sight of her dad standing in the box. Then she noticed the blood. Her gaze fell upon the crumpled body of Luli, causing her to miss the look of sheer terror that Red was unable to hide at the sight of her. But Garrick didn't.}

"Well, who might this be? Someone you know, Red?" Garrick walked over and grabbed Lizzie roughly, shoving her to her knees in front of the box.

Lizzie tried to smile reassuringly at her dad as a tear slipped down her cheek. They stared at each other for a moment, her dad's face contorted in anguish before he stepped away, turning his back and walked over to Ressler.

"Ressler!" He shouted, slapping Ressler across the face and receiving no response, he digs his fingers into Ressler's wound.

"Aah! Son of a bitch!" Ressler was immediately alert and clapping at his injured leg.

"Look at me." Red grabbed Ressler by the chin, forcing him to look. "I need you to focus. I need the code." His words were clipped, angry. A majority of his anger was directed at Anslo but a healthy dose of it was reserved for himself. His little girl had a gun to her head because of him. Because he was who he was. He'd never hated himself more.

"What code? What code?" Ressler questioned between clenched teeth.

"To open the box." Red's voice was like gravel, his face thunderous.

"Oh, God, my leg – !"

"Tell me the code now."

"Do not give him the code, Agent Ressler! That's an order!" Cooper's voice interjected. A corner of Red's brain began to plot the man's murder.

"Oh, come on!" Garrick shouted, digging his gun into Lizzie's skull.

"Telecom has been restored. They have an open signal out." One of Garrick's men stated before Garrick could go on a rant.

"In about five minutes, an FBI assault will retake the building. Get out now. You might survive."

Lizzie hoped her voice sounded steady.

To prove them correct, her phone began to ring. Garrick quickly reached into her pocket and retrieved it, answering it and putting it on speaker.

"Lizzie. Hey, what's going on? We haven't – "

"Lizzie isn't available right now. May I ask who's calling?" Garrick questioned, gesticulating with the hand that held his gun as he spoke.

"This is her husband." Tom answered angrily. "Who the hell is this?"
"I'm the guy that's gonna put a bullet in your wife's head." Garrick clipped his hard consonants as he spoke. "Hi." He said in a singsong voice.

"Who is this?" Huh, Tom actually sounded worried, Lizzie thought. "Put my wife on the phone."

"It's for you." Garrick held the phone towards Lizzie.

"Tom!" She yelled.

"Liz, are you okay? What's going on? Are you safe?"

"Tom, listen to me! Call the FBI!"

Garrick pointed the gun back at Lizzie and hung up the phone.

Having watched the entire scene, Red grabbed Ressler's gun off the floor, grabbed his collar and stood over him as he aimed the gun at Ressler.

"No! No, no. What are you gonna do? You gonna kill me? You just saved my life."

"Circumstances have changed, Donald. If you can't save her, you're of no use whatsoever. Look at me. Look at me!" Red shook Ressler as his eyes rolled in delirium. "Agent Keen will die. Now is the time!"

"Romeo. The access code is Romeo." Ressler murmured.

Red spun around and walked back over to the front of the box. "R–O–M–E–O Romeo." Red directs Garrick, glancing at Lizzie and giving her a pained smile.

The sound of sirens announced the opening of the door and Red hopped out of the box as soon as he could.

"Anslo, what are you doing here?" Red questioned nonchalantly, his Concierge of Crime mask now firmly back in place now that he felt he held at least some cards.

When he received no reply, Red's lips pursed. "Let them go, Anslo."

"Are you pleading for the lives of the feds?" Garrick asked, gesturing towards the captured agents.

"There's enough blood on the floor. It's time to get the hell out of here."

"Oh, I know what time it is. You watch out for Old Red here." Garrick spoke to the room at large. "He may not look like much, but I once saw him kill a Somali with a wire hanger."

Red chuckled, shaking his head as if reminiscing. "Simpler days, Anslo. Simpler days."

Garrick nodded his head then seemed to shake himself, realizing he'd gotten side tracked. "Right. Bring her." Garrick pointed at Lizzie and then began to walk away.

"She doesn't do anything for you, Anslo. She's dead weight." Red tried to reason with him, stepping in front of Lizzie, between her and Garrick.

"Do I look like I care what you say, Red?" Garrick looked over his shoulder at Red.
"I have to admit, Red, I was starting to think you'd never come out of the box. But then her. She was unexpected. Old boy's still got the touch, does he? Well, whatever blows up your skirt."

Lizzie rolled her eyes just as Garrick's men blast a hole in the floor. Honestly, she was going to have to have a talk with her dad. If he had such a reputation for relationships with younger women… she needed to warn him to never bring one of them home. One of them put a harness around her and attached it to a rope. Lizzie immediately grasped onto it, glad they had at least tied her hands in front of her.

"Hold on tight." Garrick rumbled before pushing her in to the hole.

\/
\/
\/

An ambulance was waiting for them at entrance to the tunnel of the old subway line. As they came out of the darkness, Lizzie and Red were shoved into the back.

As the ambulance went on its way, sirens blaring, one of the paramedics had Red lay down on the stretcher and began pressing her fingers to his neck, in search of something.

"Ninety seconds to the drop. I need that chip!" Garrick growled from the front seat.

"I'm trying!" The paramedic screeched. This must be her first rodeo, Lizzie figured as she watched the woman barely hold it together.

"The Emissary Hotel in Chicago. Mr. Kaplan." Red murmured at Lizzie once she looked his way, shifting his eyes towards the defibrillator. Lizzie nodded in understanding.

"Hurry the hell up!" Garrick yells as the paramedic marks the spot where Red's chip is with a marker before slathering the area with iodine.

Springing into action, Lizzie took the defib paddles and placed them on the chest of her guard, one of Garrick's men. She didn't wait around to see if she'd killed him, instead bending over to steal his gun and spun to shoot the driver in the head.

Looking over at her dad, they smiled softly at each other, their eyes sad. Red nodded at the door and Lizzie sighed.

"'Til next time." She murmured, opening the door and jumping out of the moving vehicle.

\/
\/
\/

Chained to a rope taut above him, his wrists bound in leather, Red swayed, his feet barely touching the ground as he was surrounded by darkness.

Garrick pulled the gunny sack from over Red's head and smiled – well, more like grimaced – at Red. "Oh, this shall be fun."

\/
\/
\/

"How did this happen?" Diane Fowler, Cooper's boss at the DOJ, murmured angrily as they walked through the halls of the Post Office, surveying the damage and directing agents to get tasks done.

"Anslo Garrick was a known associate of Reddington's. He came in with a tactical assault team. He knew the floor plan."

"Then I have no choice. This task force is decommissioned. Do you understand what has happened,
"Harold? You obviously have a mole."

"We have to find Reddington."

"The only thing that matters right now is how quickly we contain this. This did not happen. Reddington is, and always has been, a fugitive at large."

\\/

It had been too late. By the time she was able to catch up to the chip's location, it had already been dug out of her dad's neck and thrown onto the ground inside a medical glove.

Lizzie was now back in the Post Office, having just been told that they would not be searching for Reddington. *The hell they weren't.*

"Aram, wait. You can't −" Lizzie scrambled over to Aram as he began packing up equipment.

"We're done. I'm done." Aram stuttered. The poor guy had seen more action today than he probably ever has in his life.

"Listen to me – Red's alive." She pleaded.

"Liz, this is out of my hands." Lizzie gave him her best puppy dog eyes. They always worked on her Dad and Pop. Even Dembe couldn't resist. "Okay, assuming −"

"Mm-hmm?" Lizzie encouraged, her lips stretching into a grin. She's still got it.

"I could help, what would you need?"

"Closed-circuit feeds from the block around the building from when Reddington came in, going back an hour."

"Supposed to hand off the security feeds to the new team of investigators. I suppose I could make us a copy."

"Thank you." Lizzie clapped Aram on the back, standing back up from her crouch.

"How do you think Ressler's doing?"

"He's in surgery. They're hoping they can save his leg." Lizzie's lips thinned in worry. He may be annoying sometimes with his Captain America routine but Ressler was her partner and a good guy. "Aram – we got to keep this between us. We don't know who we can trust."

"Yeah."

\\/

Lizzie ducked around the corner and pulled out her cellphone, quickly dialing the number for the Hotel.

"Emissary Hotel." She heard the Operator's voice over the line. "How may I direct your call? Yes?"

"Hi. Mr. Kaplan, please."

There was a pause before the Operator spoke again. "He's not available. Can you be reached at this number?"
"This – ? Uh, yes, I suppose."

"Goodbye."

God, her dad turned her life into a Bond film.

\---

"The girl. The agent. I want to know who she is. You came out of the box for her. Traded your life for hers. Red Reddington placing somebody else's life ahead of his own. What makes her so special? I learned so much watching you, Red. You taught me, gave me a taste of the good life. But that's all I was allowed, a taste."

"You're greedy, Anslo. You went behind my back, made deals you knew I wouldn't approve. What did you expect?" Red's poker face was in full force, though he was glad that Anslo's own tendency to monologue steered the conversation away from Lizzie.

"I suppose I expected something better than a bullet in the face, Red."

\---

Lizzie unlocked the door to her house, praying that Tom was at work. He should be at work. It'd been days since she'd been back to the house. She'd even had Dembe come pack a bag for her a few days ago while Tom was working. Looking around and seeing the coast was seemingly clear, Lizzie headed towards the stairs, wanting desperately to change into some less bloody clothes while she waited for Aram to find what she needed.

"Lizzie?"

Shit. What the hell was he doing here?

Lizzie turned around on the stair to see Tom standing at the bottom. "Yeah, I–"

"What the hell is going on? I don't see you for days and then a man is telling me over the phone that he's going to kill you!?!" Tom questioned, slowly coming towards her on the stair. She had to give him credit – he was a great actor. She almost believed that he was scared for her. Almost.

"I know. And we'll talk about this later, but right now-"

"Damn it, you need to stop. You need to stop. You need to walk away from this job before it destroys you." Tom reached for her as he came closer but she quickly batted him away. She could not deal with this right now.

"Don't."

Tom's face turns thunderous and he appears to be about to speak when Lizzie's phone rang. Squeezing past Tom, Lizzie walked back down the stairs.

Ignoring Tom's pleas for her not to answer it, Lizzie pressed the green call button.

"I sent you the files. Our cameras cover five blocks around the office in every direction." Aram's voice came over the line, the echo of rapid typing floating through the line as well.

"Okay, I'll look through them right now." Lizzie went over to the computer that sat at a small desk in the corner of the living room.
"Don't bother. Red wasn't followed. He came in at 5:15. No tail cars, no eyes on the street."

"Damn it. How did Garrick know he was in the post office?" Lizzie turned her back as Tom walked over.

"My question exactly. So I started thinking – What if somebody inside already tipped him off?"

"You found the mole?"

"No. But I think I have a lead. We routinely collect all cellular transmission from inside and directly around this facility. So much data I had to play around with various mathematical structures, knots, multivariate polynomials –"

"Aram, the lead?" Lizzie interrupted, impatient.

"Right. I found a pattern in the transmissions – a series of calls made from a burner cell. Each call was placed just seconds after Reddington arrived at the post office."

"All from the same burner?" Lizzie questioned. Who would be that stupid?

"No. All from different burners, but all the calls were to the same number. I vectored the address to a private residence a few miles from here. The address is 8123 12th street."

"What?" Lizzie walked over to the large front window of their house and pulls the curtain so that she can see. She lived on 12th Street. 8123 was right across from her. Crap. "I'll call you right back."

"As with everything involving you, things are more complicated than they may appear. If I could, I'd end this right now, give you the horrifying death that you so deserve."

"Then do it." Red murmured, closing his left eye against the flow of blood coming from where Garrick hit him in the face, splitting open his eyebrow. He'd been Garrick's punching bag for about an hour now. Most of Garrick's hits had been kidney shots. Red was going to be pissing blood for days. Joy.

"Yeah. When it's time. You see, sadly, this isn't my surprise party. I am merely the hired help. My job was to get you to the venue. And while I would pay a high price to silence you forever, others have paid much more for the chance to hear what you have to say."

Red laughed and shook his head. "Please." He said sarcastically.

Garrick looked behind him where a man was being escorted in by one of his men. Judging by the stethoscope and medical bag, Red was going to go out on a limb and say he was a doctor. Or used to be. Looked to Red like the doc was far away from his Hippocratic Oath.

Sitting the bag on one of the metal chairs in the large warehouse building, the doctor quickly removed a syringe from the bag. Garrick smiled, gesturing over at the doctor "Anesthesia blocks the impulses to the brain so one doesn't feel the sensation of pain. The drug that the kind doctor is giving you does the opposite. It enhances the impulses received by the brain. When he's finished, the feeling of a breeze wafting against your skin will be enough to make you beg me to kill you."

/\_/\
Lizzie broke the glass of the back door to 8123 12th street, carefully putting her hand in the hole in the glass, she unlocks the door and enters, pistol drawn. Finding nothing downstairs, she went upstairs where she finds a bank of computer monitors – all looking down on a room in her own flat! *You have got to be kidding me*, she thought. Every room was covered. Including the bedroom. Lizzie's brow furrowed at the sight of an apple is in front of the monitors.

She put down her gun, but then realized someone is behind her. Lizzie moved quickly grasping his hand as he tried to reach around her and flipping him over her shoulder. The man went down hard and Lizzie punched him in the face, dazing him. Reaching for her gun, Lizzie shot him twice. Once in the head, once in the chest. She’d have to think about today's body count and why she didn't seem too phased by it. Staring down at the man, Lizzie shook her head. He looked like some biker dude, thick leather boots, all black clothes and long grey hair tied at the nape of his neck. Lizzie grabbed her phone and dialed Cooper's number, figuring the FBI would need to clean this mess up and investigate what the hell was going on.

"Agent Keen? Agent Keen, are you there?" Cooper's voice came through the speaker and she pulled the phone away from her face. Looking down at it, Lizzie bit her lip before hanging up.

Or maybe she could get some answers. Lizzie dialed Mr. Kaplan.

\\\\

Lizzie had been pacing in the living room of the house where someone had apparently been surveilling her when she heard a knock at the door. Walking over, she hesitated.

"Mr. Kaplan?"

"What color is the sky?"

"Red." Lizzie's eyes widened as she threw open the door before she'd even responded with the code word. She knew that voice. "Katy Cat? You're Mr. Kaplan?!" Lizzie's voice went shrill as she stood aside to let Mr. Kaplan inside.

"Who else knows you're here?" Mr. Kaplan questioned as she whipped out a pair of latex gloves and put them on.

"Nobody. Wait. You're my babysitter!" Lizzie followed Mr. Kaplan up the stairs in shock. This woman babysat her when she was a kid and Sam had to go away 'on business.' Her dad had arranged it for the times when he couldn't be there and Pop had to leave.

Lizzie had been five the first time she met the woman her Dad had introduced as 'Kate.' She could still remember the time that she had given her the nickname, 'katy cat.' The dour woman's voice had softened as she read her favorite picture book, 'Catwings.' Lizzie had giggled and pointed to her favorite character and said "Katy, cat!" Just as Red had walked back into the room. "Well Katy Cat, looks like you two will get along swimmingly!" Her dad had chuckled, ignoring the disgruntled look that Kate Kaplan had thrown his way.

"Yes dearie, and would it have killed you to call every once in a while?" Mr. Kaplan gave her a pointed look and Lizzie's gaze quickly skittered to the floor as they entered the room with all the monitors. "Now, have you phoned anyone?"

"No."

"Who is he?" Mr. Kaplan nodded at the body as she slowly got down onto her knees beside the dead man.
"I don't know. Every time Dad came to the post office, a call was made to this address, I assume to him."

Mr. Kaplan looked over at the desk where all the monitors say. "He's been watching."

"When he got word that Red was at the post office, he must have called Garrick to trigger the hit."

"I'll handle the body." Mr. Kaplan said, a note of finality in her voice.

"Handle??"

"We need the bullets. We can't have ballistics traced to your weapon."

"Okay, wait." Lizzie put her arms out in front of her. "I can't do this. I'm a federal agent."

"I have two directives – to protect you and find your father. I intend to do both. My team will be here soon. Find his car."

\\%

"Increase the dosage." Garrick said in frustration. Even with the serum, Red was refusing to talk. His body was wracked with spasms of pain and he was sweating profusely, yet still Red did not speak, didn't cry out as his body roiled with fire.

"We're already 12 cc over the max." The Doctor answered.

"Then why isn't it working?!!" Garrick yelled.

"He's resisting somehow. I can stick him again, but if his heart goes into v–fib, we could lose him."

Red opened his eyes slowly, a small smile gracing his face as he puckered his lips at Garrick, as if to give him a kiss.

Garrick chuckled darkly. "Stick him again."

\%

"I ran his face against the database." Mr. Kaplan announced as she climbed into the driver's seat of the dead man's car.

"What database?"

Mr Kaplan raised her brow at Lizzie as if to say do you really think I'm going to tell you that? "No matches. The car is registered to Borderland Cargo, a shell corp with a dummy address.

"What about the GPS data? If he works for the man holding Red, then maybe he's been there before."

Mr Kaplan looked askance at Lizzie, impressed. Going through the recently found addresses on the GPS, she frowned in thought. "You have six addresses. Five are centrally located – A motel, a church, two gas stations, and a restaurant in Alexandria. But this?" She pointed at one of the addresses. "This is something."

"Why?"

"It's an industrial neighborhood, remote. The kind of place I'd find for Mr. Reddington if I didn't
want him to be found. Time for a road trip." Kaplan turned the key in the ignition and pulled out onto the street.

\\\\

"Armed lookouts." Mr Kaplan said, gazing up at the posted guards outside the warehouse from the relative safety of the car. "What are you doing?" She questioned as Lizzie pulled out her phone and went to dial.

"Calling it in. We need backup."

Mr. Kaplan pointed out of the car where a familiar looking group of men in military formation quickly incapacitated the two guards. "Stay in the car. My orders are to keep you safe." Mr. Kaplan directed as she saw Lizzie about to step out. Lizzie's head spun around as she heard the rear door open, only to sigh, rolling her eyes as Dembe slid into the seat behind her.

"Oh great, so now both of my babysitters are here." Lizzie grumbled, making Dembe chuckle. She tried not to bring too much attention to the way Mr. Kaplan's lips twitched upwards as well. The woman didn't smile very often, it was best not to mention it when she did.

\\\\

Red's shaking had graduated to full tremors as the Doctor took his blood pressure and measured his pulse.

"I think we're ready here."

"About bloody time." Garrick hit Red in the stomach once more, eliciting a weak groan as he swung on the chain, his feet unable to touch the ground as the man holding the other end of the rope lifted him higher.

Footsteps approached but Red was too weak to look up, his head resting limply on his raised arms.

"How are we?" He knew that voice. God he was in trouble. Moving his gaze, Red's lips thinned as his eyes settled on Alan Fitch. Well shit.

"He's ready for you, sir." Garrick murmured deferentially.

Fitch ignored the man as he walked up to Red. "Ray. It's been, what – 20 years?"

\\\\

Lizzie escorted Cooper and a team of agents into the warehouse that Red's team had raided only to find that Red wasn't there.

"Tell me, Agent Keen, which part of 'stand down' was unclear to you?" Cooper questioned, his gravelly voice at an all time low.

"This wasn't my operation. Fowler may have shut us down, but did you really think Reddington's people weren't gonna try to find him themselves?" She said leaning against the fenced area which housed… something.

"They did this without your involvement?"

"The only reason you're standing here is because they trust me enough to involve me."
"Enlighten me. What is all this?" Cooper pointed to the fenced in area which contained a wealth of computers and servers.

"Some kind of operations outpost three miles from the post office. Seems to be manned by the same people who infiltrated our facility and kidnapped Reddington. That doesn't concern you?"

"I lost a dozen people today, Keen!" Cooper lost his cool. "That isn't on you. It's on me. No one wants the men who did this more than I do. But riding shotgun on an unsanctioned massacre isn't the way to get it done."

"Excuse me, Director Cooper?" Aram hurried over, a small laptop opened in his hands.

"What is it?"

"There's something you need to see."

\\\\

"I thought I was clear. This task force is done. Diane Fowler had the voice of a woman who'd been smoking for a handful of decades, which was further deepened by her disapproval.

"I think you'll reconsider." Cooper replied coolly.

"Why in God's name would I do that?"

"Because this isn't just about Reddington anymore. Agent Keen located a surveillance outpost a few miles from here. Next-gen tech, better than anything we have in the field."

"Surveillance on what?"

"Us. They've been watching this task force for months. Phone taps, communications logs. We're not sure to what extent. We were able to recover very little. The equipment and data were rigged to self-destruct."

"I don't understand. Fowler looked at Cooper, worry making her face look even older. "How is this even possible?"

"Something else you should know. They've been watching you, too." Cooper spun the laptop on the table to show her the video Aram had given him – a video of him and Fowler meeting up on the side of a street.

\\\\

"All right, that's enough." Fitch announced tiredly after Garrick had roughed Red up for another 15 minutes. "Let him down. Come on. Get him a chair."

Red was let down by one of Garrick's men and lost his balance, conveniently knocking into the Doctor. They quickly plopped him in a chair before everyone left the room, leaving Red and Fitch alone.

"I don't understand, Ray. None of this had to happen. I thought we had an arrangement."

Red tried to speak, cleared his throat then attempted it once more. "We do." His voice was barely a whisper.

"Eh, I don't know. The people I represent, they're nervous. We don't know what to think. We
could've killed you. I don't mean today. I mean any day. I mean every day for the past two decades. But we don't. We know what you have, Ray. And we know what'll happen to it if you turn up dead. So we do nothing. We let you live. And in exchange, we– we trust that our secret remains secret."

"Nothing has changed."

"Oh, no. I'd say everything's changed. Everything changed the minute you surrendered to the FBI. Did you think we wouldn't know? Maybe you wanted to change our arrangement. Maybe you thought you could turn yourself in and, uh, find some new friends to protect you. Maybe you plan to expose us."

"No."

"What have you told, Ray?"

Red shook head vehemently. "Nothing."

"Then what the hell are you doing here?"

"My reasons have n- nothing to do with you."

"Do they have to do with your daughter, Ray?" Red looked up sharply at the question, his heart beating even faster than it already was from the drugs.

"Yes Ray, we know about her. Special Agent Keen. You see, at first we figured that this whole thing with the FBI was just another way Red Reddington was benefiting Red Reddington. But then we heard about the deal, how you're only willing to talk to her. What's so special about her Ray? Then we looked into her and it all clicked. Found out she was adopted by Sam Scott – your old Navy pal – just a couple months after little Masha Rostova disappeared."

"Don't you dare touch her." Ray growled, his eyes igniting in anger.

"Of course not. Because I've always liked you, Ray. You're a pain in my neck, but I like you. Just know this. Little Lizzie went to get coffee on that corner shop near your hotel this morning. You were walking in the park this morning. We could've taken you then. Instead, we dragged you from the safety and security of the bed you're now sharing with new friends. Why would we do a thing like that? To make it abundantly clear, there's nowhere you can go. There's no one you can trust to keep you from us."


"А тут шесть человек. Это было постом. Профессионалы. Эти люди были достаточно подготовлены. Как Гаррик. Что это за дела?" Лиззи указала на пачку документов из маилана.

"Страшная тратка времени." Мейра посмотрела на нее. "По распоряжению Коуpera, я связалась с несколькими нашими коллегами в Агентстве, сообщила им о нашей ситуации, и предложила связаться с нашими коллегами в другие черные места для совместной разведки." Лиззи взяла один из папок, брови ее затравились от волнения, когда она открыла его, чтобы взглянуть. "Все эти имена были скрыты."
Meera rolled her eyes. "So much for inter-agency cooperation."

"You really think that Garrick had someone on the inside?"

"It's possible. The only one beyond suspicion is Ressler, unless he used Garrick to shoot him in the leg to cover his tracks."

"Is he still in surgery?" Lizzie's voice softened with worry for her partner.

"Four hours and counting."

Lizzie sighed before looking at a map from one of the folders. "Hollins Ferry Road. I know that address. It says DCM What does that mean?"

"Decommissioned. Here I am trying to help, and the only names that aren't blacked out are sites that are no longer in use."

"Is that a church?" Lizzie asked, poring over the map.

"Well, that's the cover story."

"I'm gonna need satellite access to this address."

"Why?" Meera questioned, not quite understanding where Lizzie was going.

"Because I think this might be where they're holding Reddington." Lizzie stated, shifting slightly so that Meera could read the map over her shoulder.

"Is this in Franklin Square?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"The ambulance that was used to abduct Reddington they found burning in a garage a quarter mile from there."

Lizzie looked up to see Cooper and Diane Fowler exiting his office. "I think we found Reddington." She announced, walking over to them, the map in her hand.

"Where?" Cooper asked, looking down at the map.

"A church in Baltimore – A decommissioned black site."

"A black site? You think that's where they're holding Reddington?"

"It makes sense. It's the last place we would think of. And if he knew about this site, he'd know about others."

Cooper looked over at Diane Fowler who had remained silent. "What about it, Diane? I need an answer. Are we shut down or not?"

Garrick walked over to where Red was apparently still tied to the chair.

"Just you and me again, Red. Just like the old days."
"Oh, give it a rest." Red snipped. "We both know Fitch won't let you finish it."

"That's as may be. But you know what I can do, though, Red? I can find Lizzie. I can hurt her. I can make her suffer. And when I'm finished, I can kill her. Sometimes you just have to take what you can in this crazy world. Guess who taught me that, Red." He paused for a moment, waiting for Red to say something. "You did. What? No smart quips? No?"

Red began to have a coughing fit, leaning forward in his chair. Garrick pulled out a chair and sat close to Red, leaning towards him.

"You're not actually feeling something, are you, Red?" He teased.

Lightning fast, Red headbutts Garrick, then grabs him, stabbing him in the neck with the surgical scissors he'd pocketed when he'd fallen into the Doctor. Red watched coldly as Garrick drowned in his own blood before stiffening and falling limp.

"Regret." He murmured before standing up and letting Garrick's body fall to the floor after he pulled the bloody surgical scissors from Garrick's neck. Red left without looking back.

\\\\

Ten minutes later, Lizzie, Cooper, and Meera stormed the church with a group of armed agents. Seeing a body on the floor, Lizzie ran towards it, only to sigh in relief at the sight of Garrick's lifeless body.

"He was here." She murmured.

\\\\

"He was there. Lab tests confirm the blood was Reddington's." Cooper reported to Fowler as they sat in his office.

"Which means?" Fowler's strict, birdlike features tightened with impatience.

"As far as we can tell, he killed his captor and escaped."

"Then why aren't you out hunting him down?"

"I'm sorry?" Cooper leaned forward, lacing his fingers atop his desk. "I thought we were in the 'cover our asses' business, in containment mode."

"That ship has sailed, Harold." Fowler spat angrily. "Someone is surveilling us, and we don't know who. Reddington does."

"You don't know that."

"We have a mole. That mole leaked intel leading to the abduction and torture of Reddington. It's a simple math problem, Harold. Whoever is after Reddington is after us, and that means, as far as I'm concerned, that Reddington still has real value. The unit has a new focus – Finding him. As of this moment, the only target on the blacklist is Raymond Reddington."

\\\\

Lizzie sat on the couch in a new safe house. Dembe had driven them there as they both felt that the Hotel was compromised. Neither had spoken a word all evening, silent with worry as they hadn't heard from Red yet.
Lizzie startled as her phone lit up next to her, grabbing it, she fumbled to answer the call.

"Hello?"

"Lizzie." His gruff voice came over the line.

"Red." Lizzie's entire body seemed to sag with relief. "Where are you?"

"Gone for a short while."

"Are you alright? Dembe's out looking for you."

"I've already called Dembe, he'll be coming back to the safe house soon."

"The task force, Cooper – They're searching for you. What should I tell them?"

"Lizzie, do you remember the men who stormed that outpost with you today?"

"Yea, why?"

"They're your team. They're tasked to protect you. Let them."

"Dad? What's going on?"

There was a moment of silence before she heard a great sigh. She could almost imagine her dad rubbing his hand over the top of his head in frustration. "They know, Lizzie. The people I've tried to protect you from. They know you're my daughter."

Lizzie gulped in fear. In the back of her mind, she'd always known that some day, it would all come to a head, that her dad wouldn't be able to keep them away forever. But she had hoped they'd have more time. She wasn't ready. If she was honest with herself, she didn't think she ever would be.

"The cards are still stacked in my favor, Sweetheart. But I don't think they will be for much longer. I need you to stay safe while I'm gone, okay? Dembe is to stay with you at all times when you're not at the Post Office. Baz and his team will also still watch over you. Promise me, Lizzie. Promise you won't do anything stupid. That includes going to see that husband of yours. Promise me."

Lizzie bit her lip at the intensity of her dad's voice. She hadn't heard him sound so upset since that night all those years ago, the night her sister had died.

"I promise, Dad." She whispered. "Where are you going to go? What are you gonna do?"

"There is a mole on the taskforce, Lizzie. I intend to find out who. Now, I have to go. But Lizzie I want you to know, wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, if you are in need, I will be there."

"Dad, that sounds an awful lot like goodbye." Lizzie couldn't stop the small snifflle.

Red chuckled softly. "Of course not, Sweetheart. Until next time."

The sound of the dial tone cut off her reply.
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

So I wanted to skip over this episode but then I watched it again and well, there are some excellent badass Red moments that I think were a necessary reminder that he's still a dangerous criminal. There is also a bit of a like-father-like-daughter moment of badassery for Lizzie, as well. Oh... and I hope ya'll like the conclusion to a certain plot line :-D I can't promise he won't be back but it will NOT be in the way he keeps crawling back in the show.

Lizzie drew back the curtains of her kitchen and sighed when she saw the white surveillance van posted outside. They said it was for protection while they searched for the mole, but since everyone was suspect until that time, it felt more like they were there to surveille her rather than protect.

Checking her phone, Lizzie rolled her eyes, pressing the button to hear the latest voicemail and putting it to her ear as she grabbed some coffee.

"Listen Liz, I know that you've...we've had a rough time of it lately. And I think we really just need to get back to us, back to normal again. I don't understand why you've been ignoring me and haven't been home in days but I want to work on this. Which is why I have an interview in Nebraska."

Lizzie's face quirked into shocked confusion as she listened. What sort of crap logic is that?

"There are great schools, low crime, and an FBI field office there. We could just...go. Be normal. No hidden cameras, no fake passports. So uh, I'll be coming back tomorrow night. I'd really like it if you would meet me at the house so we could talk."

Lizzie hung up and deleted the message, placing her cell in her back pocket as she grabbed her jacket. She was going to have to deal with that whole situation, but right now, she was late for work.

Frowning, Lizzie took her phone back out of her pocket as she heard an e-mail notification.

Glancing at the screen, her mouth dropped open. "My God."

\/
\/
\/

"You're positive it's him?" Cooper questioned as he sat at his desk.

"Same surgical precision, same call to 911. This is the guy."

"Mobile psych can handle it." Cooper dismissed.

"I rode lead on this case. That's why they're requesting a liaison." Lizzie paced in the small area in front of Cooper's Desk.
"Our only job right now is finding Raymond Reddington."

"This case is important to me," Lizzie dug her index finger into the desk as she spoke. "It's personal. If it's personal to me, it's personal to Reddington. He may reach out, try to help make this his case."

\\\\\\

"In the last three weeks, have you had contact with Reddington?"

Lizzie's lips pursed as she sat on the wrong side of the table in one of the Post Office's interrogation rooms. "No."

"Tell me this, Agent Keen – is your husband cleared to know the location of this black site?"

"No."

"And yet you brought him here."

"As part of an investigation."

"What investigation?"

Lizzie repressed the urge to roll her eyes. Barely. "You can look into that. All the information is here."

"Are you refusing to answer?"

"Yes."

The OPR interrogator wrote something down in her notebook. "Where were you when the site was taken?"

Lizzie swallowed, knowing how this was going to sound. "I was on my way here. I was late."

"That was convenient."

\\\\\\

"Tell me, our guy – what do you got on the victims?" Ressler leaned heavily on his cane, clearly attempting to keep as little weight on his butchered leg as possible as they walked through the hospital's basement hallways. Lizzie was sure he probably shouldn't have been cleared to work so quickly. She had to admire the guy for his dedication.

"Seven so far. All different ages, incomes. He always acted unpredictably. We could never figure out his trigger, only that he's trying to make a statement."

"What kind of a statement?"

Lizzie combed her fingers through her hair, tugging slightly. "He never kills his victims. He always calls 911, allows first responders a chance to save their lives. That's why the papers call him The Good Samaritan."

\\\\\\

They stood awkwardly outside the morgue with the latest victim's husband and son after
introducing themselves.

"What's happened? Are you sure it's my wife?"

"That's what we need you to confirm for us, sir. I'm sorry." Lizzie frowned, the corners of her eyes creasing with sympathy.

"What's your boy's name?" Ressler questioned gruffly, shifting his weight.

"Michael."

Ressler looked over at Lizzie. "Why don't you take Mr. Brodine inside here? And I'll hang out with Michael." He directed his gaze back to Mr. Brodine. "If that's okay with you."

\\/\\/\\

Red stood quietly in front of Luli's coffin, wearing a hoodie, overlarge coat, and a beanie hat. Certainly not his usual fare but when needs must. He wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there, too lost in his head, playing the scene of her death over and over again in his mind. When would it end? All the blood and death.

Not yet. That was for damn sure. He had a rat to sniff out. His chin jutted out as he rolled his tongue, his back straightening with new determination.

"Arrange transport of her ashes personally. I want it done properly." Red directed his assistant, Newton as he left the room.

\\/\\/\\

Red walked through the bowling alley and straight into the bathroom. Nodding in acknowledgement in the mirror at Dembe who stood at the sink, he walked up to the man standing with his pants unzipped in front of the urinal.

"The hell are you looking at?" In a flash, he had the man's arm twisted behind him, his head smushed against the bathroom wall.

"I want you to tell me about your friend – the man with the apple."

"I don't know." The man's voice took on a note of desperation as he realized what this was about. "We never met before the job. I swear. I didn't even know his name."

"How did you communicate?" Red's voice darkened.

"By the phones. Everything was anonymous. Nobody knew anybody. We all had jobs."

"Tell me about these jobs."

\\/\\/\\

He sat in the back of an SUV, Dembe upfront and the Paramedic sitting beside him, wringing her hands as he maintained a lose grip on his pistol. "I've never worked with any of these people before. I was told to be on standby for a 48–hour window. They said I had under four minutes to pull a chip from your neck."

"Who told you you had four minutes?"
"The people who paid me."

"How were you paid?"

"Cash, at a drop."

"Where?"

"It was always a different place, different locations. They picked me up in an ambulance. I didn't even know where we were going!"

"How were you paid?"

"In cash at the site." Each time the Paramedic spoke, it was as if the words tumbled from her mouth before she could catch them.

"What denomination were the bills?"

"He paid in $5s and $10s. Nothing larger than a $20. I've told you everything, I promise." She pleaded.

"I know you have. You have such a pretty face. And a paramedic. What a shame." Red's eyes were dull, almost as if he were bored, as he shot her.

/

Another SUV, another conspirator. This time it was the bastard Doc who kept injecting him with that serum in the church.

"So, you had no knowledge of either the location or a target?"

"No. I'm surprised it was you. I was just hired to supply the injections and monitor your vital signs."

/

Lizzie walked into the safe house, setting her purse down by the door and flopped onto the couch, groaning as her phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Lizzie."

Lizzie sat up straight at the sound of his voice. "Where are you?"

Red ignored her question. "I read about that poor woman they found in Albany. Sounded awfully familiar. The Good Samaritan. Are you back on the case, I hope?"

Two could play this game. "They're going to find you."

"This one's important to you, isn't he? Why? What on Earth happened? I only ask on the chance that I may be able to help."

He was like a dog with a bone sometimes. Sitting back, Lizzie let out a shaky breath. "One of the earliest victims – she died in my arms. There was nothing I could do to stop it."
"You missed something, didn't you?"

"Serial killers escalate. This one doesn't." Lizzie shook her head, her brain was constantly trying to fit the pieces together but they just weren't lining up. They never had. "The victims and methods vary. I could never see the pattern the profile. Still can't."

"I don't know about serial killers, but I do know about torture, and there is no one–size–fits–all. If you really want to hurt someone, you need to tailor your attack specifically to that person. Perhaps the killer's methods, the injuries he inflicts tell you less about him and more about his victims." Red paused. "I got to go."

"Wait!" He had already hung up.

\///\\

She hadn't been able to rest after the phone call, which is why early morning found Lizzie at her desk, poring over case notes and x-rays of the victims before anyone else was at the Post Office. Dialing Ressler, Lizzie put her phone to her ear.

"I think I've got something."

\///\\

"You've spoken with Reddington." Ressler gimped over to the table where Lizzie had all of the case files splayed open.

"Yes. He called." Lizzie didn't look over as she held an x-ray up to the light to see it better.

"He called? When? Did you tell Cooper?" Meera questioned.

"Not yet." Lizzie stated distractedly. "We talked about the case." She didn't notice the shared look between Ressler and Meera.

"We're all under suspicion here. He called, and you didn't report it?" Ressler asked, leaning against the table.

"I will, but something he said about the case – We've been focused on the killer. We should be focused on the victims. The most recent victim's son, Michael, broke his collarbone."

"Yeah. He told me at the morgue." Ressler waved his hand dismissively, not seeing the importance.

"I looked through his medical records. He broke a lot more than that – broken ribs, collapsed lung, blunt trauma to the liver and kidneys. The boy was abused. These are the autopsy x–rays of the most recent victim. Every fracture, every injury the son had, the killer gave to the mother."

"We should bring the boy in."

\///\\

Red walked into the quiet nightclub with purpose in his stride. As soon as he rounded the corner, two bodyguards stood from the booth they were occupying to protect their man. Red quickly put them down, spinning on his heel to shoot the man coming around the corner he'd just come from and spun again to shoot his latest victim in the thigh.
"Hello, Fyodor."

"Ahh! Hey! Okay! Cool out!" One hand was outstretched in supplication while the other clutched his thigh. "I can make this right! Just talk to me!"

"Oh, yes, Fyodor. We're gonna talk, all right." Red smirked darkly.

\[\text{\textbackslash//\textbackslash//}\]

Red poured glugs from a bottle of vodka on Fyodor's wound and takes a swig from the bottle as Fyodor cries out in pain, struggling against his restraints.

"Honestly, I don't understand you, Fyodor. With all the business you do, and you're still funneling the money through your nightclubs, paying contracts in 5s and 10s 'cause you're too cheap to pay the commission for clean cash." Red shook his head. "Anyway, I get sidetracked. I've come for your banker. Who is the banker?" Within a split second, his tone of voice went from jaunty storyteller to murderous.

"I can't – " Red stood and dumped some of the vodka over Fyodor's face, causing the man to choke and splutter as he accidentally ingested some.

"The first time I ever smoked a cigar was with Marnie Petersen in fifth grade." Red muttered around the cigar he'd placed in his mouth and lit it. "Funny, little, bat–faced girl. I adored her." Red swiped the match close to Fyodor's now very flammable face. "The bank."

"Please." Fyodor pleaded, shaking his head yet never taking his eyes off Red and his cigar.

"How about I make this as simple as possible? There are five bankers on the East Coast who were capable of financing a mission like Garrick's. I run money through four of them. Which one?" Red took his cigar out of his mouth and brought it close to Fyodor's crotch.

"Okay! Oh, okay! The money was wired from Gestalten Landesbank, the New York office. We have a man there. I swear that's all I know!"

"Thank you." Red smiled pleasantly.

"Okay. So – so that's it? We're finished?" Fyodor's face turned slack with hope.

"Yes, we're finished." Red's smile turned feral as he dumped the rest of the vodka over Fyodor's head then put the burning cigar in Fyodor's mouth.

"Oh, my God!" Red shook his head, an enormous grin on his face, having watched the cigar burn down for a few moments. "The suspense is killing me." Red serenely grasped his pistol and shot Fyodor in the chest before walking away.

\[\text{\textbackslash//\textbackslash//}\]

Little Michael and his father, Mr. Brodine sat on a leather couch in one of the lounge areas of a local Police Department.

"I don't like to talk about that." The boy said, his eyes shifting away.

"I know, Mike. I know. We really need to, okay?" Ressler asked, his voice soft and reassuring.

Mr Brodine clapped his son on the shoulder, squeezing gently in comfort. "Hey. You're not in trouble. I promise."
"So, you broke your arm and your wrist?" Ressler questioned.

"I fell off my bike." Michael whispered.

"And last year, you broke your collarbone and, uh, broke your ankle?"

"They were accidents. That's all I'm supposed to say." Michael shifted in his seat in discomfort.

Ressler and Lizzie shared a look. "Who told you to say that?"

Michael's eyes widened as he realized he made a mistake.

"It's okay, Michael. Tell him what you told me. No one's gonna hurt you anymore." Mr. Brodine whispered in his ear.

"My mom." Lizzie's heart broke at the little boy's scared whisper. The woman was dead yet her child still feared her.

///

"Michael's mother was abusing him for years, and now she ends up dead." Meera stated as she gazed at the various x-rays and case notes that were now displayed on the evidence boards.

"The same injuries she inflicted on Michael." Ressler agreed, admitting defeat as he sat on a stool, rubbing his aching leg.

"Normally, the father would be the prime suspect, but that doesn't fit. I mean, even if he wanted to hurt her for abusing their son, what about the other victims?" Lizzie's face froze before she walked up to the evidence board, the pieces finally beginning to fall into place. "Unless it's the same motive."

"Our unsub's somebody who targets the abusers." Ressler voiced their shared conclusion.

"Like a vigilante killer." Meera stated.

"Let's run background checks. We need to know what other victims have loved ones with identical injuries." Ressler hopped off the stool and balanced on his good leg before hobbling off to get to work.

///

"Henry." Red stepped out of the shadows and walked up to the man on the sidewalk as he exited his home.

"What the hell are you … My wife will be down here any minute." Henry looked behind him, checking to make sure his wife was not already outside.

"Great. I'd love to meet the wife." Red said jovially.

"Mr. Reddington, we have a dinner engagement. Don't you think it's best you and I make an appointment for another time?"

The smile cleared off of Red's face and his tone turned brusque. "There's been a nasty bit of business – blood spilled, lives lost. A modicum of torture words don't fully describe. I know who's responsible. I know who carried it out."
Red watched with disinterest as the half of Henry's face which was illuminated by the streetlamp became ashen. "Mr. Reddington, I have no idea –"

"I've tied up all the loose ends but one. To finish the job, I'll need all your wire and transfer records pertaining to the operation."

"Mr. Reddington, I have no idea who –"

"Please, Henry. Stop." Red shook his head in agitation. "You were the bank. Henry. You were the bank."

Henry sighed, licking his lips. "This puts me in a real situation. Listen. I'll do anything I can to help. I'll need time to –"

"You'll hear from me tomorrow." Red stated before walking away and blending into the shadows just as Henry's wife opened the front door to exit.

\\\\
Meera pulled Cooper into a hallway at the Post Office. "You need to see this. One of the offshore accounts was used to launder money from Gestalten Landesbank into this dummy account in Manhattan." Meera's voice had an air of urgency as she handed the file over to Cooper who immediately opened it and began to review the contents.

"Louis Coogan. That's our mole?"

"Well, that's his alias. Turn the page."

Cooper did as instructed and he immediately did a double take at the photo of Aram Mojtabai staring up at him.

"Bring him in." Cooper ordered gruffly.

\\\\
Unfortunately for Cooper and Meera, Red had gotten to Aram first.

Red sat at a rickety wooden table in a dirt basement, Aram on the other side. Dembe pulled the black hood from over Aram's head and the man blinked at the sudden light.

"Hello, Aram." Red greeted.

"What – what is this? Where am I?" Aram looked around him, trying to figure out what was happening. Noticing the laptop sat open beside him and the pistol laying on the table in front of Red, he swallowed noisily.

"You're going to do something for me. Account numbers, routing information. You're going to steal $5 million from that account and place it into one of mine. I expect the transaction to be untraceable."

"What? I can't."

Red picked up the weapon. "Aram this is a Colt .45 1911. I can strip and reassemble this weapon – in well under two minutes."

Aram shook his head vehemently. "Mr. Reddington, please."
"Once I have it reassembled, I'm gonna reload the mag, and if at that time, your task remains incomplete, I'm gonna empty that mag into your head."

Aram's eyes widened. "That's really messed up."

Red smiled benignly. "Don't look so stricken. The first shot will kill you."

Red began disassembling the gun and Aram quickly sprang to action, hunching over the keyboard. A strange symphony of sounds – the clicks and metallic snick of a gun being taken apart smoothly accentuated by the incessant tapping of keys.

Just as Red added the last bullet, loaded the mag into place and cocked the weapon, Aram put his hands in the air, sitting back in his seat.

"Wait. … Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait! … I did it. It's done. Look. It's untraceable, like you asked." Aram spun the laptop around so that Red could see it.

"How? Explain."

"I used a ripple exchange to have the Flat currency converted to e–cash and then into Bitcoin. I ran the whole transaction through a randomized cryptographic extension at the protocol level, then through a two–tiered secure laundry service I know I can trust. No one's gonna catch you. I promise."

Red smiled at Aram and unloaded the bullet that he'd cocked into the barrel, holding it out to Aram.

"A souvenir. You're innocent."

"I am? I mean, I am!" Aram hesitantly reached forward and took the bullet. "Wait. Of what?"

"The team that broke into the black site was paid through Gestalten Landesbank. My contact there traced a $250,000 payment to a covert account belonging to Louis Coogan."

"Louis who?"

"It's an alias, for you. Someone is attempting to implicate you as a mole by creating a money trail that leads directly to you. You're obviously far too clever to have accepted payment that was so easily traceable."

"You're not gonna kill me." Aram said, his shoulders slouching in relief.

"No. I'm going to find somebody else, and I'm going to kill them."

/
\/
\/
\/
\/

"Henry? I'm so glad you're home. We have company. You never told me you rowed crew for Dartmouth." Henry's wife yelled from the kitchen at the sound of the front door closing. Henry walked into the dining room to see Red sitting at the table, smiling up at him with his head cocked to the side.

"Don't worry, Henry. I haven't told her all our war stories. Well, a few. You have a lovely wife. We've been getting to know each other. Come here, you old such and such." Red stood and walked over to Henry, giving the shocked man a giant bear hug as he whispered darkly in his ear. "I know what you've done."
Henry's eyes widened but he tried to recover quickly as his wife entered the room.

"I invited Bernard to stay for dinner. I have a Stroganoff on the burner." Red smiled at Henry's wife, Janice then looked to Henry.

"I hope you don't mind if I stay. I do love Stroganoff."

Henry smiled shakily. "Let me wash up." He murmured before leaving.

Red walked over to Janice and put his arm around her waist. "You're fun." He stated, making the woman give out a peel of giggles.

///\

"Would you like rice or noodles, Bernard?" Janice questioned Red as she brought in a hot dish, setting it on the table near where Red and Henry sat.

"Whichever is quicker." He smiled at her, smiling. The moment she left the room, he looked over at Henry, his face suddenly thunderous.

"I gave you what you asked for." Henry whispered, a tinge of desperation in his voice.

"No, Henry. You gave me the bank transfers pointing to a patsy."

"What's he talking about?" Janice questioned as she walked in from the kitchen.

"Janice, shh." Henry sighed, looking back at Red. "You should never have come here into my home. They're on their way."

Red shook his head, having already figured that Henry had made a call while 'washing up.' "Nearly everyone has been accounted for, except one. Who else got paid?"

"Red, please. They will kill me if I say a word about any of –"

Losing patience, Red shot Henry in the knee. Which immediately sent Janice into hysterics.

"God! What on Earth?! –" Red winced at the sheer shrillness in her voice. She had a falsetto that would make Queen proud.

"Who else got paid?" Red questioned Henry, pointing his gun at the man's head as he wreathed on the ground, holding his leg.

"Henry!? You monster! What have you done?!" Janice looked up at Red from where she kneeled next to her husband, fluttering her arms in panic.

"Please, Janice. Stop with the yelling. It's just a flesh wound." Red tried to reason with the woman.

"He shot you!" The woman moaned, clutching at her husband's leg, causing the man to groan in increased agony.

"The next bullet goes in your stomach if you don't start talking. I want a name."

"I have to call an ambulance. He needs a doctor!"

"Janice, if you don't stop, – I'm gonna put you in the closet."
"Red, please." Henry pleaded.

"I need to call Dr. Wright. He will come to the house!"

"No doctor" Red murmured as he walked over and grabbed Janice by the arm, hauling her to her feet.

"— What are you doing?! Stop it! Aah! No! Aah! Her voice became muffled as Red shoved her into the closet and closed the door before spinning back towards Henry.

"Henry, give me the name."

"Let me out of here!"

Red spun on his heel and face the closet. "Janice if you don't stop your yammering, I'm gonna have to shoot through this door, which will be a shame, because I won't have any idea what I'm shooting at." Red paused, nodding his head in satisfaction when only the slightest sound of a whimper passed through the door. Walking back over to Henry, Red cocked his gun. "Give me a name, Henry, or I'm gonna drag you out, throw you in the trunk, fly you to Papua New Guinea, and have your head stuck on a pole."


Red's lips pursed in anger before he turned back to the closet. "Janice, my sincerest apologies. I'll take a rain check on the Stroganoff. It smells delicious." He yelled through the door before quickly leaving the house.

\---

Lizzie, Ressler, and Meera stood in the war room of the Post Office, with Cooper, presenting their case to him as it stood. "Every one of The Good Samaritan's victims had a family member with identical injuries – fractured skulls, broken bones, torn retinas. All of them either the victim's spouse or child. All of them classic signs of physical abuse." Lizzie explained.

"You think your serial killer only targets people who hurt others?" Cooper asked, skeptical.

"How else do you explain this?" Lizzie gestured her hand in a broad sweep at the evidence boards.

"Every one of these family members was at a different hospital, different insurance, different doctors. There's nothing that ties them together." Ressler stated, clearly frustrated, though that may have been because his usual Captain America stance was severely diminished by his cane. He was only able to place one hand on his hip. It just didn't have the same effect.

Her eyes running quickly over the board, Lizzie stepped towards it and pointed to several pieces of paper, each with the same name on it. "Yes, there is. Nurse Karl Hoffman. He was on call every time one of the family members was brought into the ER. He's a locum tenens. He fills in for short-staffed hospitals, like a substitute teacher."

\---

"We're getting warrants for his home address and the last hospital he reported to." Ressler updated Cooper.

"Good. Get moving."
Lizzie and Ressler rounded the corner of the hospital and walked up a nurse's station. "Okay. So, you wanted a list of all the patients Hoffman saw today?" The nurse at the station asked, flicking through some files.

"Yeah, specifically ones who came in with broken bones." Lizzie answered.

"Right." The nurse nodded her head. "Well, there's only one patient that fit that description – Melissa Wilkinson. She had a fractured wrist. I think she came in with her husband." The nurse handed Lizzie the patient file.

Lizzie stood at the door of Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson's apartment as the woman leaned against the door jam, wrapping her overlarge sweater around her and crossing her arms over her chest.

"Is George in some kind of trouble?" Her voice was so soft, Lizzie strained to hear her.

"Melissa, I need to ask you a difficult question. Has your husband been abusing you?"

"No. Of course not." Lizzie pursed her lips at the immediate jump to deny the abuse.

"I'm aware of your visit to the ER. You've been interviewed by a caseworker in the past."

Mrs Wilkinson worried her bottom lip. "We've had some problems. Every marriage does. But he's getting help. He's been going to group classes at the church twice a week. In fact, he went today."

"Okay. Let's see. What's next? A concussion." Hoffman turned around from the backlit x-ray viewing screen and walked over to where he had Mr. Wilkinson restrained to a medical bed. "Do you know what a concussion technically is, George? It is a blow with significant enough blunt force that it literally causes the brain to rattle around inside of your skull. This won't do, 'cause there was also a vertical laceration along with the concussion. What did you do, George? Huh? What did you throw at her? Huh? A bottle! Huh?"

"A bottle of beer!" The man screamed, blood seeping down the side of his face where Hoffman had detached his retina.

"What's that, George?"

"A bottle of beer!"

"A bottle of beer!" Hoffman nodded with satisfaction as if a puzzle had just been solved. "Of course it was. Keep an eye on him, mother." Hoffman directed at the old woman who sat in a wheel chair, tears running down her miserable face as she looked on, forced to watch. "I need to run to the kitchen. I'm afraid we've run out of time, mother. We're going to have to expedite the procedure."

Lizzie burst through the door before he could exit the garage and trained her gun on Hoffman.

"Step away from him!" She ordered

"Why should I? Do you have any idea what this man has done?" Hoffman's face contorted grotesquely. "This man is a monster!"
"That may be, but killing him isn't gonna solve anything."

"Tell that to his wife. We don't have the luxury of your simple morality. Talk to me when you've been a victim." Hoffman raised his hand as if to strike Mr. Wilkinson.

"Drop the hammer! One more body isn't gonna make a difference."

"I think it will especially if it's the right body." He spins and runs at his mother. Lizzie doesn't hesitate. She takes the shot.

\/
/\/

"Agent Keen." Mrs. Wilkinson greeted, appearing shocked to see Lizzie in the hospital.

"Mrs. Wilkinson, I'm gonna need to speak with your husband alone for a moment." Lizzie pointed to Mr. Wilkinson where he lay on a hospital bed, his injured eye covered with a patch of gauze.

"Of course." Mrs. Wilkinson hesitated before taking a couple steps away.

"Actually, wait." Mrs. Wilkinson turned back around and walked back over slowly. Once Lizzie was sure she was back in hearing distance, she looked back at Mr. Wilkinson. "Metro PD is looking into charges against you, but without Melissa's cooperation, I don't know what will stick. What I do know is this – if you ever touch her again, if you so much as look at her sideways, I will find you." Lizzie gazed steadily at the man as he swallowed uncomfortably. "And I will do to you myself what I probably should have let Karl Hoffman do to you in that garage. Do you understand?"

Lizzie was beginning to wonder if she was spending too much time with her father. Either way, she couldn't bring herself to care as she exited the hospital.

\/
/\/

Red crouched on a small cliff and upturned the urn holding Luli's ashes, slowly scattering her ashes into the water below. Standing there in silence for a moment, Red sighs before turning around.

"Newton." Red calls, indicating with his hand for Newton to come over as he walks closer, meeting the man half way before placing the urn on the ground beside him.

"So it's finished?" Newton asked softly, gazing out at the water. Red stood behind him, his gaze firmly on the side of Newton's face.

"If you had come to me, I could have helped you. We could have avoided all of this. But now we can't." Red stated gravely.

Newton looked over at Red. "They threatened my family."

"Of course they did. Newton, I'll take care of your family, whatever they need."

Newton looked down at the ground the back up at Red. "My wife she has no idea. If you could make it look like an accident, for her."

"Look out at the water." Newton looked at Red, confusion marring his features. "Just look out at the water."

Red grabbed the plastic lining from Luli's urn and shoved it over Newton's head. Wrapping his arm
around Newton's neck, he ignored Newton's attempts to struggle and pound on his arms with his fists until the man fell still.

\\\\

Lizzie walked warily into her house, unsure if she had beat Tom here.
"Tom?"

Walking into the living room, she was momentarily startled as the lamp clicked on, revealing Red.
"Tom's at the airport."

"What the hell are you doing here?" She asked, though a smile slowly crawled across her face as she pointed at the couch in clear invitation. It had been weeks since she'd seen her dad and she missed him.

"You shouldn't have agreed to meet with him alone, Lizzie."

Lizzie simply shrugged sheepishly in answer. A part of her knew that it was a bad idea. But she felt that this was her mess, her marriage. Even if her dad had played a role at the beginning, it was her job to finish it.

"How did things go with your case? Congratulations. I'm proud of you."

Lizzie smiled brightened as she sat on the sofa beside him. "Does this mean you're back?"

Red sighed, grinding his teeth slightly. "I don't know. My house is clean. But yours is not."

"What does that mean?" Lizzie's brow furrowed as she tossed her hair over her shoulder.

"The deficit that I found in my organization could not have supplied all the knowledge required for the incursion to take place. That would have been supplied by someone with far greater access."

"Someone on the inside."

Red nodded, a small frown marring his features. "It would seem so."

"Therefore, we're back where we began."

"Me speaking with you."

Lizzie smirked at him, taking his hand in hers and squeezing gently. "Well, then. Welcome back. Where have you been, anyway?"

Red finally smiled back at her, shifting to get more comfortable. "Out and about."

"Did you bring me anything?" She asked smartly.

Red threw his head back and laughed, which had been her goal. She didn't like seeing him so serious and forlorn.

They were quiet for a few moments, just enjoying each other's company.

"I'm sorry about Luli." Lizzie murmured and squeezed Red's hand once more in comfort, smiling sadly as he squeezed back, looking back over at her with such a deep sadness in his eyes.
"Thank you, Sweetheart."

They had waited. When they heard the front door open, Both Red and Lizzie stood up from the couch. They heard Tom calling Lizzie's name but neither replied. They knew he'd walk into the living room eventually.

And he did, stopping short in the doorway at the sight of both Lizzie and Red standing in front of the couch.

"Lizzie? Who…who's this?" Tom questioned, apparently confused as he gestured vaguely at Red.

Red chuckled darkly before moving towards Tom, "The jig is up Tom. No need to pretend anymore."

"Liz, what the hell is this? Who is this guy?" Tom's voice grew steadily louder.

"Don't act like you don't know who he is Tom." Lizzie spoke softly. She was just so damn tired of the entire charade.

"I literally have no idea what you're talking about."

"Shut up! Just… shut up! I'm sick of this. Did you really think that I would ever trust you again after I found that box? Did you really think you could weasel your way out of that?"

Tom moved towards Lizzie with his arms outstretched, but Red quickly blocked his path, stepping in front of Lizzie.

"Step back, Tom."

"What the hell is this?" Tom yelled, stopping short from getting too close to Red. "Lizzie, some strange guy – a criminal – comes to you telling tales and you just believe him over your own husband?!"

Lizzie laughed bitterly. "You were hired by him. You then betrayed him and spent three years as my husband yet you still didn't figure it out?"

"Lizzie – " Red cut in. "Don't."

Lizzie took a deep breath, biting her bottom lip as she realized what she'd almost revealed before straightening her spine and gazing at Tom steadily. "I want a divorce." Her words were clipped with anger for all the crap this man had put her through, all the wasted years, all the wasted love.

Tom's large doe eyes hardened as he went to walk around the coffee table, hoping to side step Red.

"Here's how it's going to go, Thomas." Red stepped towards Tom who immediately took a step back, backing away from the table. "You're going to leave. You will not communicate with Lizzie in any fashion. You will never step within 50 feet of her. Try anything and there will be no hole deep enough to hide you. You know who I am. You know what I do. I am giving you an out, Tom. I suggest you take it. There will not be another one." Red's grave voice teemed with danger.

There was silence as Tom adjusted his glasses nervously.

"Lizzie, please, we can figure this out. Let me expl -"
"Leave Tom." She was rather proud of how steady her voice sounded because she was pretty sure she was going to lose it in about 2.3 seconds.

Tom stared at her for a moment longer before spinning on his heel and walking away, his fists clenched.

"Oh and Thomas?"

Tom paused at the sound of Red's voice but didn't turn around.

"Tell your employer that we're ready, whenever he decides to show himself."
Lizzie sat in their office, looking up as Ressler walked in, throwing his cell phone down on his desk.

"My ex, Audrey – she's getting married. She just texted me again. Wants to meet for drinks to talk about Tassels." Ressler sighed, skimming his hand back and forth over the back of his head.

"Tassels? Is that her dog?" Lizzie questioned, looking up at him in confusion.

"No, it's the guy. He's a hedge-fund guy – pink shirt, loafers with those tassels. Anyway, the thing is, I got to tell her I'm happy for her when I'm not. The guy's a tool." Ressler rolled his eyes.

"Gotcha. Tell her…tell her that marriage isn't all that it's cracked up to be." Lizzie said softly, looking back down at her paperwork, worrying her bottom lip between. She was glad to be rid of Tom. That didn't mean she wasn't lonely or didn't wish things had been…different.

Ressler was quiet for a moment and she could feel his eyes on her. "Everything alright Keen?"

Lizzie's eyes wetted at the compassion in his voice. They had slowly begun to thaw towards each other and she now hesitantly called him her friend, at least in her head. Wouldn't want Captain America's ego to inflate any further.

"Yea uh… I should… well, you probably should know." Lizzie cleared her throat. "I'm divorcing Tom." Lizzie looked up just in time to see the shock slide across Ressler's face.

"But…why? I thought you guys were doing well, working through everything?" Ressler stood and came over to Lizzie's desk, leaning against the side right beside Lizzie's chair.

Lizzie shook her head. "How could I, Ress?" She leaned back in her chair, letting her head fall against the headrest as she looked up at Ressler. "He was my husband and yet I was so quick to believe the worst of him. It almost felt like a relief." Lizzie blew out a heavy breath through her lips. "Like there had been something…off for our entire marriage and it finally clicked into place. Like my instincts had been muted until the proof hit me in the face."

It was a rehearsed half truth but that was the genius of the lie. It was true. She so easily accepted that her husband was a spy/assassin. There had been something in her waiting for the shoe to drop since the beginning but she convinced herself that it was just a paranoia born of who her father was, what he did. The psychologist in her wrote it off as her projecting her inner turmoil about her father onto the new man in her life – her father was a criminal so that meant every man in her life was, right? Damn she hates when she's right.

"But…he was cleared. Do you think we should dig deeper?" Ressler asked.

"No, no. I think he's innocent it's just… the trust between us is gone, Ressler." Lizzie snorted, shaking her head. "And apparently my trust in him never existed."

"Damn." Ressler placed his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. "I'm sorry, Lizzie."

Lizzie looked up and smiled at him. That was the first time he'd ever called her by her first name. Guess they really were friends.

"Thanks, Don."
Red sat in Meera's living room, reading a book by the light of a dim table lamp. When she walks in, he snaps the book shut and looks up at her as she stops dead in the doorway, her hand lifted to turn the overhead light switch on. Kudos to her for not questioning his presence in her home. Why people, even criminals, expected him – a criminal and international fugitive – to respect personal boundaries and trespassing laws, he'd never know.

"Hello, Meera. I trust you know why I'm here."

"Yes. You're here to kill me because I'm the mole."

Lizzie groaned as she pushed herself away from her toilet where she'd had her head stuck inside for the last 20 minutes. After wiping her mouth, Lizzie took the hair tie off her wrist and threw her hair up in a messy bun. Adjusting the thin strap of her cami, Lizzie brought her flannel covered knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"Shit." She murmured, resting her head on her knees.

Red sat in one of the many pews in the synagogue, wearing a Yarmulke. Lizzie quietly walked up next to him and sat down.

"Are we Jewish?" She whispered hesitantly.

Red laughed, shaking his head. "No, of course not," He fluttered his hand in a 'look around gesture. "But when in Rome."

Lizzie simply nodded, looking around at the synagogue. Their family had never been religious but she'd always found something rather pleasant about places of worship. They were rooms cradled in awe and wrapped in a comforting sense of history. She could have used that growing up.

"There's nothing more profound and of lasting consequence than the decision to have a child. The exploitation and perversion of that decision is the stock and trade of a truly evil organization – the Cyprus Adoption Agency."

"Adoption?" Lizzie looked at her dad askance. "Is this an attempt to make me feel better about my failed marriage and how close I came to adopting a baby with a spy?"

"Life is full of lovely little ironies." Red laughed. "The Cyprus Agency offers a promise of something very special– perfection. Their clients are ordering from an unlimited genetic menu, the characteristics of the child they want to bring home. But the evil is not in what the agency offers. It's in how they get it done. The Cyprus Agency is in the abduction business. They don't locate kids for adoption. They steal them and adopt them out to new parents. And moving stolen children is difficult. There's copious amounts of paperwork. They're using a forger. One of the best. But I'm biased. He's one of my best." Red paused and looked at her solemnly, handing her a folder. "Lizzie, I'm giving you the chance to take down a criminal organization that is abducting babies from their mothers' arms. This is the next child the Cyprus Agency will deliver, a boy, less than two weeks from now."

"Who is he really?" Lizzie asked, opening the folder and looking down at a file of a beautiful baby boy.
"I have no idea. But he's about to become the child of David and Wendy Roland."

/

"So, where did he come from?" David Roland questioned them as they sat around the couple's dining room table.

"I don't know." Lizzie looked over at Ressler, hesitant. "Our source says he may have been abducted."

"Oh, my God." Wendy Roland covered her mouth with her hand in horror.

"Abduction? Abducted from whom?" Mr. Roland asked. "W--we've been through all the details."

"Y--you're saying he may never be our son?" Mrs. Roland questioned, on the verge of hysterics. What, y--you're saying there may be another mother out there who's looking for him?"

"I'm sorry Mr. and Mrs. Roland, I know this is very difficult." Ressler murmured, shifting in his seat.

David Roland sighed. "S--so, what do you need us to do?"

/

Brimley walked out of the backroom of the abandoned office building, the squeak of the little wheels on his oxygen tank trailing behind him. He took the oxygen mask off his face as he stood in front of Red. "She's a tough little punjab. Doesn't talk so much."

"That's why you're here, Mr. Brimley." Red stated, his hands behind his back.

"She's telling the truth. Don't bet the trailer money, but I pushed her hard, and I'm telling you-- that girl's cleaner than a duck fart."

Red nodded and waved dismissively at the man. "Thank you, Teddy." He stated, walking over to where Meera was being held as the squeak of Brimley's oxygen tank wheels slowly faded away. The heavy door creaked on its hinges as he opened it then closed with an echoing bang. Walking over to where Meera sat, restrained to a chair, looking exhausted and rather the worse for wear, he sat down. Red sat down across from her, crossed his knees and hung his fedora on his knee. He quietly stared at Meera for a moment, his lips turned down in a frown. "Let's talk."

"Already did."

"Yes, but now that you've been vetted by Mr. Brimley, I'm more inclined to listen. Like I said, to get into the black site so quickly, Garrick had to have the site layout in advance. Which you gave to him."

Meera shook her head. "No."

"I have an RFP we recovered from the trash of a government contractor, signed by Meera Malik. You leaked classified data in the name of improving security."

"No. I was authorized to start the bidding process."

Red paused, the muscle under his left eye twitching. "Authorized by whom?"
"I don't know. All I know is that Cooper handed me the order. Putting a bullet in my head gets you nothing. But letting me help you might get us both what we want."

He had to admire the girl. She had chutzpah. "And why would you want to help me, Agent Malik?"

"Someone on the inside betrayed us. Colleagues of mine were killed. We both want the same thing. Let me go, and I'll find out who did it."

"The order was classified."

Meera smiled grimly. "You let me worry about that."

\\\\

The sting they'd attempted on the Agency's general council, Caldwell, failed rather abysmally. The Rolands had spooked the man as they tried to get answers from him while talking over coffee with the man. When he went outside to take a phone call, warning his boss, Lizzie and Ressler moved in on him and he walked right into traffic, getting hit by a bus. But not before giving Lizzie and Ressler enough probably cause.

Lizzie and Ressler stood in the foyer of the Cyprus Agency's office as agents began to swarm around.

"You can't. Those files are confidential." One of the many secretaries murmured as she pointed at a box that one of the agents were holding.

Ressler walked up to her and held up a folded pile of papers. "Warrant. I need you to step outside."

He then pointed to a computer that one of the agents was holding without bothering to look to ensure that the secretary had scuttled off. "Get that hard drive to Aram. We need a full work-up on it, pronto." The man nodded before scurrying off.

As they stood there, a man with salt and pepper hair, an expensive suit, and rather handsomely aristocratic features walked towards them.

"Agent Ressler?"

"Mr. Mallory. I see you got my message." Ressler replied, shaking the man's hand.

"I did. I just – I don't really understand." The man looked around him in confusion as the agents milled around, removing various files and computer equipment.

"I – Neither do we." Ressler stated, shifting on his feet with his hands placed on his hips. "But it's clear an adoption being brokered by this agency is a fraud."

"Well, I–I can't believe that. If there was a misstep with a case, it undoubtedly happened overseas. All of the legal aspects on our end are dealt with by Ted Caldwell and his team, who I am completely confident in."

"Someone got it wrong." Ressler stated firmly.

"All right, Agent. You're welcome to examine all the records, warrant or not, but if there was a false claim made, believe me – you should be looking into our overseas partners."

"We're launching a wider investigation. Until we're done, you're out of the adoption business."

"Understood." Mallory nodded his head. "I just ordered an internal review myself. Look, this
agency is only as strong as its reputation, so I want answers as much as you do. Anything you need – anything – just let me know."

"Twenty-seven files." Lizzie dropped the pile of files onto one of the table tops in the war room of the post office. "That's 27 adoptions brokered in the last 3 years alone."

"Is that a lot?" Cooper questioned.

Lizzie nodded her head. "That's a lot, especially when you're adopting out infants, and that's almost never done internationally. But there's the thing. I've gone through every case file. I can't authenticate a single adoption. One child was supposedly born to a birth mother in Lithuania, but I can't find any record of the birth."

"They're smart." Cooper sighed, frustrated. "The trails lead to facts we can't verify instead of something we can prove is a lie. Bring me evidence. Make the case. Compare the kids delivered by the Cyprus Agency to police reports of missing kids."

"I'll call Interpol, check their database." Ressler gruffed.

"A lot of their missing-persons files have DNA on record. We should coordinate DNA panels on all the kids." Lizzie spoke up.

"Let's do it." Cooper said, nodding his head.

At that moment, Aram came in carrying his lunch – a microwave bean burrito, judging by the smell of it – to his desk. Lizzie covered her mouth and nose but it was too late, her stomach roiled.

"Excuse me." She murmured, hurrying off to the restroom.

Cooper and Ressler looked at each other, dazed, then over to Aram.

"What?" He questioned around his bite of food, looking around nervously.

Red and Lizzie stood inside the lobby of an office building that was closed for the evening, the only light came from the street lamps through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

"How's the case coming along?"

Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair. "We compared the DNA to every known sample on file for missing or abducted kids – not a single hit. The Cyprus Agency delivered 27 children, all unaccounted for. Nobody's ever reported them missing."

"You're so linear." He chuckled, shaking his head.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lizzie's hip jutted out as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"The FBI and the police– the way they teach you to think never ceases to amaze me. Lizzie, not every missing child is on the back of a milk carton."

"Who wouldn't report a missing child…?"

"People who won't or can't go to the police. Criminals. Run the DNA again. This time, don't look
for an exact match. Look at the relatives. You want to find where those kids came from, that's how.

\///\/

Ressler came around the corner and poked his head into their office. "Keen, the DNA results are in."

"We get a hit?" Lizzie asked as she stood from her desk and headed out to the war room with him.

"We got five." Ressler stated as they headed down the stairs and over to one of the computer terminals. "You need to see this. Five hits, all women. According to the DNA, these five women are the biological mothers of 12 of the 27 kids."

"The mothers. Let me guess. They're in prison."

"No." Ressler's closed in a thin line as he paused. "They're not in the system because they're criminals– they're in the system because they're missing."

"Missing?" Lizzie's head shot around to look at him.

"All five of them."

"Five women– all attractive, smart, in their early 20s."

"All five were in college when they disappeared." Ressler stated.

"Four of the five disappeared without a trace." Lizzie said as she read the files. "Allison Hayes – she was a physics student at BU. She went to class one Monday morning and vanished. The police reports are almost identical. These were clean grabs, no witnesses."

"All except one." Ressler walked over to one of the evidence boards and pointed to a picture of a pretty young woman. "Kate Ellison, also 20. She goes drinking with a fake ID at a bar near Brown where she's a sophomore. She got taken on the walk home. A witness said they saw her fighting with a man who then pushes her into a van, but no ID was possible."

\///\/

"So, they're not taking children." Cooper's solemn voice echoed across the room as everyone had stopped to listen in. There was something about this case that horrified even the most seasoned agents. "They're taking women. What's the timeline?"

"Kate Ellison was taken three years ago." Lizzie paused, her brow furrowing in confusion. "Wait. That can't be right. According to the DNA test, Kate's the mother of two children delivered by the Cyprus Agency. They're 1 and 2 years old."

"So she gave birth after she was taken?" Cooper questioned.

Lizzie shook her head in horror. "She didn't only give birth. She got pregnant after she was taken."

Ressler rummaged through the other files before looking up grimly. "So did Allison Hayes and Michelle Lefferts. The kids matching their DNA were conceived after they were abducted."

"These women are alive. They're still out there." Cooper announced heavily.

\///\/
Aram: I was looking at Ted Caldwell's computer, the one we seized from his office. Now, most of it was routine, but deep in the background was a file nobody wanted found.

Ressler: "Purchase Orders." What exactly was he buying?

Aram: Not buying. From the looks of it, I'd say it's something he intended to acquire. I had them printed. It's a complete dossier – medical profile, grades going back to middle school, athletic and extracurricular interests.

Liz: Charlotte Patterson – in her second year at Georgetown. You think she could be the agency's next target?

Ressler: We can't afford to risk it. We need to get her into protective custody.

Ressler and Lizzie stood in the war room, downtrodden. They had failed at finding the latest victim in time by mere moments. Lizzie could still hear the screech of the black van's tires echoing in the parking garage.

"Charlotte Patterson never made it home from class. She was definitely inside that van." Lizzie sighed, throwing a file onto the table beside her.

"Her cell's not active. We're setting up checkpoints, and every law-enforcement agency in a 200-mile radius has her photo, along with the make, model, and plate number of the van." Aram spoke up, he was always most confident when in his element, surrounded by his computers and tech.

"Where are we on Mallory?" Cooper asked.

"Waiting on documents from overseas. And the files we seized at the agency have Caldwell's name all over them." Lizzie pointed to one of the many boxes currently littering the room. "But there's no paper trail proving Mallory or anyone else knew what was going on."

"Are you saying he's innocent?" Cooper questioned, disbelieving.

"No. We've interviewed employees on three continents – accountants, marketing, researchers. They all seem to be clean." Ressler stated, leaning against the desk next to Lizzie.

"We need proof!" Cooper shouted, clearly frustrated and as disturbed by this case as everyone else in the room. "And it would be nice to get it before another woman is abducted."

Lizzie and Ressler waited in the hallway of the County hospital's morgue.

"Name is Kate Ellison. Computer said the FBI is looking for her." The medical examiner began speaking as soon as he walked through the door.

"Thanks for the call. You get a cause of death?" Ressler asked as the man approached.

"Single gunshot wound. And that's about the only thing in this that makes any sense. Just h–hang on a second. Let me get my file." The medical examiner spun back around and went back through the door he'd just exited.

Ressler looked over at Lizzie who had her lips pursed in thought. "What are you thinking?"
"Nothing good." Lizzie blew out a breath, running her fingers through her hair. "Kate Ellison had blond hair and blue eyes. She dies, and a day or two later, Charlotte Patterson gets taken."

"It's the same type. Maybe the agency needed a replacement." They both winced at the implications of the thought.

The ME soon returned with the file and they turned to look at him.

"Okay, Kate Ellison, abducted at the age of 20. She dies at the age of 23. So, where has she been for the last three years? I would say nowhere."

Ressler and Lizzie glanced at each other in confusion. "Meaning?" Ressler spoke up after a moment of hesitation.

"Let's start with the muscle tone. She has severe muscular atrophy. Her arms, her legs, all the major muscle groups – are deteriorated."

"What would cause that?" Lizzie asked as they all moved to the side as a nurse wheeled the body of Kate Ellison over to them.

"Inactivity– I don't think that this woman has stood upright for any length of time in years. She was in an induced coma." The ME removed the sheet covering the woman's arm and turned it to show the crook of her elbow. "The needle marks on her arm suggest that she was fed through a tube. Okay, now, here's where my findings go from the crazy to the totally insane. She's given birth – several times."

"How is that possible in her condition, though?" Ressler questioned, shifting on his feet.

"Well, she was heavily sedated and she's lost a lot of muscle mass, but she's actually in great shape to deliver a child. Her folic acid, her calcium, her iron were all incredibly high. So, whoever's been keeping her has been giving her prenatal care."

"If she was shot, maybe she was trying to escape." Lizzie voiced her thoughts aloud.

"That would be pretty tough." The ME shrugged his shoulder, his head tilted slightly. "She was on some very heavy sedation – a benzodiazepine called hydroxipam."

"Thank you." Lizzie murmured as she fished in her pocket for her cell phone as it vibrated. Glancing at the screen, she quickly answered it as she walked away from Ressler and the ME.

"Aram, what do you have?"

"It's about Owen Mallory." The techie's voice came over the line. "Cooper said get into his life, so I started with his undergrad degree from Harvard."

"Oh, let me guess. He never went."

"Oh, no, he went. Here's the thing– he went under a different name. Owen Mallory was enrolled as Charles Lassiter Jr. He falsified his transcripts, applied as the only son of Charles and Jill Lassiter from Bethesda."

Lizzie spun around and looked over at Ressler. "We've got something on Mallory." Speaking into the phone again, Lizzie demanded, "Aram, send us the Lassiters' address."
Lizzie and Ressler sat on the couch in the home of the Lassiters.

"I know this must be a shock. His name is Owen Mallory." Ressler said as he placed his coffee cup gently on the small table between the couches. "He attended Harvard, claiming to be your son."

"I'm sorry. What did you say his name is now?" Jill Lassiter questioned, nervously tucking a strand of her grey hair behind her ear.

"'Now?'" Lizzie questioned, picking up on the woman's phrasing. "Mrs. Lassiter, do you know this man?"

Mrs. Lassiter's lips thinned as she looked at her husband before finally nodding. "He was our son."

"The boy we knew was named Michael Shaw." Mr. Lassiter took his wife's hand in his and patted it gently with the other that wasn't clasped around hers in a comforting gesture. "And when we met him, he was seven years old and in foster care."

"So you adopted him." Lizzie caught on.

Mrs. Lassiter nodded slowly. "He was with us for 16 months. Charles and I- I mean, we knew Michael was troubled. But nothing could have prepared us for –"

"T- the therapist called it severe attachment disorder." Mr. Lassiter picked up where his wife left off as she became choked up. "Uh a- and there- there – there were many therapists, all kinds. We tried. I know – I know how that sounds. But- but when Michael began threatening to hurt himself an- and us, then the doctors stepped in and felt uh – " The man's voice faltered. "for, uh for Michael to return to foster care."

"I'm so sorry. That must have been very difficult." Lizzie gave her best sympathetic voice though on the inside she was fuming. How dare these people treat a child like a bauble that they no longer wanted?

"No, I'm sorry. It's just, in many ways Charles and I blame ourselves. In hindsight, we weren't ready. We, the marriage was troubled. We- we just weren't equipped for a child."

/

Dembe drove up next to Meera's car in the cemetery, the headlights illuminating the headstones eerily. Red smoothly hopped out of the back seat the moment the car rolled to a stop.


Meera waited silently as Red leafed through the small packet of papers. His lips puckered in thought as he got to page 6. Dropping the hand that held the file, Red turned on his heel and walked back over to his car. "Our business is done, Agent Malik."

/

Red's car pulled up behind Lizzie's where she was parked along a fairly wealthy suburban street in Maryland.

"Sorry I'm late." Red apologized as he got out of the car, walking over and giving Lizzie a quick hug.
"What the hell is this place?" Lizzie pointed to the house which was the address Red had given her.

"Not at all what it seems." Red smiled benignly as he began walking slowly up the path to the house.

"What are we doing here? I told you— I need help tracking hydroxipam. There's no federal prescription database. Can't subpoena every pharmacy on the East Coast." Lizzie's frustration practically leaked from her.

"You don't have to. Did you know the earliest-known cul-de-sac is over 2,000 years old, unearthed in El-Lahun, Egypt? Aristotle himself was a big fan— said they made it difficult for the enemy to find their way while attacking. Now, be polite. You're about to meet one of the nicest narcotics dealers this side of Cleveland." Red quieted as he knocked on the door. It was immediately opened wide and they were hit by a barrage of hip hop music, laughter, and dozens of indistinct conversations. Walking in, Lizzie attempted to avoid the many women and men in what appeared to be various stages of undress, almost getting hit in the head by an inflatable alligator in the process. She followed Red into the kitchen and over to a man who had his head covered by a hood, standing over a pot on the stove.

"Russell!" Red called, his arms opening invitingly as the man took the hood off and stood straight to see who was calling for him.

"What's up, fool?" The young man with shaggy brown hair laughed as he and Red embraced.

"Ah. Smells delicious, Russell." Res murmured, taking a whiff as he stood over the pot that Russel had just practically been immersed in.

"Mescaline steam bath. You want a hit?"

"Oh, my God. If only I could do just one. No, thank you. No, last time I played around with that, I ended up naked in the desert trying to hitch a ride to Tuba City. Those Navajo tacos— Oh! Heaven!" Red shook his head, laughing nostalgically.

"– When was this?" Lizzie questioned from behind the pair.

"Uh, about two years ago." Red looked towards her without actually meeting her eye. Lizzie just rolled her eyes, unimpressed with her dad's history with drugs.

"She seems like a cop." Russel leaned towards Red and said in a not-so-whisper.

"You see? I keep telling her that. She doesn't listen to me." Red pointed at Lizzie then back at Russel as if to say 'I told you so,' before clapping Russell on the shoulder. "Listen, Russell, this isn't a social call. I came for your professional opinion. I need to know about hydroxipam."

"Sure, yeah, I know all about that— that and the Betamax and the BlackBerry."

Red shook his head, his lips cocked to the side in a small grin. "I don't understand the reference."

"Nobody wants it. Uh, hydro is supposed to be a sleep aid, but it's crazy powerful— too powerful. The half-life's like 100 hours."

"So?"

"So," Russell chortled, "people need to get up in the morning."
"Where can I get it?"

"You don't want it." Russell tried to convince Red. Guess there is honor among criminals. Lizzie thought to herself. A drug dealer who is trying to convince a paying customer that they don't want the product.

"I do."

"Okay." Russell said with a sigh, shaking his head. "But I got to tell you, I don't think most pharmacies even stock it now. Luckily, I have access to their inventories." Russell grabbed an iPad from the kitchen counter and typed something in before placing it back on the counter so that both Red and Lizzie could see. "There. See? Only three pharmacies in 1,200 miles carry hydro. And of those, only eight doctors wrote scripts – in the last year."

"What's this code here?" Lizzie asked, pointing to one of the columns of data.

"That's what kind of doctor wrote the prescription. Looks like seven are sleep therapists, and one is a fertility doctor!?” Russell chuckles and Red began to laugh as well when Russell looked up to see why no one else found that funny.

\///\\\\n
"FBI. We need to talk with Dr. Gideon Hadley." Lizzie stated with authority as she and Ressler walked up to the reception desk at the fertility clinic, flashing their badges.

"Dr. Hadley's in a meeting." The man behind the counter stated kindly.

"You'll just have to interrupt." Ressler ordered.

The man pursed his lips before nodding his head and walking into the office area. Ressler and Lizzie stood quietly for a few minutes before they noticed him coming back.

"I'm so sorry. Dr. Hadley actually stepped out for the afternoon."

"I thought you said he was in a meeting." Questioned Ressler.

The man shrugged his shoulders, clearly losing his patience. "I thought he was. He'll be back in a few hours. You're welcome to wait."

"Great. In the meantime, I think we'll give ourselves a tour of the facility." Lizzie stated, walking around the desk and heading towards the doors which lead into the offices

Hearing a commotion behind her, Lizzie reaches for her holster, spinning around to see Ressler wrestle a gun off of the guy and laying atop of him on the ground, subduing him.

"Find Hadley." Ressler grunts.

Lizzie nods before quickly making her way through the floor. Pausing at the sound of gunshots, Lizzie spoke into her mic.

"Ress? You alright?" She whispered lowly.

"Yea." He grumbled. "Found Hadley." His voice came through her earpiece.

Lizzie ascended a set of stairs and found a floor that said "Restricted Area." Opening the door, Lizzie was met with a cavernous, bare bones floor of the building. Walking forward, her gun
raised, Lizzie made her way to where it appeared that a large portion of the floor was cordoned off with heavy plastic sheeting. Finding a parting in the sheeting, Lizzie walked through only to stop dead. There were two rows of ten hospital beds – 20 in all. There were IV lines at each bed and the soft beeping of machines recording the vital signs of the woman sedated on each bed – all of whom looked to be in some stage of pregnancy.

Just as Lizzie's stomach began to roil, she let out a gasp as she was tackled from the side, knocking her gun out of her hand and sending it skittering across the floor. Lizzie looked up at her attacker and realized it was Dr. Mallory. She landed a punch to the side of his head, dazing him, and scrambled out from underneath him. Before she could reach the gun, Dr. Mallory swept his arm out, tripping her and sending her careening into one of the hospital beds. She heard him stand and was suddenly bowled over by one of the hospital beds, trying desperately to break the fall of the unconscious woman who fell out of said bed at the impact. Lizzie looked up at the sound of her gun cocking. Laying the woman down on the floor, she turned to see Mallory aiming her own gun at her. Closing her eyes and wincing at the sound of a gun shot, Lizzie waited a breath before opening her eyes. Looking down at herself and assessing the damage, her brain quickly caught up to the lack of pain and she looked around her. Seeing Mallory writhing on the floor, clutching his knee, Lizzie looked over at Ressler and they both smiled shakily at each other.

"Keen?"

"I'm okay. Call it in."

Lizzie sat across from Mallory in the interrogation room. The man sat stoically, his now bandaged leg sitting at an awkward angle under the table.

"We found Kate Ellison. And I'm guessing that's not the only body we'll find before this is done. Is it Michael? We know who you are. Michael Shaw adopted at 7 by Charles and Jill Lassiter and returned to foster care. Owen Mallory has no record, but Michael Shaw– he's quite a con man, isn't he?"

"Thank you." The man smirked, dipping his head in apparent gratitude.

"You must have felt so rejected, being removed–"

"I wasn't removed." Mallory cut in, his sudden anger whipping through the air between them. "I was returned like a defective toy."

"I met the Lassiters." Lizzie continued calmly. "Is that why you did this? To get back at them?"

"The Lassiters didn't want a child. They wanted an accessory to smile for their Christmas card. They wanted perfection, like all the others. So I sell what people want. Everybody wins. They get their little geniuses, and–"

"And you and your employees get rich?"

"No." Mallory let out an amused breath. "Well, yes. But it's not about the money for me."

"What does that mean?"

"I think I've said enough. But my legacy is complete. And there is nothing you can do to change that."
"Your legacy." Lizzie couldn't keep her eyes from widening in horror. "You're the father. The children brokered by the Cyprus Agency are yours. Why?"

"Well, I was damaged goods, wasn't I? Not fit to survive in their privileged world. Well, I am surviving. Now part of me is thriving in every home that has my child."

/

Red entered a darkened den and started a record player, then sat himself comfortably in a stuffed chair.

Sundown, you better take care
if I find you been creeping 'round my back stairs.
She's been looking like a queen in a sat–

Red lifted the needle from the record as an older woman in a white satin nightgown walked into the room, having come to investigate the sudden music.

"What the hell are you doing in my house?" Diane Fowler asked angrily.

"I know, Diane." Red stated solemnly.

"What?" She questioned, walking slowly into the room and sitting in the wingback chair across from him.

"You signed a directive ordering a mandatory security upgrade at the post office. It's how you got the blueprints into enemy hands. You're the dirty rat, Diane."

"I'm calling the police." She made to get up from her seat.

Red chuckled darkly. "No, you're not."

"You stupid son of a bitch." Diane took a step towards Red and he pulled a pistol out of his pocket, pointing it at her.

"Sit your ass down."

Diane did as she was told. "I signed that directive for your protection."

Red chuckled. "You remind me of this woman I knew in Lisbon. Strange old bird."

"If you think Fitch or any of his people are going to let you get away with this, you're more arrogant than I thought. We came into the post office to make a point. If you come after me, if you so much as lay a finger on me –"

"You talk too much." Red stated with an air of boredom before shooting her in the stomach.

With a gasp, Diane slumped against the back of her chair. "You can't shoot me!"

"Why not? You're not one of the good guys. And, as of today, you're utterly worthless to the bad guys. Fitch and I have an agreement. He goes about his business. I go about mine. You and I don't have an agreement."

"I know the truth, Red, about that night – about what happened to your family. Do you want to know the truth?" Diane's voice had weakened with pain.
Red rolled his tongue, the muscle under his eye twitching. "More than anything in the world. But if you know the truth, Diane, then somebody else does, too." He said sadly before shooting her three more times. He sat there, staring at her, as memories of his wife and little Jennifer flashed before his eyes. After some time, Red shook himself and clicks the record back on and digging his cell phone out of his pocket.

I can see her lying back in her satin dress
in a room where you do what you don't confess
Sundown, you better take care
if I find you been creeping 'round my back stairs
Sundown, you better take care
if I find you been creeping 'round my back stairs

\\\\

"Mr. Kaplan…" Red greeted, walking forward to give the woman a quick embrace and a kiss on the cheek. "I'm sorry. It's messier than I had hoped." Red whispered, gesturing over to the chair where Diane Fowler still slumped. It was rare that he let emotions take over while he was...conducting business. Though frankly, it was becoming a rather common occurrence since he started working with the FBI, with Lizzie. The woman slumped in her wingback was the reason Dembe and his little girl had had a gun held to their heads. And that was unacceptable.

"Don't worry, deary. I'm used to cleaning up after you." She stated simply, taking her latex gloves out of her purse and setting to work. "Now when are we all going to get together for that family dinner you promised?"

\\\\

"Lizzie? What are you doing here?"

Lizzie looked up at her dad as he entered his current hotel room. She'd been sitting on his couch facing the floor-to-ceiling window in the living room which had a breath taking view of the capital city.

"I couldn't be alone. Not after today." She murmured as he sat beside her. Lizzie had just moved into her new apartment that weekend. She'd only slept in it a single night but the thought of being there alone …she just couldn't. Scooching closer to her dad, Lizzie laid her head on his shoulder, wrapping her arms around her knees and smiling softly as he brought his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him.

"It's going to be okay, Sweetheart. It already is. You did an amazing job today." Red kissed the crown of her head. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks Dad." She murmured, sniffing slightly. "I just… I can't get the image of those women laying there, helpless and forcibly impregnated by that… disgusting piece of shit."

"Shh…shh Sweetheart. He's going away for the rest of his life. Those women will be okay. Life will go on."

Lizzie nodded her head shakily and they merely sat there, soaking in the peace and pleasant company before Lizzie finally gained the courage to break through the quiet though her voice was so soft, Red had to strain to hear her.

"I uh… I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that you're going to be a grandpa in a few
months."

Yes. Yes I am a little bit evil. Also the song = Sundown by Gordon Lightfoot.
"I uh… I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that you're going to be a grandpa in a few months."

Red pulled away to get a better look at Lizzie, his face frozen in shock, his mind running a million miles ahead. How the hell could he have been so stupid? He didn't plan for this. He had no plan for this. Why the hell didn't he have a plan for this? Ok. We need a plan for this. We need a lot of plans. Plans for our plans and contingency plans.

As Red began to try and set out a basic framework, his mind slowly caught up to what was happening around him and saw that Lizzie was crying, tears sliding down her cheeks slowly as she waited for him to say something.

"Oh Lizzie. Sweetheart." He whispered brokenly, gathering her back into his arms.

She sobbed into his neck, wrapping her arms around him fiercely.

"I know, Dad. I know the timing could not be worse and I can't bear to think of…of who the father is and the circumstances of…that." Lizzie sniffled, pulling away to look at him. "But Dad, I can't not have this baby. I –" Lizzie blew out a shaky breath. "I want this baby. And I need…I need you to be my dad and tell me everything is going to be okay, tell me that you're happy for me, that you're excited to be a grandpa. Can you do that? For me?"

Red looked at his daughter, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear as he sighed. "I'm sorry Sweetheart. I can't."

Lizzie choked on a sob, unfolding her legs to stand up and escape but Red wrapped his hand around her wrist and tugged her back down.

"Do not misunderstand me, Lizzie. It will take me a little time to wrap my head around the idea – especially, as you said, the timing is far from ideal and there is a lot that needs to be done. But Lizzie," Red gently took her chin in his hand and guided her to look at him, "I promise you, once the shock wears off I will be ecstatic about the idea of being a grandpa and will probably stock pile on toys for every stage of development up to and including those for a 12-year-old child before this baby is even born." Lizzie smiled tearily, letting out a huff of a laugh and Red chuckled along with her before growing serious once more. "But Sweetheart, I cannot tell you that everything will be alright. I can tell you, I can promise you, that I will do everything that I can to make it so."

Taking a large gulp of air and letting it out slowly, Lizzie nodded. "Time to plan then?"

Red smiled sadly. "Time to plan."

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Red lounged in the overlarge chair, needles sticking out of his face as the acupuncturist did their work, the soft sounds of a water fountain relaxing him further.

"The box in Istanbul." Dembe's voice startled him slightly. The man was stealthy. He hated when Dembe put said stealth to use with him. It was cheating.

"Hmm?" Red hummed, trying to act unaffected.
"It's been cleared out. This was left behind." Red opened one eye and sighed, taking the proffered envelope.

"I was just starting to feel the endorphins vibrating in my spleen." He muttered, opening the envelope to reveal a thick cardstock note written in an elegant hand. *Windsor Lounge, 8pm. – M.*

Pursing his lips, Red motioned to the acupuncturist to start taking the needles out. He apparently had work to do.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Red quickly spotted Madeline at the bar, nursing what looked to be a bourbon. Walking up to her, he stops a couple feet away, folding his hands in front of him.

"The key. How did you get it?" He questioned her.

Madeline smiled, looking over at him coyly. "Macau. Last winter."

Red tossed his fedora onto the bar and sighed, sitting in the seat next to her.

"I've always hated Macau."

When the bar tender came over to ask what he'd be having, Red shook his head with a murmured "No thank you."

Looking to Madeline, Red rested an arm against the bar. "The documents in the box are worth over $10 million."

"You stood me up in Florence." A harshness that looked unnatural on such a beautiful face appeared in one blink and was gone in the next, being replaced with that same coy look from earlier. "I had to get your attention somehow. I have a proposition."

Red pursed his lips. "In that case, perhaps we should move to your room."

"I'll take the check." Madeline signaled the bartender without taking her eyes off of Red.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Red and Lizzie stood in the library of his latest safe house, both grimacing as they stared at a painting of a young woman sitting at a piano.

"She's breathtakingly unattractive, but she's worth over $40 million– the only Vermeer in private hands."

"That's considered a masterpiece?" Lizzie shook her head in disbelief. Just because it was made by an old dead guy, it didn't make something art.

"Last night, I got up for a scoop of orange sherbet, and she caught my eye. I just stood here in the dark squinting at her." Red leaned forward and mimicked his pose from the night before. "Poor thing ruined my appetite. Even after I went back to bed, all I could hear was the hideous music she must be playing. Didn't sleep a wink."

"Why did you buy it?"

"Oh, my God, no." Red laughed. "She's not mine. She belongs to some hedge-fund manager who lives here."
"You're staying in the guy's house and you don't even know him?"

"The owner's been on vacation ever since the SEC started its investigation. I've never met the man, but his housekeeper is an old friend. Please." Red gestured towards the chair opposite his own in clear invitation. "Do you have any idea how much the US government has spent on signals intelligence in the past year?"

"No." Lizzie murmured, confused by the sudden subject change.

"Your country has become a nation of eavesdroppers– frequency domains, triangulation, satellites, crypto-whatever. You've forgotten that what matters most is human intelligence– alliances, relationships, seduction. Madeline Pratt is a master at…"

"Madeline Pratt? Madeline Pratt—"

"—is a thief and a woman of…" Red's eyes grew distant and a small smirk stained his face. "…singular talents."

"And now you want something of hers and you expect the FBI to help you get it." Lizzie asked, choosing to ignore the clear implication of her dad's words and facial expressions.

"I've begun beefing up your security. I'm having a state of the art alarm system installed in your apartment as we speak and once this case is over, I would like you to meet your security team."

Lizzie rolled her eyes. She'd been prepared for this, they'd talked about it. But as her father always did, he had steamrolled along without consulting her.

"Madeline Pratt. How do we find her?" It was time to focus on the case. Everything else could wait.

"Finding her is easy. Catching her is difficult. Luckily, she's asked me to help her plan a heist."

"To steal what? …"

\///\\n
"—The Effigy Of Atargatis. The Effigy was thought to be lost, disappeared from the British Museum in 1983." The older gentleman slowly descended the rolling ladder in his library, having retrieved the book he was looking for. "Two months ago, it pops up at an estate sale in Henderson, Kentucky. The feds raided the auction and paraded it back to the Syrians" The man, wearing a robe and pajamas, his grey hair mussed, flipped through the pages of the old tome. "Ah, here it is– the Effigy."

"Novak, I have friends who are looking for this funny little statue, and they're not the least bit interested in antiquities. What is the real story?"

Novak smiled softly at Red. "The Kungur Six. It's said that when the Cold War was ending, its owner hid a list inside the effigy, a list of Soviet spies."

"Why is that relevant today?" Lizzie spoke up, no longer happy with being a silent observer to the conversation.

Novak startled and looked over at her as if he'd forgotten she was there."The Kungur Six are still active and are said to be responsible for some of the most damaging intelligence breaches in the past 30 years. Find the effigy, and you find them. Finding them would be the Holy Grail of US
"Excuse me." Cooper said, affronted at the sight of Red in his office as he and Meera walked in. Red straightened from where he'd been looking at several pictures in frames, pointing to one of them. "That's great. Harold, look at you!" He greeted jovially.

"Sit down." Cooper grumped.

"No, no, no. I'm fine, thank you." Red walked out from behind Cooper's desk, tapping his fedora against his knee. "I was just looking at the pictures of Charlene and the kids. How old are they now? The kids, not Charlene."

"Diane Fowler. Where is she?" Cooper blustered on, ignoring Red's attempt at small talk.

"I have no idea. And frankly, I'm flummoxed as to why you would even care."

"You expect me to believe that you walk in here after she vanishes and there's no connection?"

"Has Diane gone missing?" Red questioned, appearing clueless to this new development. "Perhaps you should ask Agent Malik. She works for the woman, doesn't she?" Red glanced over at Meera mildly.

Meera's eyes hardened as she looked at Red. "I've had no contact."

"You made it clear. You thought we had a mole. And you wouldn't set foot inside this facility until that mole was captured or dead."

Red looked around the room, his lips downturned in dislike. "Who decided on this paneling?"

"You told us you wouldn't come in until the mole had been caught." Cooper's voice rose along side his frustration.

Red shook his head. "I said nothing of the kind."

"You said our house wasn't clean. Is it?" Meera questioned.

Red looked over at her, pausing for a moment. "I suppose you'll have to ask Diane Fowler when you find her."

"When we find out what's happened to her– and we will find out– if you had anything to do with it, you're gonna spend the rest of your life in a box. Understood?" Cooper stated solemnly, stepping towards Red in an effort to intimidate him.

"You smell nice. Something new?" Red looked up at Cooper who stood almost a head taller than him and smiled.

"Did you hear me?" Cooper barked.

Red took a step back. "Madeline Pratt."

"What about her?"
Red stood beneath the large screens mounted to the wall in the war room which depicted a beautiful blond woman with patrician features mingling with senators and doing charity work. "This is the Madeline Pratt you all know and love—politically active, influential, a good citizen. What you don't know is the Madeline Pratt that I love. $6 million in diamonds stolen from a DeBeers outpost in the Congo. Security fibers used in printing the Czech koruna, taken from a mint in Prague and used to produce counterfeit bank notes. The Madeline Pratt you know fosters relationships with incredibly powerful people. The ones you don't exploits those relationships in ways that impact national security."

Lizzie looked sharply at her dad at the word 'love.' She knew he'd had lady friends but was he in love with this woman? If so, why was he now hunting her down as a blacklistter?

"Well, we can't just arrest her. We have no evidence." Cooper stated.

"What you do have is an opportunity, which brings us back to the Effigy of Atargatis. Madeline feels her profile is too high right now to steal it herself, so she's asked for my help."

"Where is the Effigy?" Meera questioned as she leaned against a desk.

"Secure wing in the Syrian embassy for now. But it will likely be repatriated at any moment, which means Maddie is rushed and vulnerable. She's trying to make a grab that would normally take months to plan."

Cooper walked forward to take a look at the evidence boards. "Do the Syrians know what's inside the effigy?"

"If they did, it would be in Damascus by now." Meera muttered.

"I can only assume, Harold, that Madeline has a Russian patron, since it's the Russians who want to protect the identities of the Kungur Six."

"I'm not sanctioning an op in support of you going in to steal anything, let alone something that may affect national security." Cooper stated, pursing his lips and rolling back onto his heels.

Red laughed and cocked his head to the side. "I'm flattered that you think I'm up to it, but thieving is not my strongest suit. Luckily, we have an ace of spades among us. Isn't that right, Agent Keen?"

Red looked over at Lizzie who stood ramrod straight and stared at her dad in horror. What the hell did he think he was doing?!

\----

Cooper had practically dragged her to the side, over to the stairs which lead to the offices upstairs. Of course, Ressler obediently followed as well.

"What's he talking about? Is there something you want to tell us?" Cooper questioned, his hands on his hips. Why do all FBI guys do that when they're questioning someone?

"No, sir."

"Your father's criminal record didn't show up on your background report. Maybe yours is missing, too." Ressler spoke up.

Lizzie's eyes narrowed at him. So much for being friends. "I don't have a criminal record." Well it's
not a lie.

"Because you never committed a crime, or because you were never caught?"

"Yes." Damn she was starting to sound like her dad. "I believe my work speaks for itself. Sir, I can do this."

Cooper stood silent, staring at her for a tense moment before nodding. "All right. We take the case. But understand, if you do this, you're gonna be on foreign soil. If something goes wrong, we can't protect you."

Lizzie sat in an overstuffed chair in the rather feminine living room of what she assumed was Madeline Pratt's home. Red lounged on the couch, his arms outstretched on the back of the couch.

"I need to know about you, how you respond under pressure. This is an embassy. Security, cameras, armed guards everywhere. One mistake, and you go to prison." Madeline stated from her seat across the coffee table.

"Nicole here is as calm as a Hindu cow." Red stated gesturing at Lizzie before swinging his head to look at her. "Tell her that story about Frank."

"Who's Frank?"

Lizzie gave Red the stink eye before turning her head to answer Madeline. "A guy I knew."

"What story?"

"We met in high school. We grifted. Small jobs really, just whatever we had to do to pay the rent."

"Tell her about Omaha."

She was going to kill him. She changed her mind. Her baby was going to grow up without a grandpa. Taking a deep breath, Lizzie smiled at Madeline. "I was 17. There was a drugstore. Thursday night. They made bank deposits on Friday. I was the lookout. The night manager came back. He forgot his glasses. I gave the signal, but nothing. I'd convinced myself that Frank was the only thing I had in the world, so the night manager was an easy decision."

Madeline leaned forward, clearly interested. "What did you—"

"I seduced him into the alley."

"And then what?"

"I played him for a little bit, then I kissed him off, told him he'd get more next week. And Frank and I went away."

"And lived happily ever after. The end." Red laughed.

Madeline looked over at Red, a brow quirked. "I thought you didn't believe in happily ever after."

Lizzie sighed, standing up quickly. "I didn't come here to audition." She stated and grabbed her coat.

"Wait. The job. It's yours."
"I don't want the job. Call somebody who does." Lizzie reached into her pocket and tossed Madeline her own cell phone before heading towards the front door.

"How did you get my phone?" Madeline murmured before looking up and calling out "— What if I paid you double?"

Lizzie stopped at the front door and then walked slowly back into the living room. She couldn't have played Madeline Pratt better if she'd rehearsed it.

Red shook his head in obvious delight. "See, this is what I love about the two of you. Headstrong, yet vulnerable. Confident, but cautious. I think you're gonna get along great."

Lizzie didn't see that happening anytime soon.

Once they had come to agreement, it was work of mere moments for Madeline to grab the blueprints of the embassy and for them to begin strategizing.

"Your name will be on the guests list. The statue's in a UL-approved Class I vault situated in a strong room one level below the ground floor."

"How long will it take to breach?" Lizzie questioned.

"An auto-dialer can circumvent the electronic keypad in two, maybe three minutes tops. I'll supply equipment that can get through a metal detector."

"What about physical security?"

"There are two guards stationed outside that strong room, armed and mobile. They do a hall sweep every 20 minutes. When they take their patrol at 9:20, – you'll have 10 minutes."

Lizzie nodded at this. "How do I get in?"

"Dirar Marwan, embassy official. He has the security credentials you'll need to get to the structure's classified lower level. He takes a coffee break every day at 4:00 PM, wears his ID on the lapel of his jacket, easy enough to unclip in a standard brush pass. This lift needs to be round trip, not one way. Can't raise any flags."

"I know someone who can clone his badge before Marwan can return to the embassy." Lizzie shrugged as if it was no big deal. It wasn't, Aram could probably do it in his sleep. "How will you return his badge?"

"I won't. You will, in a second brush pass before he re–enters the building." 

Lizzie leaned against a car, wrapping her coat tighter around her. When she saw Marwan jogging down the steps of the embassy for his next caffeine fix, she quickly stood up, making her way closer. As she came upon him she bumped into him, swiping his badge from his lapel flawlessly. Good to know she's still got it.

Turning abruptly, Lizzie climbed into the surveillance van where Aram sat and handed him the badge.

"Okay, here we go." He murmured, getting to work.

"You good?" Lizzie asked, shifting on her feet.
"I will be in 90 seconds."
Lizzie took a small chip out of her pocket and held it out for Aram.

"What's that?" He questioned.

"It's Madeline Pratt's SIM card. I swiped it when I palmed her phone. If I'm gonna do this, I want to know who she talks to and why."

"You know how to palm a phone?" Aram asked, hesitantly taking the SIM card from Lizzie's fingers.

"He's coming. We have about 15 seconds. Hurry."
Meera's voice came over the small speaker in Lizzie's ear.

"How are we doing on Marwan's ID?" Ressler's voice came over next.

"How long you need?" Lizzie questioned Aram.

"Almost there. Okay, 30 seconds."

"He's on the move."
Meera's voice came over slightly anxious.

"I need the badge now, Aram." Lizzie stated impatiently.

"Somebody stall him." Meera directs.

Lizzie hears the door to the front of the van open and slam shut. Ressler must have volunteered as tribute.

"We are a go." Aram muttered, hitting a few more buttons before handing Lizzie the ID.

Lizzie jumps out of the van and knocks into Marwan again just as he spins back around from being slammed into by Ressler. Marwan walks away none the wiser to the fact that his badge had been missing at all.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Lizzie was readjusting one of the pins in her hair in the mirror as she listened to her dad's voice travel down the stairs of his safe house.

"We have a problem. I had my people run background on the guest list for tonight's event. The file's on the Ottoman. Rasil Kalif—notorious playboy—works as a cultural attaché in the Syrian embassy. Apparently, Madeline's been seeing him for some time."

Lizzie turned and grabbed the afore mentioned file from the ottoman and skimmed through it. "Why is that a problem?" She yelled so he could hear.

"Cultural attaché is Kalif's cover. Truth is he's been recruited as an asset by the Russian Bratva—he's a mobster. My guess is he's the one who hired Maddie to steal the Effigy. And right about now, she's walking into the embassy as his date."

"What? You said her profile was too high and she wasn't going."

"Well, she is." Red countered.
"Why would she hire us to steal the Effigy when she's obviously planning on stealing it herself?"
Lizzie spun around at the sound of her dad descending the stairs.

Red stopped in the doorway of the den and smiled softly as he gazed at her in her flowing red
dress. "Wow! Sweetheart, you look beautiful."

Lizzie smiled and almost said thank you until her brain caught up with what she was seeing. "What
are you wearing?"

Red looked down at himself and shrugged. "A tuxedo. I'm your plus one."

"You can't get into that embassy." Lizzie looked at her father like he was nuts. To be fair, the jury
was still out on that one.

"Oh, yes, I can." Red chuckled. "Some of my best friends are Syrian."

"You act like this is a joke." Lizzie's breath hitched. "There's a digital net over the embassy. Aram
can't access the surveillance feeds. I'm going onto foreign soil to steal a priceless artifact with no
backup."

Red walked forward and grasped her upper arm, squeezing comfortably. "You have me. And I'm
not gonna let anything happen to you."

//\\

"There's Madeline." Lizzie nodded subtly in the woman's direction. "Think she beat us to it?"

"Stay on task. We have two minutes to access the security door." Red grasped Lizzie's hand in his
and spun her. "Shall we?" He questioned though he was already leading her in a dance. Lizzie
tensed, not feeling that this was the time or the place for this and looking around, attempting to
keep her eyes on Madeline Pratt. "Lizzie, I know this must be very difficult for you, but I need you
to relax. Think of this as that father-daughter dance we never got to have." He murmured lowly.

Lizzie took a deep breath and smiled at him, allowing him to lead.

"How did you know about Omaha?"

"I didn't." Red shook his head, returning her smile.

"You're the one who brought it up."

"Well, it was a heartwarming story. The night manager and the alley."

"I made it up." Lizzie stated, blushing slightly.

Red chuckled darkly. "You better have. If I heard you'd taken up those shenanigans again after
promising me you wouldn't, well, I feel it is within my rights to say you are so very grounded,
young lady.

Lizzie laughed, shaking her head. "You couldn't ground me even when I was younger. All I had to
do was turn on my best puppy dog eyes and you were putty in my hands."

Red harrumphed, rolling his eyes. "Don't let that get out, will you? I've a reputation to maintain."

After they shared a couple chuckles, Red quieted. "How are you feeling?" His eyes motioned
towards her stomach in obvious question.
Lizzie smiled sweetly, touched by his concern. "We're fine. Don't worry."

"I can't help but worry. Constantly."

They danced for a few moments, slowly making their way across the floor to where they needed to be. "Now Lizzie, you're not a cop tonight. You're a criminal. And you're gonna be fine. Just be yourself. The security door is behind you." He murmured close to her ear.

"Okay, I'm gonna need a distraction."

"Be yourself." Red propels her in a spin toward the buffet table, directly into the path of a waiter holding a tray of champagne. In the immediate commotion, no one noticed Lizzie slink off into the nearby hallway, towards the security door.

Once he was sure Lizzie had gotten through the door, Red turned and made his way over to Madeline and her date, Rasil Kalif. "Mind if I cut in?" He asked, though he had already grasped Madeline's wrist and spun her away before Kalif could answer. "What are you doing here, Madeline?" He asked, pulling her closer to him as they danced.

"What are you doing here, Red?"

"I came to watch you." He murmured lowly in her ear.

"Thank you. You still wear the hell out of a tux."

"My plane is 15 minutes from here. We could be in Tegucigalpa by breakfast." He could feel her smile against his cheek.

"The girl– tell me about her."

"What would you like to know?"

"How did you pick her?"

Red chuckled. "Fate."

"She's a little young for you."

"You think?" Red quirked an eyebrow, trying not to think of the insinuations yet allowing her to make the assumption nonetheless as he spun her then brought her back in towards him, back to his front.

"Last summer, what happened in Florence? What happened to you? You left me alone. I deserve an explanation."

Red kissed her shoulder, his arms tightly around her as they swayed. "I was serious about Tegucigalpa. What do you think? Right now."

"What happened in Florence?" She questioned, a bit more forcefully.

Red didn't even have a chance to come up with another deflection as an alarm began blaring.

Madeline's escort – Kalif, came running over and grabbed her hand. "Come! I need to get you to the safe room. All embassy dignitaries will head to the safe room."

As they rushed off, Red stood calmly looking around him. A guard walked passed him and Red
takes the opportunity, pinching the man on the neck and sending him to sleep. He took the man's gun from his holster and quickly fired two shots into the air, causing the crowd of people around them to scream and stampede for the nearby exits. Red dumped the gun into a champagne chiller.

Red heads down a stairwell and moves to the side as a group of guards pass him. He noticed a straggler and stops him as he tries to pass.

"Shh! Shh! Shh! Shh! There was a man. He had a gun. The man had a gun."

When the guard looks to where Red is pointing, Red takes him in a choke hold and holds it until the man stops flailing, stealing his pistol and holstering it in the waist of his trousers.

Once he got to the bottom of the stairwell he, turns down the hallway and finds Lizzie, restrained in a chair with a guard standing guard over her.

"There you are! What the hell happened to you?! You just leave me stranded with that awful Algerian?! He's been hitting on me for 20 minutes!" Red shouts at her rather… flamboyantly.

"Sir, this is a secure area!" The guard shouts.

"Well, not secure enough if you ask me, sister. You know what? Why don't you ask Rasil? We wouldn't even be here if it weren't for that troublemaker." Red said, sweeping his hand out towards the hallway before placing his hands on his hips and cocking said hips to the side saucily. "Always an agenda with him. Cultural attaché. Culture my ass. The things I do for this one." He points to Lizzie who is staring up at him, stunned. "Gallivanting around the globe for your little assignations with you–know–hmm–hmm, carrying her furs and bikinis as if I wouldn't rather be back in Dutchess County with my shelties. Hey. don't take anything for granted!" Red leans forward, getting into her face. "Everything you have was bought and paid for by your boyfriend! Do you have any idea whose horn this tramp is blowing? Let's just say it starts with Bashar and ends with Assad, gassing you faster than a Sunni." Red stood back up and addressed the guard. "So, let's get her out of the hot seat and into a limo– good God! – Crumbs up!" Red shouted, pointing disgustedly at the man's waist.

"– What?" The poor guard questioned, looking down at himself.

"Your cummerbund. Pleats up! You look like Bob Yoshimura in 8th–grade swing choir. It's upside down!"

Red moved towards him as if to fix it and when the guard looked down, Red punched him, knocking him out.

"Aah! God, that hurts! Ohh!" Red groaned, clutching his hand as he walked over to the guard, swiping the keys from him.

"What the hell was that?" Lizzie questioned, unable to keep in a small giggle.

"I don't know. It just felt so right in the moment." Red sighed, only slightly embarrassed. He quickly finds the needed key and uncuffs Lizzie, enabling her to stand up.

"Where's Pratt?"

"Gone."

"And the effigy?"
"Gone with her."

"God, Dad. I know you two have history but we have got to discuss your choice in women! She is so not coming to Christmas dinner."

\---

"Where the hell is Reddington?" Cooper barked at Lizzie as he walked up to where she stood in the war room, her hair and make up were still all done up but she had changed into more comfortable clothes.

"He told me he was going to try and locate Pratt."

"For all we know, he set up this whole thing so he could get the identities of the Russian spies, damaging national security. The Syrians know the safe was opened as a distraction, and they're still trying to account for exactly who was in that panic room with the effigy. They're attributing the whole heist to Reddington."

"She knew where the effigy was the entire time, and she used us to get it." Lizzie defended. "She got me to set off the alarm, and she used Reddington's notoriety get the Syrians to believe that he took it."

"We got something." Meera stated, walking over to them. "The SIM card Keen took from Pratt's phone. This is a list of outgoing calls she made over the past two weeks. Several of these calls were to a mosque outside of Arlington."

"Homeland has a person of interest tied to that mosque– a cleric named Firas Ashear." Ressler continued where Meera left off.

"And he's connected how?" Cooper asked, looking at the files that Ressler handed to him.

"We're not sure. But the biggest red flag is his family's connection to The People's Liberation Alliance." Ressler answered.

"Extremist organization out of Aleppo. Apparently, the father is a local warlord – with financial ties to the group." Meera continued for him.

Cooper nodded, shutting the folder and slapping it on the table. "Find him. Bring him in for questioning."

As they made their way out, heading to find Firas Ashear, Lizzie and Ressler stepped into the elevator. Just as Lizzie closed her eyes, absolutely exhausted, her phone began to ring. Glancing at the screen, her brow furrowed in confusion at the unknown number. Assuming it was her dad, she answered.

"Hello?"

"Lizzie. Please, wait! Don't hang up!"

"Tom? What the hell are you doing calling me? How did you get this number?"

Taking Red's advice, Lizzie had changed her phone number and gotten a new phone after they had kicked Tom to the curb.

"That doesn't matter, listen. Please, I just… I want to see you. Can we talk?"
"Absolutely not."

Lizzie hung up and, with the push of a few buttons, blocked any more calls from that number. She assumed he had used a burner phone but it still felt good, like she was doing something proactive. She was going to have to talk to her dad about this.

"You want me to rough him up for you?" Ressler asked gently.

Lizzie laughed softly, shaking her head. "I think you'll have to wait in line. I think Red wants a shot at him first."

Lizzie hadn't slept in 24 hours. She'd had to escape to the bathroom twice in the last two hours so that she could go through her usual morning routine. Apparently the baby didn't care if she hadn't slept and there were no windows in the Post Office, making the idea of 'morning' rather relative.

They had finished interrogating Firas Ashear and the team immediately jumped to start researching everything he'd told them. The early morning hours now found the whole team standing in the Post Office once more.

"The CIA sanctioned a covert op to raid the compound of Al Hakam Ashear in early December 1983. The Agency received credible intelligence that Ashear had met with a former KGB agent to purchase information." Cooper stated, taping pictures and scraps of paper onto the evidence boards.

"What kind of information?" Ressler asked before stifling a yawn.

"Ashear paid $3 million for the location of the Kungur Six, which, according to the son's story, he hid in the base of the statue." Meera answered.

"So, it appears the six aren't people." Cooper sighed, taking off his reading glasses and rubbing his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

"What do you mean?" Lizzie questioned, perking up slightly.

"During the Cold War, there were rumors that Russia was able to hide several nuclear weapons in America."

"Those weren't rumors." Ressler stated though it came out as more of a question.

"Pratt was hired to steal the effigy because inside it are directions to those weapons. The Kungur Six are not Russian agents." Cooper continued.

"They're nuclear bombs. Hidden all across the country." Lizzie said, horrified.

Red came up alongside Madeline as she walked down the street, grasping her elbow firmly in his hand and propelling her forward, forcing her into a brisk trot in her heels. "Tell me about the coordinates."

"What coordinates?" Madeline tries to tug her arm away from Red. "Stop it."

"I had a little talk with Rasil. We had a few laughs, compared notes about you. He told me all about that delightful thing you do with a trouser belt, which was a bit hurtful, since I was pretty
Madeline chuckled darkly. "It's over. You were played. Go home. You really want to know why I brought you into this?" Madeline stopped, stepping directly into Red's path so that he was forced to stop or risk bowling her over. "Florence. Because you didn't show. Florence was everything, our way out, a fresh start. But to you, it's all just a job. Tegucigalpa? Honestly? If I was interested in having an affair, I'd find a man with hair."

Red's lips purse but before he can answer, two men come up behind them and Red feels the familiar stinging jolt of a taser.

"Raymond. Raymond, is that you? Raymond, say something." At the sound of Madeline's frantic voice, Red groaned and flopped onto his back on the dirty cell he was being held in.

A little while later, Red had dragged himself over to the wall close to Madeline's cell. There was a small slot between the two which allowed them to talk and see at least a portion of each others' faces.

"The Syrians aren't getting the effigy back. It's gone. I've already sold it to the Russians." Madeline stated, shaking her head hopelessly.

"I ran out of gas." Red murmured, licking his dry lips.

"Huh?"

"I was so excited to get home, I didn't even bother to look. My head was just – I ran out of gas."

"What are you talking about?" Madeline questioned. He must seem delirious from the torture.

"It was Christmas Eve. I pulled off to the side of the road. Seemed like it'd been snowing for days. No traffic. No cars to come help. Just me and a car full of gifts. It was more than 20 years ago. I must have walked four miles five, maybe." Red closed his eyes, chuckling lowly at the distant memory. "It was so still. Just cold and white. The whole time, all I could think about was them in our house. The warm light in the windows, the smoke from the chimney." Red's lips thinned, the corners of his eyes pinched tighter. "The sound of my daughter at the piano. The smell of the tree and the fire, oyster stew on the stove. I was so upset to think that I'd ruined Christmas for them, being late, leaving the gifts in the car. But the closer I got, the more I realized how funny the whole thing was, how much they'd love the story, daddy running out of gas, how every Christmas they'd get such joy from telling that story at my expense."

Red's smile at the idea of the joke quickly diminished. "And then, finally I got there. I walked… I walked through the door. And there was just blood. All I saw was blood. All there was was blood." Red's voice had darkened to a growl. "I can… I can still s–smell the nape of her neck, feel her little fingers on my cheek her whisper in my ear." Red's face contorted in a grimace before he opened his eyes to the sight of tears sliding down Madeline's cheek. "That's why I didn't show up in Florence. It's why I haven't shown up in a lot of places over the years."

At that moment, two of the guards unlocked the door to Red's cell and dragged him out, his legs trailing behind him limply.

"No, don't. Please, please. No, please! Stop! Please stop! Please stop! Please come back! I'll tell
you what you want to know!” Madeline cried out.

\\\\

Madeline gave the note pad with coordinates written on it over to the guard.

"Now, I gave you what you wanted. Where is he?"

The guard immediately turned around and handed the pad to Red who stood in all his good-looking glory, cleaned up, with barely a mark on him and wearing the hell out of a light blue three-piece suit.

"No." Madeline groaned, realizing she'd been played.

"We have the location of the effigy." Red stated before hanging up his phone.

"You son of a –"

"Yes." Red smiled grimly at Madeline.

"You'll never get to it in time. Damn you, Reddington! Damn you, Raymond! You let me out of here right now, you son of a bitch! Was it true? That story about your family? Was any of it true?"

She cried.

Red stood there for a moment before placing his fedora on his head. It was the truth. It had hurt so damn much to dredge up those memories. He wanted nothing more to go home and hug Lizzie, make plans for his little grandbaby. But it was also a convenient truth, the pain of those memories were a necessary evil to get Madeline right where he wanted her. "I never would have taken you to Tegucigalpa." He murmured before leaving, ignoring her cries to let her out.

\\\\

After a shoot out involving Rasil Kalif and his men as they tried to extract the effigy, the team had been able to subdue the men and take the effigy. Within the hour, everyone was back in the Post Office to regroup.

"ERT examined the statue. There was nothing inside, no coordinates. No papers of any kind, nothing on Kalif or any of his men." Cooper stated angrily, pacing his office where he had asked/ordered Red to meet him.

"It appears Madeline sent us on a good old–fashioned snipe hunt." Red shook his head, as if disappointed.

"I sent a team to the warehouse where you said we could find Pratt. She was gone. Where is she?" Cooper questioned, stepping towards Red.

"Let’s talk about the effigy."

"Why? The idea that it actually contained anything was obviously a myth."

"Or maybe Madeline double-crossed the Russians and kept the coordinates to the nukes for herself and led you to believe it was all a myth."

Cooper reared back on his heels, blowing air forcefully out of his nose. "You have them."

"While you were chasing the effigy, I was coming to terms with Madeline. In a moment of …
"You knew there was nothing inside the effigy when you sent us after Kalif."

"I thought you might have a passing interest in rounding up some Russian mobsters."

Cooper huffed. "The coordinates. Where are they?"

"Relax, Harold. I have no use for rusty Russian firecrackers left over from the '60s."

Cooper's brow raised as realization dawned on him. "You want the effigy"

Red smiled brightly at Cooper. "And you want the bombs. How about a trade?"

---

"Case file on Pratt." Ressler murmured, setting the now rather thick file down on Lizzie's desk and walking back over to his own, gathering his stuff.

Lizzie shook herself from her malaise and looked over at him. "You taking off already?" She asked quietly.

Ressler gave a small grin. "Yeah. Meeting Audrey for dinner." Ressler finally looked back up from where he'd been cleaning up the day's clutter from his desk and frowned at Lizzie's unmasked sadness.

"Hey? What's up? Tom bothering you again?"

Lizzie laughed wetly, ashamed to realize she was tearing up. Damn hormones. Was it too early to blame hormones? Screw it, she was going to blame the hormones.

"No. Well, sort of." Lizzie tsked her teeth. "I guess you could say he'll be bothering me for years to come."

"Huh?"

"I'm uh…I'm pregnant."

Ressler's eyes widen and he slowly walks over to lean against Lizzie's desk, beside her chair.

Lizzie leaned back in her chair and blew out a breath. "No. Go." She said waving him off. "You have dinner."

"She'll understand." He murmured, giving her a soft smile and offering his hand to help her up.

"Up for some Chinese?"
Chapter 30

Lizzie sat on her couch, her back against the arm rest as she faced Ressler, her legs drawn up close to her chest as she ate her lo mein.

"So uh… How are you dealing with all of it? Not just being pregnant but, well the circumstances?" Ressler cleared his throat awkwardly as he stabbed a piece of General Tsos with one of his chopsticks. He sat on the other end of her couch, one leg hiked up onto the cushion to face her.

Lizzie sighed at the question, she supposed she was going to have to get used to being asked that once her pregnancy became obvious. She'd been trying to wrap her own head around it ever since she found out. Bottom line was, it was her baby and she wanted it. At least that's what she kept telling herself. "I'm scared." She murmured, playing with the noodles in her to go container. "I'm gonna be a single mom. And the dad...I have huge misgivings about him. He's probably a psychopath and he's out there somewhere." Lizzie bit her lip to stem the flood of tears. She was done crying over Tom Keen. Or whatever his name was.

"We don't know that." Ressler tried to reassure her.

Lizzie merely snorted and shook her head, not willing to divulge everything she knew which basically boiled down to…yes, her ex husband really was a psychopath. Okay fine, an argument can be made for a sociopath. She couldn't very well tell him that Tom was hired by Red to look after her and Tom turned. Too many variables, too many possible questions.

"Anyway, you're not alone. You've got me, the team… and in some freaky way, you've got Reddington."

Lizzie snorted as her smile became watery. "Thanks, Ress. That means a lot."

Ressler nodded, uncomfortable with the mushy conversation and quickly changed the path of the conversation. "Are you going to tell Cooper?" Ressler questioned before swallowing another piece of chicken.

Lizzie shook her head, biting her lip. "Not yet."

"Liz-"

"No, I know. It's dangerous. And I promise, I'll listen to whatever the doc has to say on this but… not yet."

"Why not? Liz, it's not just you anymore."

Lizzie's eyes flashed as she glared at him. "Don't you think I know that? I get that. And like I said, I'll listen to my doctor. But I know what they're going to tell me. Take it easy. Listen to my body. It's not like I'm going to be placing myself at unnecessary risk. I'm going to be careful, Ressler. I just… I can't be sidelined right now."

Ressler stared at her a moment, trying to size her up, before nodding slowly. "Alright."

The rest of the night was spent slowly picking at their food and laughing at late night court room shows and Jerry Springer episodes until they began to doze off.

The third time Lizzie's head began to dip, Ressler chuckled sleepily. "I should head out." He barely
got the full sentence out before his jaw cracked with a huge yawn.

Lizzie shook her head with a small grin as she stood up. "You're not going anywhere. Let me get you a blanket and pillow. You can crash on my couch."

Ressler's only answer was a small nod and to burrow further into the back of her couch.

Red climbed into the front seat and laughed. "What is this? A '78?" He asked with a sigh, shaking his head, his eyes distant and nostalgic.

The dark skinned man in the driver's seat looked over at him, unamused. "You got a picture?"

"My father loved Cadillacs." Red continued with a smile as he handed over a newspaper clipping.

"And she's alive?" The man questioned as he looked down at the clipping with the picture of a pretty young woman with brunette hair.

"She's calling herself Jolene Parker."

The man nodded definitively, adjusting his cowboy hat atop his head. "I'll notify you when I find her."

"You don't have all the information." Red stated calmly, carefully masking his confusion.

The cowboy looked over at him without a flicker of emotion. "I have all I need."

Red shook his head, his lips pursed. "No. She's –"

"Do I tell you how to do your job?" Cowboy interrupted, his voice slightly raised. "No, I don't. So don't tell me how to do mine. If I was able to find you hiding on that sheep farm outside of Dingle, I can find this girl. Don't you worry how."

Red paused before a moment, counting backwards from ten in his head before smiling as he squinted at the man's head. "I love hats. But that honestly, that takes a certain kind of man. What size are you? I'm a 7 1/2."

The cowboy was completely unamused as he stared at Red. "I'll find the girl."

Red laughed, shaking his head before becoming serious, his face solemn. "I don't want you to find her. I know where she is. I want you to tell me where she's been. Cities, safe houses, aliases. She's already faked her death to elude me. Now she's back. I want you to tell me everything you can about where she's been, what she's been up to."

Lizzie stood in the center of the enormous warehouse, trying not to think about all of the legal and illegal merchandise were in the wooden crates of various sizes that surrounded her. She was coming to appreciate the little glimpses she got into her dad's world – like a protracted, twenty-years-too-late, 'take your daughter to work day' event.

Spinning around at the sound of a heavy metal door slamming shut, Lizzie smiled at the sight of her dad and Dembe coming towards her. She gladly reciprocated a quick hug and kiss on the cheek from Dembe before he wandered off to take care of some business or other further into the warehouse before turning to her father.
"Lizzie." Red murmured in greeting as he hugged her tightly. She had noticed his hugs had become longer and more snuggly since she told him she was pregnant. Not that she was complaining. Her dad's hugs had always been one of her favorite things. "Have you seen the paper?"

"What about it?" Lizzie asked as they pulled away, taking the newspaper he proffered and opening it up.

"Mark Hastings, US Attorney from Maryland – Put away the head of the Reynoso Cartel. A week later, he went missing."

Lizzie looked up at him and shrugged her shoulders. "I remember. The Bureau assumed it was a retribution killing."

"Yeah, well, two days ago, he was found wandering on a road in Pennsylvania. Nobody knows where he's been." Red stated, pointing to the article which discusses Hastings' sudden reappearance.

"Was he in hiding?"

"I believe he was held captive, but not by the Reynoso cartel. It's all quite a mystery. They say he's too traumatized to speak. But if what I believe about Hastings is true, if he has been held captive all these years, then it would confirm that the myth is true – The Judge is real." Red announced solemnly.

"The Judge?" Lizzie shuffled on her feet, feeling slightly awkward that she didn't know.

Red nodded, pulling up a medal folding chair next to another and gestured for her to take it while sitting down in the other himself. "Every culture has a justice myth, an avenging angel who exacts retribution for the weak and innocent. Golem for the Jews, Tu Po for the Chinese. The Ancient Greeks had Adrestia, the Goddess of Revenge."

Lizzie nodded, sighing lightly as she sat down. "And we have The Judge."

"Think of him as a prisoner's court of last resort. When your legal appeals have all been exhausted and there is no hope left, you can make one last plea to The Judge."

"What kind of plea?" Lizzie questioned, smiling as Dembe walked over, pulled up another chair, and sat down beside her. He stayed quiet as usual, always preferring to observe.

"Prisoners can state their case, argue their innocence, explain why they were convicted unfairly and who is responsible – a prosecutor, a corrupt detective, maybe an incompetent public defender." Red continued.

"This demand for justice – where does it go?"

"Supposedly, it's passed among inmates until it finally reaches some book depository at the Federal Penitentiary in Monroe, Virginia."

"And then?"

Red shrugged. "Nobody knows for sure. Nobody's ever met him. Somehow, the appeals make their way to The Judge. He reviews the case, and if he thinks you're innocent, he evens the score. If freedom or life were taken unfairly, he demands the same in return – an eye for an eye."

Lizzie nodded thoughtfully, her mind already running over all the possibilities.
"Now that I've given you the next name on the List, would you mind telling me what Agent Ressler was doing coming out of your apartment building early in the morning two days ago?"

Red looked at Lizzie solemnly, his lips pursed. She simply stared at her dad for a few moments, feeling a bit like a teenager being reprimanded. Then she remembered she was a grown ass woman.

"Jesus dad," Lizzie rolled her eyes. "My watchers are there for my protection, not to be used as your spies. We both know how it turned out the last time you employed one of those, yea?"

Shifting uncomfortably and re-crossing his legs, Red cleared his throat. "Yes well, the question still remains."

Lizzie huffed out a breath in annoyance. "I told him about my pregnancy. He was there as my friend, to comfort me. We ate some crappy Chinese food, watched some crappy tv and then he crashed on my couch." Combing her fingers through her hair, Lizzie smiled softly. "It was nice. But…we're just friends, Dad. Geez, I'm pregnant with my spy ex-husband's baby. Not exactly the time for a budding romance, yea?"

Red stared at her for a moment before nodding his head with finality. "Good. His propensity for slipping on banana peels would greatly hinder any attempts at chivalry."

"Reddington says Mark Hastings was held captive?" Cooper questioned as the team stood in the War Room.

"Yes," Lizzie nodded, "but not by Reynoso. He thinks it might've been payback for a different case Hastings prosecuted. Aram?" Lizzie looked to Aram, who with a swipe of his mouse pad, sent the digital file to the large screens above their heads for viewing. "Leonard Debs – sentenced to 14 years for armed robbery when he was 28."

"According to this so–called Judge, this guy is innocent?" Ressler questioned gruffly.

"A witness allegedly came forward at the time saying Debs wasn't at the scene. Hastings never told the defense."

"Debs got out two months ago. He served 12 years of his 14–year sentence."

"Hastings took 12 years away from Leonard Debs, so The Judge evened the score." Cooper announced solemnly.

Lizzie nodded and walked towards the screen with the view of all of the possible victims of The Judge then looked back at Ressler. "And Reddington says there have been others. A New York homicide detective, an appellate court judge, two prosecutors all missing and presumed dead, all involved in cases in which some impropriety was alleged, which made them targets for The Judge." Lizzie said, pointing to each face as she said the person's occupation.

"An underground criminal court of appeals." Cooper raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"We believe that the appeals are being processed through a book depository run by a prison–literacy project."

"We pulled the files of everyone who worked at the depository," Aram interjected, looking to Lizzie in apology at his interruption before continuing, "and I think we found something." Aram then brought another picture onto the screen. "Frank Gordon – a civilian now, but he's a convicted
killer. He now works for a prison–literacy project at their book depository in Monroe, Virginia."

"So he takes the letters from the returned books, screens them for The Judge." Ressler stated, clearly thinking aloud.

"Find him. And see if you can get anything out of him." Cooper nodded decisively before walking toward his office.

\\\\-

Lizzie looked around at the book depository which looked rather like a decrepit library where the shelves were over flowing with old, torn, beaten books. Boxes of books were stacked in piles on the floors and tables around them, gathering dust.

"Frank's been with us for almost six years now, ever since the court reversed his conviction."

"Does his job require he interact with prisoners?" Lizzie asked the kindly woman who was Gordon's boss.

"Well, n–not directly, but he does respond to their requests. Our program is one of the many that provides inmates with reading materials." She stated as she flicked a light switch at the top of a stairwell and led Lizzie and Ressler down into the basement.

"Frank?" The woman called out.

Ressler looked back at Lizzie, his lips thinned. "Who else knows Frank stays here?" He asked brusquely.

"Is he in some kind of trouble?" She asked.

"What's back there?" Ressler questioned, walking into a small area which housed a twin bed, a little dresser and a desk. Two sides of the area were walled in with fencing.

"Oh, I–I really feel we should wait for Frank to come back. It's his space. It's –"

Ressler rummaged through the desk and found a flashlight, flicking it on, he looked to Lizzie.

"Stay here." He murmured before walking further into the basement.

Lizzie placed a hand on the woman's shoulder as she went to follow after Ressler.

"Hello? Mr. Gordon? FBI. We'd like to talk to you." Lizzie heard Ressler call out before the sound of thuds emanated from the dark.

"What is it?" Lizzie called out.

"Stay where you are." Ressler shouted back and Lizzie let out a huff in frustration. Lizzie froze at the clear sound of fighting.

"Ressler? You okay? Ressler!"

Lizzie ran into the back, grabbed another flashlight from the desk and unholstered her weapon.

"Ress-" Her cry was cut off as someone knocked into her as they ran past. She fired off two shots at the person fleeing but between the disorientation and the darkness, she knew she missed.
"I set up checkpoints at all major roads and highways, sent Frank Gordon's photo to State, Federal." Lizzie said as she walked up to Ressler where he stood in front of Gordon's desk, rummaging through various sheets of paper.

"You're not gonna believe this. Pleas from inmates, all handwritten from prisons all over the country – ADX, Marion, Pelican Bay. And look at this. Alan Ray Rifkin. It's a case folder – research, evidence. Frank was reviewing trial transcripts for The Judge." Ressler barely looked up from what he was reading as he spoke.

Lizzie moved closer and read over Ressler's shoulder. "Alan Ray Rifkin – American college student, dropped out, joined the army, deployed to Afghanistan. In 2003, he was tried and convicted as an enemy combatant – fought alongside the Taliban. He's scheduled for execution tomorrow. According to the charges, Rifkin and a few dozen Taliban fighters raided an Afghan village, killing dozens of civilians. At trial, Rifkin's lawyers claimed it was friendly fire, that the American military destroyed the village, from the air, mistaking it for a Taliban outpost. The military denied it."

"So The Judge thinks Rifkin is innocent." Ressler murmured before doing a double take as if just realizing Lizzie was next to him. "You shouldn't have done that you know." He stated.

"Done what?" She asked, confused with the way the conversation turned.

"Come after me. You just –" Ressler looked down at her stomach, "You just shouldn't."

Lizzie's brow scrunched in fury as she punched his arm. "Don't you dare go all alpha-male-must-protect-woman-and-child on me, you ass."

Ressler huffed out a laugh as he rubbed his arm as if in pain though she really hadn't hit him very hard. "Ow! C'mon, it's not like that!"

"Oh it's exactly like that. Just – don't, Ress. You're going to make me regret telling you." Lizzie sighed, stepping away from him as she combed her fingers through her hair. "I'm still a trained agent. I'm not waddling yet, I haven't slowed down. I can still do my job. Got it?"

Ressler sighed, shaking his head. "Yea, I got it. But I can't just… turn it off. You're my partner. I'm worried."

Lizzie smiled sweetly at him. "I know that, Ress. But you just said it yourself. We're partners, we've got each other's backs. That's why I went in there after you." Lizzie turned and walked up the stairs, leaving Ressler and the creepy basement behind.

Ressler and Lizzie were in their office, going through the various letters that inmates had sent out in hopes of them reaching The Judge. They looked up at the sound of a knock at their door.

"Guys," Aram said, his head peaking over the door jam, "that Rifkin case you were asking about – the investigating officer was the Senior FBI Agent in Afghanistan at the time – Harold Cooper."

Lizzie and Ressler stared at Aram for a moment then looked to each other, wide-eyed.
"You think this is a coincidence? Reddington feeds you The Judge, and I'm next on that lunatic's hit list?" Cooper questioned, pacing the war room.

"We need to take it seriously." Lizzie tried to placate her boss.

"No, we don't." Cooper shook his head vehemently. "The federal prosecutor on the case is Tom Connolly. His reputation speaks for itself. So should mine. Rifkin admitted to treason."

"We're not saying he's innocent. But if you or Connolly are in danger –"

"What exactly does this so–called Judge think that we missed?" Cooper cut Lizzie off midsentence. Lizzie shrugged helplessly. "We don't know yet. We're reviewing the file now."

"Fine. You do what you need to do. But I'm telling you, Alan Ray Rifkin is guilty. And I for one will lose no sleep watching him pay the ultimate price for his crimes."

Okay, so, the question is, why does The Judge think Rifkin is innocent?" Ressler asked, looking at both Lizzie and Meera as they stood around Meera's work station.

"We've been together a timeline of events using the file you found in Frank Gordon's room, and we found a problem. After Rifkin was caught, Cooper had him flown from Bagram to Andrews Air Force Base in Virginia. From there, prison transport took them to a federal holding facility in Alexandria. That trip should've taken 30 minutes. At trial, the US Marshal supervising the transport said it arrived on schedule." Meera held out a manila folder with a sheet of paper inside for Lizzie and Ressler to see. "But look at this – the event log. It recorded the actual time that the Marshal swiped in to Alexandria. That trip didn't take half an hour. It took 2 1/2 hours."

Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why wasn't this presented at trial?"

"Another event log was – one that matched the 30–minute timeline." Ressler stated, subdued as he handed over a file with the event log which was presented at court.

"One of the event logs is fake." Meera stated.

"We should find the Marshal, ask him directly." Lizzie stated before biting her lip. She hated where this investigation was taking the team. The entire foundation of the team rested on Cooper. He was the leader. And now the foundation was cracking.

Lizzie hopped out of her car and slammed the door shut as she saw the man exiting the Marshalls' office. "William Munson?" She yelled over the snow and wind, clutching her coat tighter around her. "Agent Keen. FBI." She stated in introduction as they met each other half way in the parking lot. "I'm investigating a case you're connected to. The defendant is Alan Ray Rifkin."

Munson looked around wildly before grasping her arm, leading her further into the parking lot. "Not here. I don't want the people I work with knowing I'm involved in this." He quickly shuffled her over to his car, unlocked the door and opened the passenger door, waiting impatiently for her to get in and slammed the door.

"I'm running out of time, Mr. Munson. Alan Ray Rifkin is running out of time." Lizzie stated after they'd both been sitting in the car for a few moments, the heat up to full blast to counter act the
freezing temperatures outside.

"I know that. Why the hell do you think I came forward?"

Lizzie's head reared back slightly in shock. "Came forward? To whom?"

"That group, the one that fights against the death penalty – The Amnesty Collective."

Lizzie licked her lips, knowing she'd heard that name somewhere. "You and Cooper, you were at Andrews when Rifkin landed. You drove him?"

"Yeah, I was there." Munson forced air out between his lips. "But Cooper and me, we weren't the only ones. That prosecutor, Tom Connolly, he was waiting on the tarmac."

"Connolly was there?"

Munson nodded, dejected. "He was angry. Said the Rifkin case was assigned to him. Kept saying they didn't have enough to convict. He was going places, you know, and he wasn't gonna wreck his career by losing a high-profile case."

"You heard this?" Lizzie asked, incredulous.

"He said they needed a confession. He told Cooper to pick him up, take him over to one of the hangars, and not let him out until he admitted it."

"Mr. Munson, did Agent Cooper physically coerce Rifkin?"

"'Physically coerce?'" Munson scoffed. "Man, you feds are too much. He beat him, yeah. I swept out the entry log, made the timeline make sense, and I had Rifkin treated in his cell instead of the infirmary to avoid any record. Everyone said he was betraying our country. But now, if he's really gonna die…" Munson closed his eyes tight, his head falling back onto the headrest as he blew out another burst of air from his lips.

\\\\

"I found a flash drive, and your girl got some stuff. The last six months, she's been in Havana, Port Au Prince, Miami, various aliases. Last September, she was in Prague." The Cowboy's voice came over the line.

"This Jolene is definitely moving towards something." Red murmured, crossing his legs as he took another sip of his scotch.

"Red, best I can tell, the girl's tracking someone, causing trouble. She's either got lots of little targets or one real big one."

\\\\

"We need to talk about Rifkin." Lizzie announced herself as she walked through the door to Cooper's office.

"I've already said everything I have to say on the subject." Cooper stated, his voice carefully controlled as he stood up from his desk chair.

"Sir, I need to know whether you –"

"What's going on?"
Lizzie whipped around at the sound of another voice coming from the corner of Cooper's office. She was greeted with the sight of a man with more-white-than-gray hair and a smaller stature.

"Agent Keen, this is US Attorney Tom Connolly." Lizzie's eyes widened and her cheeks reddened at the introduction.

"Harold's been telling me what a great agent you are." Connolly smiled kindly. "Dog with a bone." It sounded more like a curse than a compliment yet he maintained his genteel smile. This guy gave Lizzie the creeps.

Turning back to face Cooper, Lizzie sighed. "Sir, may we speak privately?" She asked, nervously eyeing Connolly out of the corner of her eye.

"The thing is, this Rifkin case – the court has made its decision." Connolly stated, causing Lizzie to grind her teeth in annoyance. She hadn't asked him, dammit.

"Agent Keen, whatever you have to say to me, you can say to both of us." Cooper stated, sweeping his arm out to Connolly just in case she'd thought he'd been talking about his invisible friend, Bob.

Lizzie straightened her spine. *In for a penny, right? *"I need to know what happened at the airport after you landed with Rifkin."

Cooper pursed his lips, his large brow furrowing in question. "Rifkin was transferred to a holding facility, as documented."

"You beat a confession out of him." Lizzie stated baldly.

"Who told you that?" Lizzie may have imagined Cooper's voice had deepened dangerously. She hoped she'd imagined it.

"Your transport log was doctored." She stated, slapping a folder onto Cooper's desk. "This is the real log, which shows how long Rifkin was actually at the airport. There's a two–hour gap."

"Where'd you get that?"

"Does it matter?" Her voice rose in consternation.

Cooper sighed, leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers over his stomach. "Let's not play games. You clearly have a theory. Let's hear it."

"No, I don't have a theory." She spat. "I have a witness who says he heard you" Lizzie pointed at Tom Connolly "order you" She pointed to Cooper, "to beat a confession out of Rifkin. He saw it happen."

"I did not railroad an innocent man. There were witnesses, firsthand accounts." Cooper shouted.

"Did you beat him?" Lizzie punctuated each word as if it were its own sentence.

"Yes. Agent Keen, Alan Ray Rifkin deserves the sentence he received for his crimes."

"He's being transferred for execution. We have to stop it until the court looks at his confession."

"His day in court is over." Connolly spoke up, the slimy little shit. "He's exhausted his appeals. Once that happens, the Supreme Court is clear. Why he confessed or whether he's even guilty becomes legally irrelevant."
"We'll see if the Federal Clemency Officer agrees with you."

"He won't even agree to a meeting. Be careful who you go around talking to, Agent Keen."

Connolly chuckled.

Lizzie whipped her head around to look at Cooper. "Are you telling me this, or is he?"

"The only career you should worry about is your own." Cooper stated solemnly as he guided her out the door of his office.

\\\\

Lizzie exited her office and headed down the hallway, her head in a file.

"Oof! Sorry I wasn't – " Lizzie cut off as she realized who she'd run into.

Connolly smiled at her as he removed his hand from her arm which he had grabbed to help steady her.

"Don't worry about it, Ms. Reddington." He demurred, walking off. Lizzie stayed rooted where she was, her eyes widened in terror as she watched him walk away.

\\\\

Lizzie sat at the foot of the stairwell. No one usually used this stairwell so she figured it'd be safe.

"I think we're in a bit of shit, Dad." She whispered manically into her phone.

"Your deplorable language aside, Lizzie, what seems to be the issue?"

"Assistant AG just called me Ms. Reddington. That's the issue." She hissed.

She heard nothing for several beats and just as she was about to pull her phone from her ear, to check if the minute counter had stopped, signaling the call had dropped, her dad spoke again. "Are you absolutely certain, Lizzie?" His voice had gone deep, deadly.

"Yes! There was no mistaking it! He bumped into me in the hallway and called me Ms. Reddington!"

There was another pause. "Lizzie, listen to me. You are to never be in a room alone with that man, do you understand me? He is a friend of Harold's and he is the Assistant Attorney General so his presence in the Post Office – especially since you seem to have piqued his interest – is unavoidable. But you will not be alone with him. I will tell your detail to alert me immediately if they see him entering the Post Office while you're there. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. That's easy enough. He's a slimy little bastard, I don't want to spend any alone time with him anyway." She murmured. "But what does this mean?"

Her dad blew out a breath harshly. "I suspect that Connolly got that information from the same source Alan Fitch did and if that's the case, then he is a part of the same organization."

"Shit."

"Precisely."

\\\\
Lizzie blew out a frustrated breath, causing the hair which had covered her face as she kept her head down to blow about her in a small wave. "Connolly was right. They don't consider the event log new evidence, and even if they did, the deadline to consider Rifkin's factual innocence has passed. Do they realize how insane that is? His innocence can't be considered?" Lizzie's voice went higher as she gazed at Ressler in disbelief.

/
\/
\/
\/
\/

"Cooper's been taken. He was picked up outside of the prison right after Rifkin's execution."
Lizzie's voice greeted as soon as he picked up the phone.

"By whom?" Red asked as he handed over his empty scotch glass to Dembe, re-crossing his legs as he stared out the window of his jet.

"The Judge, we think, as retribution for Rifkin's execution."


"We've got nothing!" Lizzie shouted. "No license plate, no surveillance footage. They could be anywhere by now."

"Back up, Lizzie. Rifkin." Red directed, kindly yet firmly. "Go back to Rifkin. Why would The Judge hold Cooper responsible for his execution?"

"Because he coerced Rifkin's confession."

Red paused. "You're certain of that?"

"Cooper admitted it to me."

"How about the guy the Judge released?"

Lizzie's eyes narrowed at the apparent subject change. "Hastings? We're getting a court order to talk to him over his doctor's objections. He's worried about further trauma."

"If you ever want to see Cooper again, you need to get Hastings to talk. Lizzie, I must be going."

"Wait. Did you hear me? Rifkin was executed – an eye for an eye. Cooper is going to die."

Red's cellphone beeped as he hung up. "Dembe, you better tell Edward there's gonna be a change in flight plan."

/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Red walked up the grand stairs of the Quantico Naval Base's main hall, stepping in front of a man – an admiral according to his stripes – as he descended. As the man looked up to see the person who was blocking his path, he froze, his eyes widening slightly. "Richard. Say something, Richard. I keep meaning to attend our academy class reunions, and I remember how pinched I look in dinner dress blues." Red greeted.

"What the hell do you want?" Richard hissed under his breath, looking around them surreptitiously.

"How's your family?"

Richard glared at Red. "My wife left me, thanks. After I was sidelined. You made a hell of a mess when you left. Nobody believed we couldn't see it coming. Maybe we helped you. Maybe we
facilitated your treason. Even without any evidence, it was enough to destroy some careers."

Red's lips thinned, guilt imperceptibly creasing the corners of his eyes. "Yes, Richard, I need to know about the Rifkin case. He claims civilians were fired on by soldiers from a Black Hawk that CENTCOM says it never deployed."

Richard reared back in disbelief. "I can't help you."

"You were operational in the Guldara District. If there were choppers in the air, you knew about it."

"Rooming with you was the worst thing that ever happened to me."

Red rolled his tongue before continuing. "I'm offering you an opportunity, Richard. The men who want this information can be very helpful. If you help them, it could put you back on track."

-----------

Lizzie pinched her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she hastily walked to her car outside of the Hastings' residence. "Aram, the paper said Rifkin's last words at his execution were 'Good night, mother.' He said it to his spiritual adviser, Ruth Kipling. I just heard Hastings say it."

"Okay," Aram's voice came over the line, as did the sound of his quick typing. "Ruth Suzanne Kipling – single, 62, attended Vassar College, and co-founded the prison rights organization The Amnesty Collective."

Lizzie combed her fingers through her hair as she climbed into her car. "The Marshal that covered up for Cooper and Connolly – that's the organization he reached out to."

"Which is how Kipling found out about the entry-log evidence. Okay, I've got an address in Mercer County, Pennsylvania."

"I bet that's where she's holding them."

-----------

"Red." Lizzie answered her phone, glancing at Ressler out the corner of her eye as they sped down the highway.

"Lizzie, have you located Harold?"

'Yes. We're almost there."

"There's been a development."

-----------

Lizzie stood outside of the barn on Kipling's compound, her hands raised as Ressler made the local P.D. fall back. "Ruth, this is not a tactic." Lizzie shouted, able to see Ruth's head pop up at the window of the door to the barn. Lizzie held up a phone in order to try and get her point across. She then yelled out her phone number and waited. After several long moments, it rang. "I'm not trying to negotiate. … Yes, new information on the Rifkin case. Someone with high-level access is en route."
Red walked down the aisle of the barn, attempting to appear unaffected by the rhythmic banging emanating from the horse stalls which had been refurbished to act as prison cells with opaque glass making it impossible to see who was housed in each one.

As he stepped forward, he laughed. "Of course. A woman." He shook his head as he sat in the chair across from Ruth Kipling.

"If you came to advocate on behalf of Agent Cooper –" Red's eyes flicked over to where Cooper sat in a macabre bargain basement example of an electrocution chair. He wouldn't wish the kind of death that contraption would give on his worst enemy, certainly not on Agent Cooper.

"I didn't." Red stated firmly. "I came to advocate on behalf of you. After devoting your life to a pursuit of the truth, to making things right, it would be such a shame in your last act to get it so wrong." Red stared at Kipling a moment, watched as she shifted uncomfortably in her chair before handing over a thick folder. "This is a classified Pentagon file on the Rifkin case. In the spirit of full disclosure, it's a felony for me to have it or for you to see it. But under the circumstances, who are we to quibble? It states that on October 3, 2002, US military intelligence officers deployed a unit by helicopter to the village of Guldara in the Kabul Province of Afghanistan to extract an asset whose identity had been compromised. The Taliban in the area with whom Alan Ray Rifkin had aligned himself got word of the informant and advanced on the village. But they were too late. The boys had extracted their asset and left. Angry and suspicious of others, the Taliban and Rifkin set fire to the village and executed inhabitants. Dozens of women and children were killed at the hands of the Taliban in response to US military intelligence in the area. I guess, fearing more headlines, the Pentagon wanted no association with the incident, so they covered it up." Red stated gravely and paused for a moment before continuing. "That is what happened. That is the truth. That's why you're not gonna light up Agent Cooper today. Alan Ray Rifkin wasn't executed because of a beating or because of a cover–up. He was executed because of the truth. Now, you and I could talk for days about the whys and why–nots of an execution, but at the end of it all, in the final moment, the only irrefutable fact is you better be right. And I'm betting you're not so sure."

Kipling's eyes narrowed as she sat primly in her chair. "How could you possibly know what I'm thinking?"

Red smirked darkly. "Mark Hastings. You let him go because he had served his time, because this has always been about justice in your eyes, not blind revenge. The day you started this, you knew it would inevitably end, that when you released your first prisoner, you would get caught. You don't want to diminish your legacy of righteousness because of him which is why you're going to surrender." Though his words and tone were dark, Red sprang up out of his chair as if a flip had been switched and tossed his hat back atop his head as he smiled over at Cooper. "Harold, don't look so glum. Come on." He said jovially, winking at the man.

\\\\

Cooper sighed as he took down the pictures of all of the victims from the evidence board. "Five prosecutors, a federal judge, two cops – there were 10 people in that bunker." He stated, looking over at Lizzie as she walked forward. "What's this?" He questioned, pointing at the box in Lizzie's hands.

"Pleas we found in Frank Gordon's room from prisoners all over the country."

"Send it to the Justice Department for review. Walk with me?" Lizzie nodded, setting the box down on the table before catching up with Cooper as he entered the south hallway. "Agent Keen, I regret the methods that we employed to obtain Rifkin's confession. If you feel obligated to report it, I understand." He murmured.
Lizzie smiled up at Cooper. "I think we've had enough judgment for today."

She didn't want to believe that Cooper knew where Connolly's allegiances lay. She didn't want her boss to be another corrupt official. She wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt.

\///\

Cooper sat back in his chair, gazing across his desk at Red where he sat calmly in his own chair. "You knew this was gonna happen with me, The Judge. If you thought that by saving me you'd get some kind of leverage –"

"Harold, a war is coming." Red stated grimly. "I believe the incursion of this facility and the rather sudden disappearance of Diane Fowler were just the beginning, and I'm certain that things will get considerably worse before they get better."

Cooper cocked his head to the side, his brows raised in sudden understanding. "You want my help."

Red nodded once. "Not now. Later. But when I do, I hope you'll remember what happened today." Red stated as he stood up and headed towards the door.

"Is that it?"

"No." Red turned to look down at Cooper. "I'd like you to reach out to Admiral Richard Abraham, he was very helpful in resolving the matters of the day. He's had a rough go of it for quite some time."

"Abraham." Cooper repeated the name.

"Yes. Admiral Richard. He's a good man. I wonder if you could pull a few strings."

Cooper nodded slowly. "I'll see what I can do."

\///\

Red sighed as he opened the door to the Cowboy's car and got in.

"What have you found?" He questioned, his voice gravelly with the late hour.

"Looks like your girl has been following your every move." The cowboy stated as he handed over an iPad with various pictures of Reddington and even a few of Lizzie which had been downloaded from the flash drive he'd found. "You want me to bring her in?"

"No." Red sighed as he flicked through the images. "I believe she's finishing an operation. I'd like to see how it plays out."

\///\

"How are you doing, Lizzie?"

Lizzie smiled, rolling her eyes good naturedly as she sat down on the couch of his safe house. "Well, not much has changed since the last time you asked. During our phone call. An hour ago." She teased.

Red shrugged again, smiling unashamedly. "I'm allowed to ask. I have Grandpa rights. It is law."
Lizzie looked over at Dembe and they both laughed, shaking their heads.

"Right. Well, I guess it's a good thing that there was actually something I didn't want to tell you over the phone. So I actually do have a bit of an update for you."

Red sat up straighter in his position on the other end of the couch and Lizzie could see Dembe lean forward out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh? Do tell, Lizzie. I don't do suspense very well." Red encouraged.

"I scheduled my first ultrasound." When the only response she received was a vaguely interested brow raise, she blustered on. "And well, I know it's only going to be like… a dot, and I know that you can't go in with me. So I thought uh, well I was hoping that Katy Cat would be able to get ahold of an ultrasound machine so you guys could see too." Lizzie paused to take a breath. "I mean, I'll get print outs, obviously but I just thought that well,"

"Lizzie, I cannot for the life of me fathom why you are so nervous. Of course I want to see my little peanut of a grandchild!" Red laughed happily, leaning forward to clap Lizzie on the knee. "And I just love that you still call her Katy Cat. I imagine she gets a kick out of it."

Lizzie chuckled, shaking her head. "Not so much, though I haven't seen her since she helped uh… clean up the apple man who was surveilling me. We should all have dinner one night. I miss her."

Red chuckled in answer, nodding his head. "We'll do that."

"I have to make some calls." Dembe rumbled, standing up. He bent forward slightly to give Lizzie another hug. "I will contact Mr. Kaplan as well." He murmured, leaning down to kiss her hair before walking off.

Lizzie smiled at Dembe's retreating back and then looked back at Red. "You should try calling her Katy Cat sometime. I'd like to see how well that goes over." She joked.

Red's head fell back in tumultuous laughter.
Hey guys! So I almost didn't cover this episode because it is so Ressler-centric. However, since I'm trying to integrate him more and bring him and Lizzie closer than they are in the show, I thought he deserved his moment. So obviously, this means that for this chapter, the POV shifts will include a lot of Ressler scenes rather than just Red or Lizzie. Also, the jury is still out on whether this is going to be Keenler. But if it is... holy moly it will be the slowest burn that ever did burn slowly.

Ressler walked into the office he shared at the Post Office with Liz. He loosened the tie he'd been wearing for Raimo's funeral. God, he hated ties. He hated funerals more though. "Hey. Can I ask you something? It's Reddington. You know how to find him. Can you put the two of us in touch?"

Lizzie paused in what she was doing and looked up at him, confusion clear in the narrowing of her brow and the little pout of her lips. "What's going on with you two?"

Ressler stood with his hands on his hips, his head cocked in his own moment of confusion. "Why?"

"Because he's looking for you."

\\\\

Red sat in the box – the one that had the best view of the entire theater. Not that it mattered much as the dancers on the stage were only milling about or stretching in their more comfortable practice gear.

"You shouldn't be here. I said I'd send a messenger." Red turned and smiled at the sound of the woman's voice coming up behind him.

"I wanted to deliver the check personally, Christine." He withdrew an envelope from his coat pocket and handed it over to the woman beside him, her red hair done in a harsh bun though her practice gear was much looser and comfortable.

She smiled, shyly taking the envelope and putting her hands behind her back. "Thank you."

"Will it be ready in time?" Red asked, looking down at the ballerinas on the stage.

"Everything's on schedule, just like you asked just like last time."

Red smiled at her good-natured teasing. "What do they do for lunch? Do they order in or eat salads out of one of those Tupperware bowls? How does it work with dancers?"

Christine quirked her lips in a sardonic grin. "They smoke."

Red threw his head back with a loud guffaw before turning to look at her once more. "I'll see you on the 22nd. And please send my thanks to your mother." He stated, placing his fedora atop his
As Dembe brought the car to a stop in front of Ressler's agency issued SUV, Red hopped out.

"Stay in the car." He murmured as Dembe made to get out as well. He had a feeling that Agent Ressler was probably feeling a little cagey and having Red's brother slash bodyguard added to the equation probably wasn't a very good idea.

Standing beside the now closed door of his car, Red smiled benignly as Ressler walked over.

"I heard Agent Raimo was relieved of his viscera." He stated jovially.

Ressler's jaw flexed in anger. "If you had anything to do with this–"

"Agent Ressler, please." His rolling eyes didn't befit his rolling eyes but oh well.

"What was it payback for Vienna?" Agent Ressler continued.

"I'm the one who reached out to you, Donald." Red's voice deepened with annoyance. "And it wasn't to revisit all the times I eluded your little coterie of door–kickers who pursued me with such fervor and zeal." Red paused as Ressler shook his head, snorting quietly in disgust. "I came to discuss a former associate of mine who your team arrested along the way. Mako Tanida."

That seemed to get Agent Ressler's attention. "The Yakuza boss? He's in prison."

Red nodded. "He was. Two days ago, he broke out of Abashiri. If you ask the Japanese, they'll skirt it. They claim Abashiri is escape–proof. It's embarrassing. They're touchy about that sort of thing. I suspect Tanida is the one who killed your agent friend."

"So you want to help me find him? Let me guess he double–crossed you, and you want his head in a box."

Red paused, blinking once heavily as he leaned back as if to get a better look at Ressler. "There's a thought. But for the moment, the scalp I'm worried about is yours. Tanida is disciplined, relentless. If he did kill Agent Raimo, there's the distinct possibility he's just getting started. I fear, Donald, that you're being hunted by a vengeful, ruthless killer."

Lizzie laid near the edge of the guest bed in Red's current safe house, smiling as Dembe helped Mr. Kaplan roll in the ultrasound machine. Though she'd already done this for the first time a couple days ago, her dad and brother's excitement was infectious.

"I really appreciate you doing this, Katy Cat." She effused.

"Think nothing of it, Dearie. Though I do wish you wouldn't call me that, I don't wish to give this one any ideas." Mr. Kaplan murmured, smacking Red upside the head as she passed his chair.

"Ow! You know, I don't believe I pay for you to abuse me. I very much doubt it comes in your package. Dembe, does it come in her packet?"

Dembe chuckled, shaking his head. "No, I don't believe it is, Raymond."

"See? You see? Not in your package."
Lizzie laughed at their antics, shaking her head as she rolled up her t-shirt to reveal her still flat abdomen.

"Yes well, my package also doesn't include giving FBI Agents ultrasounds, yet here we are." Mr. Kaplan muttered, gesturing towards Lizzie and the machine as she wheeled a small stool towards the head of the bed and sat on it. She then fired up the machine as she squirted gel onto Lizzie's stomach, making the other woman jump at the sudden cold.

"Now Raymond, Dembe, if you wish to see anything, I suggest you go to the other side of the bed." 

At Mr. Kaplan's suggestion, both men excitedly scurried over to where they could see better. Red sat perched on the side of the bed and leaned forward squinting at the screen though Mr. Kaplan hadn't even placed the Doppler on Lizzie's stomach yet. Dembe stood behind Red, a large smile on his face.

Mr. Kaplan and Lizzie shared a significant look and a warm chuckle at the excited school boy faces on Red and Dembe's faces as Mr. Kaplan finally set the Doppler against Lizzie's stomach and began to slowly roll it around in order to find what they were all waiting for.

Within moments, a fluttering heart beat filled the room and a blurry image appeared on the screen. Though she'd already done it before, tears fell silently down Lizzie's face as she looked at her baby. Her excitement last time had been shadowed by the sheer loneliness of walking into the doctor's office alone. Now, surrounded by her family, she felt pure, unadulterated joy. And judging by their twin gasps, both Red and Dembe felt it as well.

Lizzie laughed as the bed bounced a bit. Looking down at her hand which her dad was now clutching, Lizzie smiled as she gazed back up at him.

"Oh Lizzie..." He murmured, utterly enraptured with the little view.

Lizzie laughed wetly and gave a quick glance to Dembe who's grin had grown even larger, looking as if it would split his face.

"Heartbeat sounds good." Mr. Kaplan said softly. "And you can see the head – oh look, the toes are developing. Isn't that adorable."

Lizzie, Red, and Dembe all shared a look before breaking out in soft laughter at the uncharacteristic adjective use from Mr. Kaplan.

"Oh shut it. See if I do this for you people again." Kate muttered.

Red laughed loudly, shaking his head. "I want copies. Can I have copies? Kate, I want copies."

Lizzie laughed at her dad, wiping her tears with the hand that wasn't currently enfolded in his.

"Don't worry, Dad. I got plenty of copies while I was at the doctor's. They're in my purse."

"Mako Tanida, former clan boss of the Azuma Dojin, based out of Osaka." Ressler announced as he walked up to the table where Cooper, Aram, and Meera were gathered, throwing a file down. "By the time our task force caught up, he controlled a large part of the heroin trade traveling along the Silk Road."

"After Tanida's arrest, we thought his empire would collapse." Meera explained, pausing as Aram's phone rang and he quickly excused himself. "It didn't. In fact, it expanded grew to include alliances
"For a time, the intelligence community believed Tanida somehow was operating his empire from inside prison." Ressler continued as if he and Meera were in a tennis match of counter intelligence. "No one knew how, but there were theories he had politicians in his pocket or he controlled the army, but after he was put into solitary, it became clear that someone else was running the empire."

Meera hit a button and a picture flashed up on the screen. "Within the agency, that man is known as Aiko Tanida, Mako's younger brother. He escaped the night of the raid that took Tanida. We believe he went underground, dark, reemerged as something entirely different bookish boy turned ruthless crime lord."

"They call him 'Tensei.' Means 'Reborn.'"

"Reach out to your agency contacts. I want to know everything there is to know about this brother." Cooper ordered just as Aram came back, holding his phone.

"Uh, we just received word. Uh, Agent Maguire – " Aram licked his lips, unable to meet Ressler's eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Maguire's body was found under a bridge near Broadway at 39th." As she spoke, Lizzie taped the crime scene photos onto the evidence board.

"Domain awareness has three surveillance hits on Tanida. Units en route." Stated one of their techs.

"Arrived on United 472 from Tokyo." Aram called out, not looking up from his computer screen. "Passed through customs at 11:32 under the alias Yasu Itami."

Cooper nodded and pointed at one of the techs. "Feed NPA the alias." He then turned on the spot and faced Ressler. "The Reddington task force – who else was on it?"

"Myself and Bobby Jonica." Ressler murmured, unable to take his eyes away from Maguire's crime scene photos.

"I'm sending protective detail. Did you hear me?" Cooper stood in front of Ressler, blocking his view of the evidence boards. "Agent Ressler."

Ressler finally looked at him, shaking his head dazedly. "I got a place up in Prince Georges County, off the grid. I got to get Audrey there."

As he approached his apartment, Ressler noticed the door was ajar. Drawing his pistol, he noiselessly opened the door and began to sweep the apartment. Noticing movement coming around the corner, he aimed his gun.

"Oh." Audrey startled as she saw Ressler with his gun pointed at her.

Ressler immediately holstered his weapon and walked towards her. "You leave the door open?"

"Yeah. I- I told you I was gonna bring my stuff by. I just didn't want to keep locking and unlocking the door." Audrey said nervously, setting her clothes down on the settee.
"Were you downstairs?" He questioned as he drew the curtains back to look out the window.

"Y–yeah."

"I parked around back." Ressler said gruffly, gently taking her by the crook of her elbow and leading her towards the door.

"Why? What's wrong?"

"I'll tell you in the car."

"Don, what's wrong?" She asked more forcefully.

Ressler blew air out of his nose, pausing for a moment. "Pete Maguire is dead. Come on."

\\\\

He hadn't washed his hands. Her blood was still…he hadn't washed his hands. "You can't sideline me." Ressler growled, unable to take look up from his hands as he sat in Cooper's office.

"We'll find Tanida. Doesn't matter how long it takes. But we have to do it the right way, follow procedure."

"You really expect me to care about procedure?" Ressler spat, finally looking up at Cooper. All he felt was rage as the image of Audrey dying in his arms replayed over and over again in his head.

"Of course not." Cooper placated, sitting in the chair next to Ressler. "I can't imagine what you're going through. I wouldn't dare. But don't compromise yourself. You're a good agent. A good man."

"I have to do something." Ressler said angrily.

"You'll grieve. And while you do, we'll track Tanida down, and we'll make sure he gets his due. You have my word on that. I'll have a car take you home."

\\\\

Ressler groaned as he slouched on the couch in his now retired ex-partner Bobby's wood paneled living room. "I went through every C.I., every source I had when I was running that task force. I got nothing."

"What about Tensei, the brother?" Bobby asked, perched on the edge of his chair as he drank his beer.

"I reached out to a friend of mine at the D.E.A. He's got no base of operation, no regular haunts, no hot spots. This guy's a ghost." Ressler shook his head, rubbing his hand along the top of his head in frustration.

Bobby looked at Ressler, pity softening his eyes. "Look, Don– Don, we don't – we can- we can do this later."

"No, we do it now." Ressler stated, his voice hard. "Somebody out there knows something."

"Well, I'll tell you who knows." Bobby said, taking another sip of his drink.

Ressler paused for a moment before his confusion suddenly cleared. "Reddington?"
"They worked together, Donny. Reddington understands how this world works. What I wouldn't give to get him alone in a room for just five minutes."

/

Red sighed as he climbed into the passenger seat of the Cowboy's car. "She still in town?"

The Cowboy looked at him askance. "No. She's at the corn palace in Mitchell, South Dakota." He rumbled sarcastically.

Red pursed his lips, unamused. "Bring her to me."

"I thought you wanted to see how this played out."

This time it was red's turn to look askance at the Cowboy. He didn't like to be questioned. "It has."

"Well, you want me to bring her in, there's gonna be a fee, and it's gonna cost you double."

Red leaned back as if to get a better view of the other man. "Oh? Why is that?"

"Cause I don't like you." A small grin adorned the Cowboy's face. "And that hat makes your head look funny."

Red chuckled, shaking his head. "The pot meets the kettle at last." He murmured before growing serious. "Bring me the girl." He stated, climbing back out of the car.

/

Red stood on the road and Dembe leaned against the hood of the Mercedes, both watching as Ressler pulled up in his SUV.

"Searching in the desert for a drop of vengeance to slake an unquenchable thirst is a lonely walk, my friend." Red stated as Ressler slammed his door closed and walked towards him.

"Tanida's close. I can burn the whole neighborhood down, or you can tell me where he is." Ressler stated tensely.

Red nodded slowly, turned on his heel and walked towards the bank of the river, watching his step as he trudged through the ice crusted snow. A moment later, he heard the loud crunch which signaled that Agent Ressler was following behind him.

"Donald, I understand how you feel." Red finally said as they reached the bank, standing side-by-side as they gazed out at the frigid river. "Beneath the iron-and-rust exterior beats the heart of a man swimming in immeasurable grief. I am truly sorry about Audrey." Red looked over at Ressler. "There are few that understand love and loss more than I."

Ressler nodded slowly, attempting to smile his thanks though all that appeared was a grimace. "Well, I'm glad you understand. Where is he?"

Red sighed. "Let me tell you something that someone much wiser than I told me at a similar point in my life. Go home. Turn back from this and go home. It may seem like the hardest thing in the world, but it is profoundly easier than what you're contemplating."

"I'm not turning back."

Red nodded, resigned. "That's pretty much what I said. "Red turned to look out at the river once
more. "In your dust–up with Tanida, were there any survivors?"

"Yes." Ressler said hesitantly, clearly unsure of the line of questioning.

"Injuries?"

"Yeah. Why?"

Red nodded and resigned himself to getting an earful from Lizzie later for this. "There's a house in Columbia Heights doubles as an underground hospital. May be worth a visit." Within moments, Ressler was speeding across the snow, heading towards his SUV.

"Agent Ressler!" Red called out, waiting for Ressler to turn around before he continued. "Once you cross over, there are things in the darkness that can keep your heart from ever feeling the light again."

"All I feel is hate." Ressler growled before climbing into his vehicle.

"Good. You're gonna need it." Red murmured to himself. Sighing, he gazed once more at the river before bending down. He quickly formed a snowball in his hands and then threw it with all his might into the river. Because why the hell not?

/\\\/

Bobby and Ressler exploded down the stairs, into the basement where a Japanese man and woman were stitching up a man who lay prone on the makeshift operating table.

"FBI! Everybody on the ground! You! Show me your hands! Show me your hands! Get over there! Go!" Bobby yelled as they entered, guns raised.

Ressler walked up to the man on the table and held his gun to his head. "You remember me? 'Cause I haven't forgotten you. Let's make this quick. Where's Tanida?" The man shook his head desperately. "Where is he?!" Ressler yelled before shooting the man in the leg. He cried out loudly, clutching his leg and writhing in agony.

"Shh. Where's Tanida? No, no, no, no! English!" He yelled when the man attempted to speak in Japanese.

"22nd and 5th, blue door! It's a club. Please you didn't hear it from me."

/\\\/

"Metro P.D. got called in on an 808. They were told two men presented as FBI." Lizzie announced as she bustled into the war room.

"Ressler and Jonica." Meera sighed. "Any idea how they slipped their protective detail?"

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "He's not answering his cell."

"How did they know to come here? MPD, with full resources of the FBI we didn't even know this place existed."

Lizzie pursed her lips, taking a deep breath. "You and I both know how they got here."

/\\\
"No, I understand, but I don't care about the Prince … No, no, no, no, no The 22nd … That was our agreement … Christina, I don't care about production issues. Please just figure it out by the 22nd." Red's voice echoed from the car, his window slightly rolled down as they idled in the middle of a deserted parking lot.

Lizzie sighed as she climbed into the backseat with Red. "Ressler where is he? I know he came to you. I know you told him about that hospital."

Red pursed his lips and looked away. "Agent Ressler came to me for assistance, which I provided."

"You sent him after Tanida." Lizzie stated harshly.

"No. I provided a bit of direction in an otherwise blind pursuit." Red reasoned.

"He's not like you. He can't just murder someone in cold blood and come out of it okay on the other end!" Lizzie yelled.

Red's lips thinned, his hurt apparent in the creases around his eyes. "Nobody can murder someone in cold blood and come out okay on the other end." He murmured.

Lizzie huffed, not in a very apologetic mood at the moment. "We need your help. We have to find Tanida before Ressler does. We've looked through his financials, his prison contacts, the brother, who –"

"Tensei?"

"The reborn."

"He's dead." Red murmured.

"What do you mean, he's dead? Aiko Tanida is running his brother's empire."

Red shook his head, exasperated at the F.B.I.'s appalling lack of intel. "Aiko Tanida died the day his brother was captured by Ressler's task force. Anyone who tells you otherwise doesn't know the difference between a water buffalo and a musk ox."

\\\\

Ressler and Bobby walked into the club and right up to where Tanida and two of his men sat. Neither hesitated before shooting the men, one for Ressler, one for Bobby. "Mako Tanida! Agent Donald Ressler. Let's go for a drive."

\\\\

Lizzie hastened into the war room, unwrapping her scarf from her neck as she talked. "Reddington says Aiko Tanida's dead; died the same night his brother was apprehended by Ressler's task force."

Meera shook her head. "No, we have documented proof he escaped, evidence from then –"

"It was falsified." Lizzie asserted. "We need to review what happened that night. Think about it – no one's seen or heard from the guy in four years. Our last known photograph is older than that. Aiko Tanida's not hiding. He's dead. We need to review the case files. Someone else is running Tanida's business."

\\\\
Meera slid a file across the table to Cooper. "This is the incident report from the NPA in Japan."

"What am I looking for?" Cooper asked, scanning the document.

"Most of the details support our own investigation. The vehicle carrying Aiko Tanida was ambushed. Only the driver's body was found."

"Most of the details?" Lizzie asked, picking up on Meera's qualifier. "What did we miss?"

"Well, there was somebody else in the car. The NPA report makes a reference to an American federal agent accompanying the transport vehicle."

"What federal agent?" Cooper asked.

Lizzie gasped as it all fell into place. "Bobby Jonica. Jonica was on the task force. He had intimate knowledge of Tanida's enterprise. He knew everything key players, trade routes, distribution hookups. And he was able to avoid detection by making us believe Aiko Tanida was still alive. Jonica is Tensei."

\///\///

Bobby looked over at Ressler as he drove. Ressler sat in the passenger seat while they had Tanida cuffed to the overhead handrail in the backseat. "Hey. You okay? Hey, Donny, we're doing the right thing here."

"How long did it take for your girlfriend to bleed out? You must be filled with rage." Tanida asked Ressler silkily.

"You have no idea." Ressler growled.

"Maybe I do."

"Hey, just keep it to yourself back there, huh?" Bobby yelled, looking at Tanida in the rearview mirror.

"Do you remember the night we met?" Tanida directed his question at Ressler. "The arrest, taking away me and my brother. That was the last I saw of him. The last anyone saw of him."

"That's a very sad story." Bobby sounded anything but sympathetic. "Don't listen to him, Donny. Hey, shut up back there."

"Raimo and Maguire – I am satisfied they knew nothing That leaves the two of you. You think I did all this because you arrested me?"

"I said shut up back there!" Bobby yelled, his face becoming splotchy and red.

"You were doing your job." Tanida leaned forward and murmured at Ressler. "I respected that. What I do not respect is that you killed my brother."

"Just shut your mouth!" Bobby yelled.

"Took my business."

"Bobby, what is he talking —"

Bobby turned in his seat to yell at Tanida. "Not one more word out of you!"
"Bobby, talk to me. Talk to me." Ressler pleaded, looking between Tanida and Bobby.

"Never mind him, Don. Don't listen to him."

"He's gonna kill both of us!" Tanida yelled.

"Shut up!" Bobby screamed, pulling out his gun and firing blindly into the back seat, hitting Tanida.

Ressler reached over the center console and grabbed for Bobby's gun.

"Donny, let go!"

They struggled for the gun. Ressler punched Bobby where ever he could reach. In his attempt to shake Ressler off of him, Bobby turned the steering wheel.

--------

Ressler came to, his head resting against the window and the world felt like it was tilted. Opening his eyes, he groaned at the brightness. The world hadn't tilted, just the car. He realized as he looked up at the driver's side door which was hanging open. Bobby had run. Sparing a glance for Tanida who was still cuffed in the backseat and appeared to be knocked out, Ressler quickly climbed out of the SUV.

Following the trail of staggering steps that led from the vehicle, Ressler quickly caught up to Bobby as he leaned against a fallen tree, clutching his arm which hung at a weird angle.

"Don't move, brother. Don't even breathe." Ressler spoke through clenched teeth as he aimed his gun at Bobby's head.

--------

"He picked up Tanida. After that, nothing. We found his cell in his apartment. The GPS in his car has been deactivated. He's off the grid." Lizzie combed her fingers through her hair.

Cooper sighed before his eyes lit in realization. "Prince George's county. Ressler has a place there. It's where he was going with Audrey. If he wants to be alone – Get there now."

--------

"What are you doing, Donny? Come on." Bobby pleaded as he leaned against the fallen tree. "Doesn't have to be like this. You got to understand me, Donny. I'm chasing scumbags all around the world, making millions of dollars. Come on, Donny. This is me. What are you telling me — the boy scout's gonna kill his best friend?"

"Best friend." Ressler spat, keeping the gun aimed at Bobby. "Couple months back, I was in this hospital. I'd been shot. Sitting in there for days, all alone. And Audrey just pops into my head. Couldn't have been more than an hour later, she walks in. It's like the universe tilted and brought her to me, like it was fated to happen. But It wasn't fate. You know why? Reddington. I can tell you this because you're gonna die. I work with Reddington. Believe it or not, I was shot protecting him. That's why I was in that hospital. It's because of Reddington that Audrey came back into my life. He's why I got three more months with her." Ressler voice caught. "And because of you she's gone. My greatest enemy brought her back to me, and my best friend took her away!" He screamed.
Bobby shook his head desperately. "No, no. Donny, you're wrong. I didn't kill Audrey. Tanida did." Ressler took a step towards Bobby, his finger moving incrementally closer to the trigger. "Don't!" Bobby cried.

"No, you brought this down on us, on Pete and on Sam. You're gonna do the honorable thing." Ressler threw a Tanto – the same weapon that Tanida forced Raimo to gut himself with – at Bobby. "Or I'll kill you myself."

\///\///

Lizzie jumped out of the SUV before it came to a complete stop and ran to the overturned SUV. Peering inside and finding it empty, she straightened back up and looked at Meera and the other agents.

"Call an ambulance. Set a perimeter." She ordered.

\///\///

"Pick it up." Ressler ordered quietly.

"That's crazy. I'm not gonna do this. What are you crazy?" Bobby questioned, aghast.

"Pick it up!" Ressler shouted.

"I'm not gonna do it, Donny! You're gonna have to shoot me first! Come on! What are you, crazy?!"

"Pick up the damn knife."

"No."

"Ressler, no!" Lizzie walked towards them, taking a wide berth so that Ressler could see her out of his periphery.

"They're all dead, Liz. Audrey's gone." Ressler said, emotionless.

Lizzie shook her head, her arms shaking as she pointed her gun at her partner. "This isn't the way. Listen to me if you do this, you're gonna go to jail for the rest of your life."

"Do it, Donny. Do it. Go ahead, Donny. Donny, pull the trigger." Bobby suddenly began to goad Ressler.

"Don't listen to him." Lizzie ordered.

"You know what they'll do to me in prison, Donny. A dirty cop – I can't do that, Donny."

"Come on. Pick it up!" Ressler screamed, pointing his gun at the Tanto blade and back up at Bobby.

"Put down the gun, Ressler!"

"Come on. Pull the trigger." Bobby pleaded.

"Pick it up! Do it! Pick it up." Ressler cried, desperation cracking in his voice.

"Pull the trigger, Donny."
"Don't listen to him." Lizzie pleaded with her partner, lowering her gun.

"She's dead because of me, Donny! Do it! Pull the trigger!"

"Pick it up! Pick it up." Ressler began to shoot, emptying his mag into the tree trunk right next to Bobby's head.

Ressler stared at his ex-Partner despondently as Lizzie walked up to him, gently prying the gun out of his hand.

"Donny, come on. Donny I'm sorry, Donny. Donny." Ressler turned his back on Bobby, only to turn back around at the sound of Bobby unsheathing the blade and watched as the man plunged the blade into his own stomach, falling to the ground.

Lizzie and Ressler walked back to the road in silence, the rest of the agents giving them a wide berth for the sake of privacy. When they reached the overturned vehicle, Ressler climbed in. When he found the handcuffs lying on the floor, he threw them angrily into the trunk and climbed back out.

He stood outside of the SUV as agents hosed it down with fire extinguishers, his hands on his hips as he breathed heavily.

"Ress..." Lizzie murmured, walking up to him and laying her hand on his arm. Ressler batted her hand away and took a few steps away, running his hands along his scalp, mussing his hair.

"Ressler." Lizzie said sharply. At her tone, Ressler turned to face her only to let out a small "oomph" as she collided with him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Unsure what to do for a moment, Ressler let her cling to him, his arms outstretched beside him, until his brain finally caught up to what was happening. Slowly, his arms wrapped around her waist and his head fell to her shoulder as he took a shuddering breath.

"It's going to be alright, Don. I promise." She murmured ignoring the cold tracks of tears on her neck.

\\\\

Red sat down in the seats at the very center of the theater, sighing as he sat back against the uncomfortable chair.

"The cowboy, have you found him?" He asked quietly as he felt Dembe's presence at his back, in the row behind them.

"No." Dembe's voice rumbled softly.

"The girl?"

"Nothing. Both of them are gone." Dembe replied as he sat in the seat directly behind Red.

Red winced, his face tight with worry until he heard the doors to the theater quickly open and shut. Smiling softly, he looked up as Lizzie walked down the aisle and sat down beside him.

Lizzie smiled softly back as she shrugged off her coat and hung it over the seat in front of her.

Just as she was going to ask why they were here, the music began to play and the curtains opened. Her dad immediately became focused on the performance as the dancers performed the
choreography for Swan Lake. Glancing back at Dembe in question, Lizzie received a small shake of the head. Looking back at her dad, she could see his face, in shadow from the spotlight yet his eyes glistened wetly.

Looking down at his lap, Lizzie bit her lip at the brochure he had clutched in his hands. It was the same ballet, dated 1987. And suddenly it clicked.

"Oh Dad." Lizzie murmured, lacing her arm through his and resting her head on his shoulder.

/\\\\

"Thank you." Lizzie said quietly as Red and Dembe drove her back to her apartment.

"For what, Sweetheart?" Red asked quietly. He'd been rather subdued all evening.

"For sharing that part of her with me." She murmured, reaching across the bench seat and squeezing his hand.

"Lizzie, I haven't purposefully –"

"No Dad, I know. I know it's really difficult to talk about her. I understand. Which is why I'm thanking you for tonight. I know it couldn't be easy to share." She explained gently, grasping his hand tighter and smiling as he squeezed hers.

"You deserve to know her too." He murmured, his gaze shifting out the window beside him.

/\\\\

Ressler groaned as he sat up from his couch, setting his beer down on the coffee table. "I'm coming!" He yelled as whoever it was continued to knock. Opening the door, he was surprised to find Reddington's bodyguard, Dembe, standing there with an ornate box in his hands. "From Mr. Reddington." The tall dark-skinned man murmured, handing the box to Ressler before turning and walking away quickly. Ressler shrugged and closed the door, placing the box on the hallway table. Carefully removing the note that was taped to the top of the box, he opened it.

Donald, I want you to know that I do understand how you feel.
There is nothing that can take the pain away.
But eventually, you will find a way to live with it.
There will be nightmares.
And every day, when you wake up, it will be the first thing you think about.
Until one day It will be the second thing."

—R

Ressler carefully set the note aside, unable to pretend, even to himself, that he was touched by Reddington's thoughtfulness. Ressler hesitated before lifting the latch on the box and slowly opening the lid. Jumping back a bit, Ressler cursed. It was a head. It was Mako Tanida's head. Way to ruin the moment, asshole. Ressler thought to himself as he stared down at the box.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I am... highly unsatisfied with this chapter. But I hope that that is just me nitpicking and that ya'll enjoy it!

Lizzie stood in front of the antique full-length mirror in the corner of her bedroom in her bra and panties, shifting on her feet to get different views of her stomach. As she stood straight, the change was hardly noticeable. But if she turned to the side, there it was. A small bump centered under her belly button. Smoothing a hand over the gentle curve, she smiled softly to herself. She could still hide it from the rest of the world with a loose fitting shirt but it was there. Her little baby.

Spinning on her feet, Lizzie walked over to her bedside table, glancing at the clock as she picked up her phone, she realized she was running a bit late.

"Hello?" She answered.

"Lizzie."

"What the hell are you doing calling me?" Fear seized Lizzie and she crept over to her window, lifting up the curtain just enough to peer out.

"I need to talk to you. Can we meet?"

"You have got to be kidding me, Tom. No." She scoffed.

"I'm trying to help you. I have information about the person who hired me. Please." Tom pleaded with her.

Lizzie shifted on her feet and walked over to her bed, flumping heavily onto it. "Fine."

"Thank you!" He effused. "Thank you. When can we meet?"

"I don't know. I'm about to get another case. Can I reach you at this number?"

They worked out the details quickly and she hung up without so much as a 'good day.' Her dad was going to kill her for this. But he had known exactly which button to push. The need for information was Lizzie's kryptonite.

"Well baby, apparently he-who-is-nameless isn't as gone as I had hoped." She grumped.

\///\///

Lizzie walked into the little workshop in the backyard of Red's safe house and peered around, disconcerted at the sight of her dad tinkering. Red Reddington was tinkering. He sat at a work bench with a bright overhead lamp shining down as he concentrated on what he was doing.

"You're late." He observed quietly as he used one of those tiny screwdriver things – like those ones you could use to tighten your glasses – on two small parts.
"Sorry. Something came up."

Red looked up from what he was doing without moving his head. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah, fine." Lizzie stated, having already decided not to tell Red about Tom's call until after she'd met with him. He'd only tell her not to go. "What is all this?"

Red shrugged as he picked up another little piece, lined up the holes, and began screwing a small bolt in by hand, just to get it started before picking up the little tool again. "Just a little restoration."

Lizzie snorted. "Of what? The timing mechanism for an explosive device?" She teased, reaching to pick up one of the pieces.

"Ah, ah, ah, ah!" Red warned her off, slapping her hand.

Lizzie laughed as Red smiled, both amused at their own antics. "Should I be worried?"

"Yes. But not about this." Red sighed as he stood up from his work bench and walked over to a side table. Picking up a newspaper, he turned back towards Lizzie and handed it to her.

"What am I looking at?" Lizzie asked, her gaze stuttering across the first page.

Red pointed at the article he wanted her to read. "A car accident. Killed the driver, Nathan Platt."

Lizzie looked at him, her brow twisted in confusion as she held the paper loosely in her hand.

"Why am I looking at it?"

"Because it was no accident. The crash was engineered by a notorious cyber criminal known only as Ivan." Red answered solemnly.

"Please." She scoffed. "And you know this how?"

Red pursed his lips in obvious distaste for her flippant tone. "I've had some experience with the man. He stole from me. His brother and I spent a delightful evening sharing stories over a plate of meat jelly and half a gallon of vodka. All the while, Ivan had his hand in my wallet."

Lizzie rolled her eyes, tossing the paper back onto the table. "My job isn't to settle your grudges, Dad. So I'm gonna need a little more than your gut instinct that Ivan was involved."

Red smirked, having figured that would be her answer. "How about a confession? Ivan took credit for the hit in some deep, dark recess of the internet-- a place only inhabited by scary people and reckless teenagers. A place where curiosity inevitably kills the cat."

"So, Ivan ran some guy off the road. Or are you thinking it's something a little more sophisticated?" Lizzie questioned, her interest finally piqued.

"Given his technological skills, he wouldn't even need to get his hands dirty. Ivan's had a very long career-- Russian markets, selling off government secrets, disrupting Siberian pipelines."

"It sounds like his beef's with Moscow." Lizzie countered.

Red nodded his head, in complete agreement. "This is the first time Ivan's ever struck on US soil, a fact that should have you all very concerned, because whatever he has planned, this is only the very beginning."
Lizzie sat at the work bench in the little shed once more, watching him labor away at the various intricate pieces which she still had no idea what they were for. She could see the little pieces but they weren't making up the whole yet. Story of her freaking life.

"So, the federal government has armed a cyber terrorist with the digital equivalent of a nuclear warhead." Red shook his head as he rummaged in his toolbox. "Another fabulous example of your tax dollars at work and yet another reason why I don't pay taxes."

Lizzie had just told him about the FBI's findings about Nathan Platt – mostly that he wasn't a TV repairman but rather an NSA agent working on creating the 'skeleton key,' a computer algorithm that could decimate countries by slicing through any secure network – defense grids, weapons systems, and communications, with the touch of a button. The 'skeleton key' which Ivan had apparently just stolen. Obviously, Red was less than impressed.

"State's reaching out to the Russians, but getting them to cooperate will be one thing, and actually finding this Ivan will be a separate problem altogether." Lizzie stated, ignoring his judgments against the FBI, growing rather used to it and knowing not to take it personally at this point.

Red shook his head and continued tinkering. "Kastrychnitski Rayon. It's in Minsk, Belarus. That's where Ivan is currently."

Lizzie looked at her dad, holding up her hands in shocked annoyance. "Wait, when did you learn this?"

Red shrugged nonchalantly. "I've always known this."

"And it didn't occur to you to say something earlier?" Lizzie's voice raised slightly with consternation.

Red chuckled happily. "You FBI are such blunt instruments. Lizzie, you don't just swoop in and arrest a man like Ivan, because you know what he'll tell you once he's in custody? Nothing."

"I assume you have a better idea?"

"If you want to know what Ivan is up to, you have to get him to share that. Not because he has to, because he wants to." Red stated, smiling at her benignly before lowering his head to work again.

"How do I do that?"

"We create a problem for him and then solve it. And to do that, we need to take a field trip." Red stated, flicking his finger against the small center piece of the mechanism he'd just put together, causing it to spin quickly around the pole holding it in place.

\\\\

Red sat down at the table in the little restaurant in Minsk.

"That seat's taken." The man opposite murmured without looking up from his food.

Red simply smiled over at the little man. "Perhaps the face escapes you. Allow me to refresh your memory. Grand Cayman Bank account number 106574832. It held approximately $5 million, and then, suddenly, it didn't. It was a clever hack. Kudos and all that. But I've come to collect – with interest."

Ivan smirked at him and stood up, gathering his tablet and bag. "Sorry, friend. I have no interest."
"I wouldn't go out there if I were you." Red called after Ivan as he headed for the door.

Ivan swung back around to face Red, his eyes narrowing. "Is that some kind of a threat?"

Red laughed loudly. "Yes, but not from me." He shook his head. "Seems you've stirred up the borscht, Ivan. Murdering that NSA troll got the FBI talking to the FSB. Now you're neck-deep in the beets, Ivan. They've issued an arrest order for you. According to my informant, they're en route here now."

Ivan swore in Russian. "Of course they are." He muttered.

Red grabbed for a small bun on one of the plates at the table where he still sat and took a large bite. "Mmm! This piroshki is delicious. My point – " Red swallowed his bite. "I can secure safe travel for you out of the country – for a price."

"Let me guess, $5 million plus interest?" Ivan questioned as he stood beside the table. "Thank you very much. I'll pass."

They both looked towards the window at the sound of sirens and Red smiled as a police car pulled up to the sidewalk right outside the restaurant.

"Oh, there's my cue. You're on your own, comrade." Red stood up from the table, wiping his mouth with a napkin, before heading towards the back of the restaurant.

"Uh I accept your generous offer." Ivan stuttered as he followed after Red, clutching his tablet to his chest.

"I thought you might have a change of heart. Shall we?" Red swept his hand out in front of him, directing Ivan to go ahead of him into the kitchens.

Once they were surrounded by the bustle of the kitchen staff, Red stopped, holding out his hand which held a piece of paper. "$8 million. I want it transferred to this account."

Ivan looked down at the paper and nodded. "Fine. Let's get out of here." Ivan muttered and attempted to move off again.

Red held him gently by his shirt sleeve and set the paper onto the counter. "Not until I have my payment."

"You can't be serious." Ivan cried. "They're gonna be here any moment."

Red smiled kindly. "Then you'd better type fast."

Ivan groaned but began typing away on his tablet. Within moments, he was turning it so that Red could see it. "Okay. Done."

Red leaned forward and squinted at the screen. "See? Do you find all those little fingerprints on the glass distracting, or does that sort of thing not bother you?"

Ivan rolled his eyes and growled before making his way out of the restaurant, Red trailing after him with a placid smile on his face.

As they exited the back alley behind the restaurant and made towards Red's waiting car, Ressler came running around the corner.

"Stop! Ivan!"
Dembe quickly hustled Ivan into the car as Red took out his gun, took aim, and shot Ressler in the chest. Ressler fell to the ground at the impact as red seeped across his chest, his eyes closed though he could hear the tires squeal as the car made off with Ivan and Red inside.

Meera walked slowly up to him and looked down at him.

Ressler opened one eye and groaned as he sat up. "You think he bought it?"

"Hell, I did." She murmured.

\/
/
/
/
/

Red sat at the small table in his jet, gazing over at Ivan.

"So, tell me, Ivan, what are your intentions?" He asked, taking a sip of his scotch. "I assume you took the Skeleton Key for one of three reasons– some dastardly deed you have planned, something dastardly someone else has planned, or you've lined up a buyer and have no idea what they have planned. I'm curious, what's your price?"

Ivan shrugged, looking out of the window. "Honestly, I haven't given it much thought."

"Don't be coy, Ivan." Red smirked. "Whatever the number, I can likely double it. You could probably use the retirement money right about now."

Ivan shifted in his seat, refusing to look anywhere but out the window.

Red set his tumbler down on the table and sighed. "You have no idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

Ivan finally looked over at Red and shook his head, his shoulders hunched and blushing ashamedly. "The hack in DC, the NSA agent – it wasn't me."

"Then who was it?" Red questioned, his voice hard.

"I don't know, but he's been using my name. Look, my contempt is not for the US. It's always been with Russia. Last thing I need is a Hellfire drone missile up my zadnitsa, right?"

"Then if you didn't do it, who did?"

Ivan shook his head wearily. "Whoever it is, they're very good at covering their tracks. I haven't been able to ID them yet."

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance." Red smiled benignly.

\/
/
/
/
/

"I'm coming!" Lizzie hurried down her stairs at the sound of someone on her stoop, knocking on her door. She and Ressler had made plans to watch some TV and eat takeout while he told her about what happened in Minsk. She skidded to the door in her socked feet, wearing her comfy sweatpants and a t-shirt.

"Hey Ress, did you get the-" Lizzie had opened the door wide and stopped dead when she realized who it was.

There stood Tom with his stupid doe eyes and too large glasses, a shy smile on his face.
"Hi Liz."

"I told you I'd call you with a time and place." She murmured angrily.

"Yea well, I noticed you were home so I decided to take my chances." Tom shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

"Tom, you need to leave, now." Lizzie stated harshly, her eyes skittering around the street. This was why she had bodyguards, so where the hell were they? Where was Ressler for that matter?

As her eyes were searching her neighborhood, Lizzie didn't notice his eyes wandered down to her stomach. She was brought back harshly to the person on her stoop when he grabbed her forearm tightly.

"Are you pregnant?" He whispered in shock, his eyes never leaving her stomach which was covered by her favorite cotton t-shirt which really didn't hide her new bump at all.

"That's none of your business." She stated, her chin held high, refusing to show Tom her fear as she tried to wrench her arm away from him only for him to tighten his hold on her.

"Lizzie, this ch—"

"Hey! Get the hell away from her!" Lizzie looked up in relief to see Ressler come around the corner, hurrying towards them, a large brown paper bag in one hand.

Tom let go of her arm and backed down the stairs, his hands up.

"Fine. Fine." He looked over at Lizzie. "This isn't over." Tom smirked before heading off, jogging across the street.

"You alright?" Ressler questioned worriedly as he made his way up her stoop.

Lizzie wrapped her arms around his neck once he was close enough. "Yea…yea, uh, thanks." She murmured wetly.

Ressler awkwardly held the bag out to the side as he wrapped his other arm around her waist.

"Hey, you'll be alright. I've got your back." He murmured hesitantly.

Lizzie laughed, noticing his discomfiture and took a step back. "Yea. Thanks Ress. Uh…come in! Let's eat. The spud is hungry." Lizzie tried to lighten the mood with the nickname they'd given her baby as she ushered him inside. She was determined not to let Tom ruin her evening.

\\\\

Later that night, once Ressler had left, Lizzie dialed the number she'd memorized a couple months before.

"Ms. Keen." The gruff voice on the other side answered.

"Baz? Were you guys…did you…"

"We saw, Ms. Keen. I'm sorry we didn't interfere. We've got clear directions from Mr. Reddington though, Ma'am. We have to stay out of sight unless absolutely necessary. We were about to step in when we noticed Mr. Ressler."

"Oh uh…okay. That makes sense."
"I'm sorry again, Ma'am. Are you alright?"

"Yea, no. I'm fine. Don't worry. It's alright."

"Alright Ma'am."

"Alright...uh, would it be futile to ask you not to tell my dad about this?" She asked, embarrassed.

"Goodnight, Ma'am." Baz chuckled before hanging up.

Lizzie sat down at the workbench and immediately put her head in her hands. She was beginning to understand her father's viewpoint. The National Security Agency had been duped by a 17-year-old kid for Christ's sake and to make matters worse, he'd escaped right out from under her and Ressler.

Red seemed to follow her train of thought as he chuckled under his breath. "So, how exactly does a 17-year-old kid slip through your fingers?" He questioned as he fit two pieces together.

Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair as she lifted her head up. "He hacked the school's security system and activated the automated evac protocols." She murmured embarrassedly as she watched her dad work.

"If you ever find him, ask him if he'd like to earn some extra money." He teased.

"We'll find him. Forensics is processing his house, his computer, e-mails, cell records."

"Well, it sounds like you have everything well under control, which begs the question, why are you here?"

Lizzie shifts in her seat, biting her lip. Truthfully, she felt guilty about not telling him about Tom's little visit...or his phone call. But she still needed his information. So, she just had to swallow her guilt and remain silent.

When Lizzie remained silent, Red sighed and pointed to a piece that had somehow made its way to the corner of the work table. "Hand me that piece right there." He murmured before gesturing to the corner by the door where Dembe stood. "Dembe, come over here. We'll turn this into a family project for the night."

"Harrison was using some serious layers of encryption on his computer, but I was able to find a hidden partition filled with terabytes of data." Aram stated to the room at large as the team stood around his desk in the war room.

"Who is she?" Cooper questioned as she looked at a collage of pictures of a pretty young girl with long brown hair. All of these pictures had been hidden away on Harrison Lee's hard drive.

"Her name's Abby Fisher."

"Lizzie's Abby Fisher." Aram answered.

"Yes," Aram nodded, "she's the daughter of David Fisher, lead engineer of the Skeleton Key program. And check this out – she's enrolled at the same high school as Harrison. The photos look like they were taken from a webcam. He breached her computer, surreptitiously watched her, and it gets worse. He hacked into her cell, e-mail, texts. Hell, he even got into her mp3 collection. He
chronicles her every move. He's stalking her."

Cooper's lips thinned before he sighed. "Get David on the phone."

\\\\

Lizzie looked around the war room, the cuts on her cheek from when she'd shot out the window of the moving train and jumped in were starting to itch as they scabbed over and she knew she was going to have lots of aches and pains tomorrow.

"Good work today." Ressler said softly, smiling as he walked up to her.

"Yeah." Lizzie smiled in return. "You too. Hey, you hungry?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll just head home." Ressler said, shaking his head softly.

Lizzie raised her brow in concern as she brought a hand up and squeezed Ressler's bicep in comfort. "You sure?"

Ressler smiled reassuringly. "Lizzie, I'll be fine. See you tomorrow."

Lizzie stared at him for a moment, before nodding when she was convinced he would, in fact, be okay. "See you tomorrow then." She murmured.

\\\\

God, she'd almost died today. It was just hitting her as she walked through the park. There was still enough light out for there to be a decent amount of people milling around.

She had almost died today and all she wanted to do was curl up in a blanket burrito and tell the Spud it was going to be okay, that they were going to get through this. But no. Instead she was out in this stupid park, waiting for stupid Tom under this stupid street lamp. She really hated her quest for information sometimes.

Speak of the devil, Lizzie sucked in a breath and let it out slowly when she saw Tom walking towards her with his trademark smile.

"So you said you had information for me. What is it?" She said in greeting.

"Are we just not going to discuss what I found out yesterday?" Tom questioned, his hands in his jeans as he frowned at her bluntness.

"No."

"Seriously?"

"It's none of your business. You lost any right to know about… this… when you married me to spy on me."

"I was spying on you according to Daddy Reddington's orders." He whipped back angrily.

Lizzie snorted, rolling her eyes. "If you were following orders, I would have never known what you looked like." She hissed.

"Fine." Tom growled. "You want information? Here it is. My boss sent another one to take my place. She was using an alias, Jolene Parker."
Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. "I've never heard of her."

"You're welcome." He spat.

"What? Tom, explain." Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair in agitation.

"I've hung around because I knew this would happen. The buck doesn't stop with my boss. We were hired for this job. I knew he'd just send someone else. So I watched. He even had her using the same warehouse I used as a sort of home base." He stated, calming down slowly as he spoke. Tom withdrew one of his hands from his pocket and handed her a scrap of paper. "That's the address."

"What happened to her then? This Jolene Parker?" Lizzie asked as she hesitantly took the paper and put it in her pocket before folding her arms over her chest.

"I killed her." He stated simply.

Lizzie's eyes widened and she took a step back. "What?" She asked breathlessly.

Tom shook his head, laughing softly. "What did you think, Lizzie? That I would stick around and just watch them infiltrate your life?"

"I thought maybe you were coming to tell me so that I could handle it…so the FBI could handle it!" Lizzie noticed her voice was raised and quickly tried to quiet down, looking around them hesitantly to see if anyone noticed. "Not come to me after the fact and admit to murder!"

"It needed taken care of, so I took care of it." Tom stated, shrugging his shoulders. "But I wanted to warn you that she won't be the last one. My boss doesn't know what happened. He probably assumes I went rogue. So right now, they're going to have two missions, find out what happened to me, and then continue where I left off."

Lizzie counted to ten as she tried to come to terms with how blasé Tom seemed to be about killing someone. She'd deal with the fact that he had apparently done it to protect her later. What the hell was it with the men in her life thinking it was perfectly okay to kill people to protect her?

"Why hand me the address then?" She questioned, trying to shift the conversation to a different track.

"So you can know what we know. Hopefully that will help you stay ahead of the game." Tom said quietly and Lizzie could only nod, swallowing heavily.

An awkward pause took root between them and they both shifted on their feet, suddenly uncomfortable.

"You know uh… there's a second option." Tom murmured quietly.

"Oh? What's that?" She asked.

"You could come with me. The two of us and-" He looked down, nodding towards her stomach with a small grin on his face. "The baby. We could get away from all this." He said softly.

Lizzie laughed harshly, shaking her head. "That's never going to happen." She stated before turning around and walking away.

\\\"
"I'm sorry." Lizzie murmured as soon as he opened the door to his safe house. She was fairly sure he had no idea what she was apologizing for but the way he smiled sadly at her made her doubt how sure she was.

"Come in." Red said softly, moving to the side so that she could enter the house.

They quickly made their way into the living room and sat on the sofa.

"What's this?" Lizzie asked, pointing to the large wooden box that sat on the coffee table.

"It's a 1940s Sorrento music box." His gravelly voice answered as he opened it up, winding it a couple times in order to make it play. As the music began to play, Lizzie looked over at her dad in shock as her eyes became wet.

"I know this song." She whispered brokenly. "When I was a little girl, I had these terrible nightmares. I remembered flashes of- of fire and smoke. God, so much smoke." Lizzie closed her eyes against the images that began to play in her mind's eye. "Pop would lay in bed with me and hold me in his arms and hum that song. He'd tell me I was safe – that everything was gonna be okay." She looked over at her dad in shock, smiling adoringly as tears rolled down her cheek. "You spent days building that damn thing. You knew about Tom coming back. You knew. And you wanted me to know that everything is going to be okay." As she spoke, Lizzie leaned towards him and he readily took her in his arms.

"You're going to be okay. You're safe." He murmured, resting his head against hers and kissing her hair, humming along softly to the Anniversary Waltz as he soothingly rocked back and forth.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

So this takes place during the Milton Bobbit episode but there really isn't much of the "Milton Bobbit" bits of the episode because, well, for the most part (except for the scene at the end) it doesn't further the plot. At all. Though one or two of the Bobbit scenes will be from Ressler's POV again as it was mostly he and Meera doing this investigation. Also, I can't type Milton Bobbit without giggling. Heh. Bobbit. He should have been a short little guy. Then we could call him Bobbit the Hobbit.

Lizzie knocked on the doorjamb of Cooper's opened door, peaking her head in with a shy smile. "Can I talk to you for a moment, Sir?"

Cooper looked up from his computer with a soft smile and took his glasses off his face, setting them down on his desk as he leaned back in his chair. "Of course, Agent Keen. Close the door, sit down." He directed gently.

Doing as he said, Lizzie sighed as she sat down, rubbing her scar anxiously.

"Something on your mind, Keen?" Cooper questioned when Lizzie was unforthcoming.

"Um…yEA…yes. Sorry Sir." Lizzie took a steadying breath. "Sir, I may need to start stepping back from going into the field… at least into potentially dangerous situations."

Cooper's brow raised as he scratched at his 5 o'clock shadow. "Oh? Why is that?"

Lizzie bit her lip, resisting the urge to touch her stomach. "I'm pregnant, sir." She said with a small smile. "I'm not sure how much longer I'll be able to handle runaway subway trains." She joked, laughing nervously.

Cooper chuckled and nodded. "Indeed not, Agent Keen. I understand. Will you still be able to work with Reddington?"

"Yes, of course. I can still act as liaison as well as work up profiles as needed. And as I said, I can still go out into the field – interviews and such. I'm just not sure I can actually do the chasing part. What happened with Harrison Lee… that was too close for comfort, Sir." She murmured, unable to resist the urge to stroke her stomach any longer.

Cooper smiled softly at her, nodded and stood up, prompting Lizzie to do the same. "I understand." He said rounding his desk. "And I believe congratulations are in order." Cooper held out his hand to shake and, laughing lightly, Lizzie took it.

"Thank you, Sir."

\:\:\\\:

Lizzie hopped out of her SUV and closed the door. Looking both ways, she hurried across the
street and smiled as Red and Dembe got out of their silver Mercedes. Walking forward, she gave both a quick hug and stood back.

"So this is it, 1896 La Vista Street?" Lizzie asked, looking at the solid metal door.

"Yes, apparently so. Dembe has already done us the great service of picking the lock. Shall we?" Red swept his hand out as if to say 'Ladies first.'

Lizzie smirked as Dembe held the door open for her and walked into the building, stopping short at the sight that greeted her. There was a sleek black BMW parked off to the side, the garage door at the back of the warehouse locked from the inside with a chain. But that wasn't what made her stop in her tracks. There were metal shelves lining an entire wall, loaded down with weapons of every sort and all the necessary accoutrements – assault rifles, scopes, ammo, grenades, vests, pistols. Everything you could think to possibly need. There were even weapons laying across the large metal table in the center of the room.

Any possible shred of doubt about her husband's guilt was shredded at the arsenal that lay in front of her. He was a cold-blooded killer and there was only enough room in her heart for one of those.

As she came out of her gun-induced stupor, Lizzie could hear the sound of a camera shutter. Turning towards the noise, she found Dembe taking pictures of a giant evidence board with her face as well as Red, Dembe's and her team mates plastered across it.

"They were gathering information about us and the task force." Red murmured from where he stood off to the side, gazing at the pictures. He pointed to a few of the photos which lined the left side of the board. The pictures were mug shots of some of the blacklisters they'd taken down.

"Are they looking for information about the Cabal or trying to find out what we know?"

"That, my dear, is the question of the hour." Red murmured as he surveyed the rest of the room, meandering over to a small desk in the corner of the room. "They may not even have anything to do with the Cabal. It could just be one of my many enemies wanting to get a leg up on me."

Red began rummaging through the desk. "By the way, Lizzie. I feel I should give you fair warning." Lizzie turned to look at him as he straightened to look at her. "I've given your security a new objective. One that I should have put into place when we forced him to leave."

Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Tom will never be within 50 feet of you again."

Lizzie's eyes widened at the implications of what her dad had just said. Her eyes skating over to her brother, she saw that he had stopped what he was doing and was looking at her solemnly before nodding his head, in apparent agreement with Red, and began photographing the rest of the warehouse.

Looking back at her dad, Lizzie ran her thumb over the scar on her wrist. "You can't—"

"Elizabeth, you are well aware of the lengths to which I will go to protect you. will not allow him near you or my grandbaby again." Red said somberly as he walked towards her. "So the next time he asks to meet, I suggest you say no." Red's mouth contorted in a displeased frown as he turned around, walking over to a metal basin.

Lizzie winced at his displeasure. This was the first time he'd commented on her decision and his disappointment cut through her. She hesitantly walked over to stand next to him as he peered down
inside of the basin. Her brow furrowed in confusion when she saw the burnt and charred remains of photographs and papers. "He said he wanted to help us, so that we could know what they know. Why would he burn some of the evidence then?"

Red squatted down next to the basin and carefully sifted through it, some of the charred remains breaking into ash as he disturbed them. "This is most likely information about his employer. As you said, Sweetheart, he said we'd find out what they know about us." He delicately lifted out a small scrap of paper and peered at it. "He never said he'd tell us who hired him in the first place." He stated solemnly as he stood up, showing her the paper in his hand.

Lizzie squinted at the scrap and looked over at her dad in confusion. "Berlin?"

//\//\//

Red walked into the laboratory at the University of Science and Technology in San Salvador. At the sight of the short, portly man, he threw his hands up in the air excitedly. "Cvetko, you rascal. You wouldn't believe how hard it is to find a Bosnian in San Salvador." He cried, wrapping the man in a hug before taking his face in both hands and kissing the sides of his bald head.

"Wish it was harder." Cvetko murmured grumpily.

"Oh, this looks rather ghoulish." Red said placidly as he surveyed the various human remains scattered around the room. "Vlad, I need your help identifying somebody."

Cvetko shook his head before walking over to his microscope. "Can't help." He muttered, looking into the eye piece.

"Of course you can. I have a fingerprint. Got it at a lovely party out in Vegas. Benson ran it, got a name."

Cvetko looked up from the microscope and rolled his eyes. "Benson – there's your problem."

"She says the print belongs to a Craig Keen. Well, Craig Keen is an alias – a very good one at that, complete with a credit rating, school and medical records, passports with a long history – all the trimmings."

"No." Cvetko stated shortly, going back to his observations.

"What do you know about touch DNA?"

"I said no." Cvetko repeated, standing up to go find another slide with different bone fragments.

"I know very little," Red continued, following after Cvetko around the room, "but as I understand it, it's possible to actually lift tissue cells from a fingerprint and run the DNA?"

"Is that right?" Cvetko spun around and his eyes narrowed in anger. "You slept with my wife."

Red smiled placidly, rocking onto the heels of his feet with his hands in his pockets. "How is Fadila?" Vlad grunted, moving passed Red to go back to his microscope. "Vlad, it was a mistake. I can easily blame it on the hashish and the grappa, but the truth is– may I speak freely? You're better off without her. She's fickle. I'm sorry, but this business with the fingerprint– it's important." Red finished plaintively.

Cvetko looked up from his microscope, looking askance at Red. "Do you still have that little villa in Dubrovnik?"
Red's eyes narrowed, unsure. "I do."

"A weekend there with Fadila." Cvetko said excitedly. "She would love it!"

Red shook his head, rolling his eyes despairingly. "I can't understand why you insist on chasing that woman. All right. The villa is yours. And if it doesn't work out with Fadila, I know a ravishing Dane who would adore you. She's slightly cross-eyed and there's something very hypnotic about her gaze."

Lizzie stood at the back of the small storage-space-turned-office that Red had rented out for them. She had one hand wrapped around her torso as the other tapped the capped dry erase marker against her chin as she gazed at the evidence board she'd created which currently included Tom, Gina Zantakos, Jolene Parker, and Victor Fokin.

She quickly spun around towards the door as it slid open, smiling when Red walked through carrying a drink tote and a brown paper bag.

"I come bearing gifts– pimento cheese sandwiches, toasted with the crusts cut off. Eartha Kitt's recipe. It's a fantastic story." He stated grandly as he set the food down next to the lamp on their makeshift desk.

Lizzie's smiled dropped as he sat in the chair, getting straight to business. "Okay, what do you know about Tom?"

Red sighed, sitting back in his chair. "Little more than you. Several years ago, it came to my attention that somebody was meddling in my business. To protect myself and my interests, I inventoried my vulnerabilities."

"Me."

Red nodded slowly. "Among others. Lizzie, I've been monitoring Tom since he entered your life. About a year ago, I discovered that he had purchased three more passports from a trusted forger I use in Warsaw."

"That's it? He bought passports? He inserted himself into my life even though he was already my watcher. Why? Because of you."

"I can only assume that's the case."

Lizzie walked over and sat down in the chair next to Red's and grabbed a sandwich from the bag. "Do you think they were already aware of our connection? Are they aware? They could just think you have some creepy obsession with me."

Red snorted, shaking his head at her little joke. "I do not know, unfortunately. Since there was nothing concrete about our relationship at Tom's little hidey-hole, I can only assume that no, they do not know. That being said, we should act under the assumption that they do know."

Lizzie nodded her head in understanding. Always assume the worst, got it. "So what, you started the Blacklist to stay near, warn Tom off?"

Red smirked as he reached his own hand into the bag. "That, and things were shifting with the Cabal so I wanted to be near for that as well."
Lizzie paused just before taking another bite. "Could the two things be related?" She asked nervously.

"The thought has crossed my mind." Red sighed as he unwrapped his sandwich from the paper. "However, I have no evidence to link Tom to the Cabal as of now."

Lizzie nodded slowly. "But that doesn't mean the link isn't there." She murmured.

Red only nodded in affirmation before murmuring a small "Ah!" And reaching into his bag, pulling out a CD case and handed it to Lizzie.

"What's this?"

"Surveillance footage, taken by the people who were hired to watch you and Tom."

"The apple man. You watched them?" Lizzie asked, embarrassedly as she could only imagine what was on there.

"Some. Enough." Red coughed awkwardly. "Perhaps you'll see something that I could not."

"He wanted me to run away with him."

"Things are unraveling for him. He's desperate to keep you close. The people Tom works for are obviously very cautious. They operate slowly from the shadows. I've spent years tracking them, to no avail. Tom has, in their eyes, screwed up royally. We now have a chance to draw them out. However, Things will have to appear normal to Cooper, and the others. Which is why you'll need a case." Red reached back into his bag and pulled out a newspaper which he then handed to Lizzie.

"Yesterday in Brooklyn, a taxi drove into the back of a truck under the 86th Street L Train, killing the driver and his female passenger. It's being reported as an accident, but I suspect, in fact, it may be murder, the work of The Undertaker. He's a broker of death, a man who somehow convinces ordinary people to kill on his behalf. Murder/suicide is his signature. How he recruits, nobody knows, but if this accident is his work, it gives you a rare glimpse into the way he operates and a chance to find him."

\--------------------

Lizzie curled up on her couch with her laptop balanced on the arm rest and clicked play. She set the surveillance footage to fast forward and just watched as her life with Tom flashed across the screen, unwilling to look up as she sat in the same room as so many of the scenes playing across her screen were in. Lizzie watched the footage numbly until her limbs began to ache from being still for such a prolonged period of time.

Soon, she gasped, quickly pausing the footage, rolling it back a few seconds, then pressed play again. Lizzie watched closely as Tom set the floor lamp in the dining room onto the table, removed the bottom and took out a key.

Pausing the video again, Lizzie slowly turned her head towards the dining room and stared at the lamp for a moment. Snapping into action, Lizzie sprang from the couch in a tumble of limbs and slid on her socked feet over to the dining room. Mimicking Tom's actions, Lizzie set the lamp across the table and unscrewed the bottom. As she removed the bottom panel, Lizzie sucked in a breath at the sight of the key still taped to the bottom of the lamp.

\--------------------
Lizzie was in the kitchen, humming along to the radio as she bit into a piece of peanut butter and Nutella toast. Bopping her hips, Lizzie stuck the piece between her teeth and held it there as she turned around to grab her blazer and gasped, dropping her toast to the floor.

"Dammit Dembe!" She yelled, grabbing a paper towel clean up the mess. "You scared me half to death!" Lizzie shouted as Dembe laughed.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth." He murmured, still chuckling. "Are you alright?"

"Oh yea, sure. Laugh at the poor woman as you give her a heart attack right before work. Well, you won't be laughing next time when it induces labor, you prick!" She said, trying to keep her voice angry though she couldn't help but giggle at Dembe's continued laughter.

Shoving her brother, she chucked her hip against his as she stood beside him next to the kitchen counter. "So what's up?"

"Raymond asked me to give you this." Dembe handed her a manila folder, still smiling gently as she took it.

Opening it up, Lizzie's brow furrowed at the picture inside. "Craig? Tom's brother?"

"That is not his real name. Look at the rest."

Christopher Maly. His real name was Christopher Maly.

Lizzie smiled, already forming a new thread on the evidence board in her head. "Thanks Dembe."
Lizzie looked up at him as she spoke and noticed he was looking around the room, at the walls. "What?"

"This paint – what color is it?"

Lizzie laughed under her breath, shaking her head at his preoccupation. "It's called 'Chicago Skyline.'"

Dembe nodded solemnly. "Nice."

Lizzie stood with Ressler, watching the proceedings as the local PD ushered Danny Moss – the man-dying-of-heart-failure-turned-assassin who'd just attempted to kill a Senator – into their squad car. Ressler nodded at Lizzie in silent question and Lizzie nodded back. As they both started to make their way to the SUV, Lizzie's phone rang. Holding up a finger to ask for a moment, Lizzie walked off to the side.

"Keen." She answered.

"How's your case developing, Lizzie?"

"We have one of the assassins in custody. We're taking him in for questioning now."

"Have you figured out how he selects them, the common denominator?"

Lizzie sighed and looked over at her partner, shrugging her shoulders helplessly at his impatient look. "They're all sick. We know from their autopsies they're terminally ill."

"Well, there you have it. You only know these assassins were ill because of their autopsies and
police reports. You know after they're already dead. But somehow, The Undertaker knows before. Find out how he knows that, and you'll find your man."

Lizzie nodded her head even though he couldn't see it.

"Where are we with Craig? Is he still in town?" Red continued in the space of her silence.

"A—as far as I know."

"Good. Find him. Watch him. I think it's time for the three of us to have a little chat."

Lizzie waited until she heard footsteps coming down the other end of the hall. Carefully peeking her head around the corner, she watched as Craig – Christopher – inserted his key card into his door and opened it. Running silently down the hallway, Lizzie shoved the door open just before it closed fully, hitting him in the back of the head as he hadn't moved away in time. Lizzie slammed him up against the wall, punching him in the eye once, twice, before he cottoned on to what was happening.

Craig picked her up, slamming her against the mirror on the adjacent wall, causing her to groan at the impact. Lizzie then cried out as he punched her in the face. Shaking it off, Lizzie punched him in the nose, following it up with a quick elbow on the same spot, sending him sprawling on the floor as the cartilage in his nose snapped.

"Hey, Craig. Can we talk?" Lizzie asked coolly, drawing her weapon.

Lizzie stood over Craig where she had him handcuffed to the sink.

"Who do you work for?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Craig said quietly, shaking his head as blood continued to dribble from his nose.

Lizzie slapped him across the cheek. "Who do you work for?!"

"Please, look. This has got to be some" Craig began to plead and Lizzie grabbed a fistful of his hair before slamming his forehead into the side of the porcelain sink. "— Aah!"

"I know who you are." She said calmly, bashing his head against the sink once more.

"Aah!" He cried out, blinking away the stars.

"I know about the time you did at Wasco. I know about the warrants. I know about you, Christopher Maly."

Craig's eyes twitched up at her then back down at the floor quickly. "I don't know who the hell —" She slammed the side of his head against the sink again.

"Somebody provided you with an identity, a history, embedded you into my life. I want to know who, and I want to know why."

"This is a mistake. You have no idea who you're dealing with." Craig stated, shaking his head and chuckling drily.
"I never did like you." Lizzie said with disdain before standing back up from her crouch before she walked into the other room, answering her phone.

"Ressler, hey, what's up? Yeah. Of course. No. I'll be right there."

Craig laughed again. "You didn't exactly think this through, did you?"

At that moment, a knock came at the door. Lizzie's gaze went to the door and back to Craig, a small smirk crawling across her face.

"Actually I did." She stated before walking down the hall to answer the door. Lizzie murmured a quick greeting to Red and Dembe as she moved aside to let them in.

"Looks like we're a little late to the party." Red deadpanned, looking around at the broken mirror and lamp from the earlier kerfuffle. Turning on the spot in search of Craig, Red smiled benignly as he saw him in the bathroom, cuffed to the L joint of the sink's piping. "You must be the brother-in-law."

"Ressler called. I have to step out. He isn't cooperating." Lizzie spoke up from behind Red before quickly exiting.

Red nodded in understanding, not looking away from Craig even after the door closed signaling that Lizzie had left.

"Oh, hell. Dembe, get the hacksaw. We're gonna have to take him out of here in pieces." At Craig's widening eyes, Red laughed uproariously. "I'm just kidding. We'll get old Christopher to talk. Who's up for a field trip?"

\\/

Red sat beside Craig on a small bench in the center of the gallery. He'd strategically hung Craig's coat between the man's hands, covering his handcuffs from the sight of other patrons as he held a gun pointed at Craig, hidden beneath his own coat.

"Terrifying." Red shook his head as he looked around at the grotesque paper maché dolls and puppets which constituted the exhibit. "You know, this artist got his start with puppets. What is it about puppets? It's the same with clowns. I'll never forget a puppet show I saw when I was 5, maybe 6. Hansel and Gretel."

"Why are we here?" Craig asked impatiently, looking around them.

"Scared me to death." Red continued on as if Craig hadn't spoken. "But it wasn't the witch. It was the oven. Imagine an oven puppet. I don't think I set foot in our kitchen for a month."

"I don't know what you think you're gonna gain from all this, but I'm not gonna talk. I will die before I give you anything." Craig quickly clammed up at the sight of Dembe casually pushing an elderly woman around the exhibit. He seemed to freeze, swallowing loudly. "If you so much as touch my mother – " He whispered angrily.

"God, I miss Bob Ross." Red lamented, once more ignoring Craig. "That television painter with the little squirrel on his shoulder and the happy little trees. Few strokes with a palette knife and an entire mountain range would emerge through the clouds—absolutely mesmerizing." Red shook his head pleasantly before springing up from the bench. "Well, let's go back to the hotel. I think I saw some yogurt pretzels in your mini bar."
Ressler and Meera walked into the offices of the Green Glades Insurance company. They'd finally figured out how the Undertaker had chosen his victim/assassins. They all had life insurance policies through this company.

"So, we're specifically looking for the policy files for a Wahid Davi, a Dee Torres, and a Danny Moss." Ressler told the sales manager as he walked them through the office.

"I looked up those names after you called. And the thing is, we don't have any active files on any of those names."

"When you say these people don't have active files with you, what does that mean? I mean, these people have life insurance policies with you." Meera questioned.

"Well, I mean, if they were dropped, then they would have been purged from the system. Dropped and purged why? Good God. Any number of reasons. Uh, medical conditions, change of lifestyle—it's—it's like a whole formula. I mean, if you guys want to talk actuarial tables, then Milton's your man. Milton Bobbit. He's where all policies go to die." The man chuckled lightly at the obvious inside joke.

"What do you mean 'Go to die?" Ressler queried, his hands on his hips.

"No, it's nothing. It's just we— we like to joke about Milton. He's—he's kind of obsessed with death. He actually volunteers to deliver flowers to the Westport cemetery."

Lizzie entered the hotel room and stopped short at the sight of Dembe and red sitting on the edge of the bed, watching the Three Stooges, both giggling madly. Looking back into the bathroom, Lizzie scoffed at the sight of Craig still sitting there, chained to the sink while these two knuckle heads watched the Three Stooges.

Red held up a finger "Wait." He chuckled, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"What are you doing?" She questioned, her hands outspread beside her.

Red flapped his hand at her. "Shh, shh, shh. Watch – the hat."

"Raise your right hand. Will you get rid of that hat? Raise your right hand." The character on the TV intoned

Red finally stood, still chuckling as he turned off the TV. As he looked over at Lizzie, he quickly dropped his smile. "Unlike someone who shall remain nameless, we waited for you. Shall we get started?"

"I get a phone call. They tell me where to go, and I go." Craig explained.

"Who tells you?" Lizzie questioned from where she stood in front of Craig. Red was perched on the side of the tub and Dembe's hulking frame occupied the bathroom doorway.

Craig shook his head in frustration. "Different people. It's never the same person twice."

"Jolene Parker?"
"I'm telling you that I don't know any names."

"My husband hid a key in the house. What's it for— a safe deposit box? A storage unit?"

Craig chuckled darkly. "It's your husband."

Lizzie bashed his head against the sink. "Tell me about Tom." She demanded.

Craig blinked rapidly, groaning slightly. "I don't know his real name. He's got a brother in Chicago. I've heard him talk about a woman, Niki."

"Niki? Is that some woman he sees?"

"Do you think we sit around and we chat about it?" Craig spat. "There's a reason that his cover is that we're estranged and our parents are dead. There's a reason that there are no people in his life— because none of it is real." His phone began to ring for the third time in 5 minutes. "We were supposed to meet. He wants me to help him cover this whole mess up. He knows where I'm staying. It's only a matter of time before he's here."

Lizzie looked back at Red. "We got to get out of here."

They had moved Craig to the small chair beside the window in his hotel room. Red sat across from him while Lizzie and Dembe stood, hovering.

"Everything's fine." Craig said into his phone.

"Yeah? Then why didn't you pick up?" Tom's voice floated through the room as Craig had put him on speaker.

"There's a situation. I'm handling it. I just need time."

"Time for what?" Tom questioned.

"What are you— my wife, Tom?" Craig snapped. "Listen up. I just need" Craig glanced over at Red who quickly held up two fingers. "—two hours. I'll explain everything then. Just sit tight. Don't panic."

"Easy for you to say. I'm the one who is accountable to Berlin for this mess. I'm coming to your hotel now."

Craig winced at Tom's inadvertent slip and hung up the phone.

"Tell me about Berlin." Red's gravelly voice demanded. "Berlin." He spoke louder as it appeared Craig didn't want to answer.

Craig shook his head. "I can't."

"What's in Berlin? Is the bank in Berlin? Christopher who's in Berlin?" With each question, Craig just shook his head harder until Red sighed, frustrated. "Dembe, we're moving the conversation elsewhere. Wipe down the room."

Dembe quickly nodded and walked into the bathroom.

Red turned towards Lizzie. "Tell me about the building."
"The south elevator has no cameras, empties into the basement. Two doors past the mechanical room lead to the alleyway."

Lizzie stuttered to a stop at the sound of the window breaking. She looked just in time to see Craig's feet as he plummeted to the ground.

Red calmly moved to the window and peered out. "Okay, then." He said, putting on his fedora.

Lizzie's wide eyes moved back and forth from the broken window to her dad. "What now?" Her voice tinged with hysteria. "What are you doing?"

"Putting on my coat." Red deadpanned as he, in fact, shrugged on his coat.

"A man just jumped through the window. There's a body on the sidewalk!" Lizzie cried, pointing to the window just in case Red hadn't noticed.

"Yes. And your husband, the police, and all the king's men will be here soon. If you care to stick around and explain, feel free. But I, for one, will not be in attendance." Red began to head out of the hotel room before stopping short next to the bathroom door. "Dembe, I'll get her downstairs. After you're finished, grab the pretzels."

\\\

Police vehicles quickly swarmed Milton Bobbit's location at the Westport Cemetery, their sirens blaring. Lizzie hopped out of her vehicle and jogged over to where Meera and Ressler stood, safely behind the police line. She watched the scene for a moment as Milton shouted at Dr. Fredrick Osborn – the chair of the Department of Endocrinology at City Memorial who supervised the clinical trial which caused Milton Bobbit's flesh to begin to rot away. Bobbit currently held a gun to Osborn's head and wore a suicide vest just for good measure.

"Negotiator's en route." Lizzie said softly.

"We have snipers in place." Meera updated everyone.

Ressler shook his head. "No."

"He's not gonna let us take him, and the man has a death wish. How do you plan on recovering the hostage?" Lizzie questioned.

Ressler walked around the front of the SUV they'd taken cover behind and began walking up to where Bobbit and Osborn stood.

"What– what are you doing?" Meera stuttered.

"Ressler!" Lizzie called after him.

"Stop! Not– not one more step further. Don't come any closer! I swear to God– you take one more step!" Bobbit aimed his gun at Ressler who held up his hands but continued to move forward.

"Stay calm, Mr. Bobbit. Fredrick Osborn you're under arrest." Ressler stated, walking over to Osborn and quickly cuffing the man.

"What?" Osborn questioned, looking at Ressler like he was out of his mind.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you."
"What is happening?!" Milton cried out as his plan unraveled before him.

"You're under arrest for evidence tampering, for murder in the furtherance of a corrupt criminal enterprise." Ressler spoke to Osborn, ignoring Mr. Bobbit.

"You can't arrest me." Osborn said shakily.

"We know about the clinical trials, the people who died."

"What about him?" Osborn tilted his head in Bobbit's direction as Ressler began leading him away. "You should arrest him."

"I'm not leaving." Bobbit stated desperately.

Ressler looked back at Bobbit but continued walking. "I don't think Milton has any intention of being arrested today."

They got a few more steps away before they were knocked down by the concussive blast as Milton Bobbit blew himself up.

\\\\

Red sat quietly in one of the chair's in Cooper's office, staring down at a sheet of paper. "Time's up" Cooper stated from the doorway before quickly making his way into the room.

"Is that what this was about? You getting access to Bobbit's client list?" Cooper questioned as he sat behind his desk.

"Yes." Red said softly, standing up as he placed his fedora atop his head.

"Find what you were looking for?"

"Good night, Harold."

\\\\

Lizzie is visibly exhausted as she slumps in the chair in their storage-space-turned-office.

"You need to rest. We've done well. With Craig, things have been set in motion." Red told her quietly, unable to keep the concern from his voice.

Lizzie shook her head. "I don't think I can."

"You're going to have to, Lizzie. You just told Cooper that you need to step back from the dangerous stuff – and then you go and attack Craig in his hotel room!" Red's voice rose with frustration. "Elizabeth, you were supposed to watch him and wait for us to get there. I cannot keep you safe from yourself."

Lizzie said nothing, biting her lip as she nodded silently. She knew he was right and truthfully, in hindsight she felt like she was already failing at being a mother as she continued putting herself in dangerous situations. Lizzie vowed to herself to make more of a conscious decision and to stop being so reckless. Her dad was right, though she would die before she told him that.

Sighing, scratching his head in exasperation, Red turned to their evidence board. After staring at it a moment, he moved the small scrap of burnt paper that had the word "Berlin" typed on it up to the top of the board.
"What is it? What does it mean?" Lizzie asked.

Red stared at the board a moment longer before shrugging. "I don't know yet."
"Alright, Popcorn or trail mix?" Ressler questioned as he walked into his living room. They'd been having these movie nights on a weekly basis for a little while now.

Lizzie looked up at Ressler from where she sat on his couch, her brow raised in question.

"Audrey must have left it." He murmured, shrugging his shoulders embarrassedly as his eyes flickered to the trail mix in his hands.

"Popcorn." Lizzie said softly, smiling sadly up at him.

With a nod of his head, Ressler went to put the popcorn in the microwave. Within minutes, he was back with a huge bowl of the deliciously salty and buttery puffs of heaven. Setting it between them, he sighed as he slouched on the couch next to Lizzie.

"Alright, so what did we decide on again for tonight?"

Lizzie snorted, rolling her eyes. "You decided that we were going to watch the Avengers." She smirked. "Guess you wanted to watch your hero, Captain America."

Ressler let out a bark of a laugh. "Very funny, Keen." He murmured before nibbling at the handful of popcorn he'd taken from the bowl as Lizzie started the movie.

They'd been watching quietly for a half hour when Ressler began to shift in his seat, throwing furtive glances over at Lizzie. She attempted to ignore it for a few moments until she realized that she was so preoccupied with him that she had no idea what was happening in the movie. Sighing, Lizzie paused the movie and looked over at him.

"Okay, what's up, Ress?"

Ressler coughed awkwardly before shifting to face her. "I was … I'm curious.

Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. "About what?"

"Tom."

Lizzie gazed at him for a moment, waiting for him to continue. When he didn't, she combed her fingers through her hair and sat up. "Okay, you're gonna need to be more specific than that, Ressler."

"It's just that… When you told me you kicked him out, you said you didn't trust him. And then that day that I came over and he was on your stoop…" Ressler coughed once more, clearing his throat in a clear stalling tactic. "Liz, did he hurt you?"

Lizzie's eyes widened at the conclusion he'd jumped to, though, in truth, it was a much more plausible and… mundane reason than the truth. "No, no Ressler. He didn't."

"Then I don't get it, Liz. You're not the type to give up like that." Ressler shook his head. "You're… my best friend, Liz. But you've been so tight lipped about this whole thing with Tom. What's going on?"

"He wasn't innocent." She blurted out, wincing at her own stupidity before the answer even came out of her mouth. But god he'd called her his best friend and she just needed… someone. Someone
who wasn't her dad or her brother. Someone she could talk to, maybe not about all of it, obviously. But she needed a sympathetic ear.

"What are you talking about?" He asked incredulously. "We cleared him."

Lizzie shook her head, her lips pinched. "No, Ress. He was just that good. He fooled everyone."

"Liz, are you telling me that those passports were his, that your husband was some sort of an assassin?" Ressler stood up from the couch in a burst and stood in front of the coffee table, his hands on his hips.

"Well, more like a spy-slash-assassin." She murmured, playing with the hem of her shirt.

"Liz." Ress barked. "Explain, now."

Lizzie glowered at Ress. She hated when he went all caveman on her. "He was hired by someone to watch me, to get close to me." She spat. It was easier to be annoyed with him than to relive the betrayal.

"What the hell? Why?" Realizing that he'd caused Lizzie to go on the defensive, Ressler took a deep breath and sat back down on the couch, his leg hiked up and his arm resting on the back of the couch so he could face her.

"I don't know." Lizzie shook her head.

"Sorry Liz, but I call bullshit."

Lizzie groaned, falling back against the arm rest. "I'm serious. I don't know for sure."

"Not knowing for sure is different from not knowing anything." He at least tried to make it sound less like a reprimand. "So tell me what you think is going on."

Lizzie bit her lip and began rubbing her scar, trying to figure out a way to tell him what happened without spilling everything. "Like I said, he was hired to watch me. I don't know by who but I think Reddington was the reason." Lizzie held her breath.

"Why?" Ressler asked gruffly.

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "I doubt even they know. My guess is that Reddington had kept an eye on me for some time – we all know that there is a reason he chose me to be his liaison. We just don't know why." Lizzie looked away, taking a breath. "But whatever reason, he probably didn't just show up the day I started working at the FBI. He had a vested interest. I think one of his enemies knew that." Lizzie looked hesitantly over at Ressler. "I think someone wanted to use me to get to Reddington."

Seriously, she deserved an Oscar. Her fathers had taught her well. The best lies always had a hint of truth.

Ressler stood up again and began pacing, running his fingers through his hair roughly. "Why didn't you tell Cooper any of this?"

Lizzie opened her mouth to respond but was saved by her ringtone. Grabbing her phone from where she'd set it on the armrest beside her, she answered.

"Hello?"
"Liz?"

"What the hell? How do you keep getting my number?"

She was getting really sick of having to change her number because of him. Stealing a glance at Ressler, his pursed lips and pinched eyes gave her no doubt that he knew exactly who was on the phone.

"Just listen to me. Reddington isn't who you think he is."

Lizzie let out a bark of laughter. Some spy Tom was. After three years, he still didn't know who Red was to her.

"I know you found the key under the lamp. Go to Bradford bank, Box 382. You'll see what I mean."

Tom hung up before she could say anything. Lizzie sighed, throwing her phone onto the couch, watching with disinterest as it bounced off and landed on the hardwood floor.

"You alright?" Ressler questioned gently.

"Yea."

"What uh…what'd he want?"

"He wants what he's always wanted. He wants me to trust him so he can complete his mission." She knew her voice sounded flat, deadened. But she was just so damn tired. Closing her eyes, Lizzie began to rub the Bump in comfort. She didn't hide her small smile when Ressler reached over and squeezed the hand that laid across the back of the couch.

"It's gonna be fine, Liz. I'm here."

/\/\\

Red walked into the opulent, glass indoor pool room, throwing up his hands enthusiastic as the man in the pool took notice.

"Niko! My goodness!" Red laughed.

"Red! Welcome! The house is yours until I return. My flight is in three hours." Niko said boisterously as he swam over to the side of the pool where Red stood.

Red shook his head, smiling. "Look at you. You're wasting away."

"Down 37 pounds." Niko stated proudly, patting his belly where he stood in the pool.

Red raised his brow in apparent shock. "All from swimming?"

"Yes swimming. And bread. I cut out bread entirely."

Red chuckled. "I was a lifeguard my junior year in high school. Had to give mouth–to–mouth to Mrs. Beerman. She belched up a lung full of corned beef and chlorine. I haven't been in a pool since."

"I'm sorry weren't you in the Navy?"
"Enough." Red said, his head cocked as he smiled placidly. "To business."

Red and Niko sat at a small table to the side of the pool. Niko was now wrapped in a luxuriously fluffy black robe, wearing tinted glasses.

"What happened in Prague, losing Emil Dusek, is very concerning." Niko stated, referring to the Czech finance minister Red had in his pocket who had just been brought up on murder charges.

"What happened in Prague is unfortunate, but how it happened is of more concern. I believe it's a frame. Dusek was targeted." Red replied solemnly.

"Targeted by whom?"

"The Kingmaker."

Niko raised a single brow in disbelief. "You're saying he was retained to eliminate Dusek as a way of weakening our interests?"

"Yes. What I don't know is who retained him."

Niko shook his head, exasperated. "You do know. You may not have a name, but, Red, this was done by the same mysterious enemy who has been plaguing you for months. Prague is just one example. Someone has devoted a great deal of time and energy to depreciate your business."

"Watch your tone." Red's deep voice pitching into a dangerous valley.

"It's not my tone, Red." Niko shook his head sympathetically. "People are talking. Your friends are talking, whispering."

Red chuckled darkly. "I don't have any friends."

"Whoever this unseen enemy is, they don't think he's after us." Niko continued "They think he's after you. For now, they remain loyal, but they won't forever."

"These 'friends' you mention, the ones whispering in the shadows tell them from me 'Shut the hell up.'"

Lizzie stared at the photos in her hands as she stood at one of the work stations in the war room. She'd come straight to work after visiting the bank and retrieving the manila envelope containing the photos. Photos of her father leaving a hospital.

"St. Adrian's Hospital?" Lizzie jumped, spinning around to face Aram who'd come up behind her to peer at the photos. "This is where your father died?"

"Shit."

"Sam. It's the same building. I checked like four times."

"Where did you get this? Is that Reddington? Do you trust the source?" Aram spat out these questions in rapid succession.

"No." Lizzie said simply, silently pleading with him to not continue that line of questioning.
"Doesn't prove Reddington was there the day Sam died." Aram said softly.

"If Reddington did fly all the way to Nebraska just to talk to my dad before he died, there must have been something he wanted." Lizzie shrugged, trying to play it cool.

"Well, is it possible they were friends, he was just paying his respects?"

"Uh…yea, maybe." She murmured, grasping at the out he'd given her.

"You gonna ask him about it?"

Lizzie shook her head. "Not until I know whether the photo's real."

Lizzie stood on the gravel driveway, looking up at the monstrous mansion-estate that was Red's safe house. She recorded a little note to herself in her head – if you want to find a criminal, look for the largest, most ostentatious house on the block. Gathering herself and shaking her head, Lizzie let herself in at the front door as Red had instructed her on the phone.

"Jamie, tell your people I'll have an answer by the end of the week, but whether or not we do business, I'm keeping all the samples." Red's voice immediately greeted her as she stepped into the foyer. "Lizzie," Red greeted. "Perfect timing. Say hello to Jamie." Red introduced the man while simultaneously hustling him out of the house.

"Hello." She murmurs just as them man exited. Turning back to her dad, Lizzie sighed. "Where's Tom?"

"What a delightful man – scrupulous mind for business, sharp as a tack." Red stated, shaking his head as he stared at the door.

"Dad, where is Tom?" Lizzie repeated her question. She had told him about Tom's phone call and the pictures he'd directed her to. Not that they meant much to either of them. Lizzie already knew he was at Sam's bedside. She knew that her Dad had put her Pop out of his misery. But it was always good to know what your enemy knows.

"He's in New York. Not to worry. My people are watching." He said, waving his hand in dismissal as he escorted her down the hall. "Please excuse the house. My host spends a tremendous amount of money on all the wrong things."

"What the hell is that?" Lizzie demanded as they walked into the kitchen to the tableau of dozens of jars of marijuana, all with labels of their specific brand or type, sitting on the kitchen table. She stared incredulously as a particularly mellow Dembe took another bite of mint chocolate chip ice cream.

"Cannabis." Red answered glibly. "Jamie's trying to form a huge consortium of farms and warehouses outside Denver and having a little trouble securing the financing, so I would be the bank. I'd offer you an edible, but we have work to do. The Kingmaker. I've never met the man, but I recently lost a great deal of time and money to his talents. He's single-handedly responsible for the rise and fall of some of the world's most pivotal politicians and statesmen."

Lizzie shook her head, laughing at her brother's current situation. She'd never seen Dembe high before and frankly, it was funny. Glancing over at Red's disapproving frown, Lizzie shook her head, forcing herself to catch up to what he'd said. "Right. He's, what, some kind of political strategist?"
"He's raised opposition research to an art form." Red pulled another chair over to the table and sat, directing Lizzie to sit down in the remaining chair. "He arranges scandals, exploits proclivities, assassinates when necessary. I don't know how he chooses his clients, but they say he grooms them from an early age the right universities, mentors, even spouses. And when they're ready to run, he does whatever it takes to assure their victory."

"He's causing trouble for some politician in your pocket, and now you want the FBI to arrest him?"

"Yes. Please. And thank you." At Lizzie's raised brow, Red sighed and plowed on. "Lizzie, this is extremely important. He recently had a politician that was in my pocket framed for murder." Red scrubbed his face, causing Lizzie to sit up straight and take notice. Her dad never showed such blatant worry unless it was for her. "I believe he was hired by our invisible adversary, the man who hired Tom. His attacks on my business have not gone unnoticed by my associates. I must find this man. I must find out who hired him."

"Whoever this person is, he's a threat to everything isn't he?" Lizzie asked hesitantly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes."

Lizzie blew out a breath, nodding her head. "Alright then."

Red nodded his head once. "My sources say he left Prague within the last 12 hours on a flight to the United States."

---

"Reddington's intel had our suspect travel from Prague to the United States sometime in the past 12 hours. There were six flights during this time period." Meera stated, staring up at one of the screens in the war room where they'd posted the Kingmaker's apparent travel itinerary.

"We've pulled the passenger manifests and applied the profile you developed a foreign national, male, traveling alone in first class. That narrowed the list down to 47 passengers." Aram spoke up.

"Of those, 40 were on business. We were able to confirm their identities and itineraries with their respective corporations, which leaves seven potentials." Meera continued after Aram.

"Six of which checked in to the hotels they had listed on their immigration forms. One did not."

Sometimes, listening to Meera and Aram speak felt like a tennis match.

Meera clicked a button and nodded her head at the image on the screen. "You're looking at The Kingmaker."

"Paul Fredrick Smithson." Lizzie read the name on the passport which was currently magnified on the screen.

"Got to assume that's an alias." Ressler thought aloud.

Lizzie nodded in agreement. "Where did they land?"

"JFK, 4:52 PM. And get this we pulled the credit card that our suspect used to purchase his plane ticket into the United States. Forty-five minutes ago, that card was used to book a hotel room in Manhattan." Aram fired off, tapping furiously at his keyboard.
"What hotel?" Ressler questioned.

"The St. Rose in midtown."

&&&&

"Federal agents! Hands where I can see them." Lizzie yelled out as she and Ressler slammed open the hotel room door, guns raised. She knew she promised to step back form these situations and she'd tried to ignore Cooper's glare when she refused to be sidelined. It was a bit more difficult to ignore Ressler constantly shooting worried glances at her though. But she needed to be on this case. It was her turn to protect her dad.

They quickly walked down the hallway and rounded the corner into the main room where a couple were eating their room service dinner.

"What's going on?" The man questioned, clearly startled.

&&&&

"It's a case of stolen identity. He cloned his credit card and passport, and he's a salesman who travels frequently." Lizzie explained, frustration tingeing her voice as she spoke loud enough for the team back in the war room who was on speaker phone with her and Ressler.

"For all we know, this guy's not even in New York anymore. This could have just been his entry point." Ressler continued for her, eyeing her with concern.

&&&&

Red walked up to where Fitch was sitting at a table in his favorite club, about to enjoy an expensive looking meal. Sitting down, Red gave the man his signature placid smile and enjoyed watching his eyes widen in shock.

"Have you lost your mind?"

Red's smile quickly disappeared as he got to business. "What I've lost is the luxury of time, Alan." He stated darkly. "I don't have a week to wait around for your minions to pass my request up the food chain."

Fitch looked around them, as if his associates were going to pop around the corner at any moment. "This is out–of–bounds, Ray."

"As much as I appreciate a good sports metaphor, what I've come to discuss requires a somewhat more dramatic analogy." Red paused for a moment, piercing Fitch with his gaze. "I'm under attack and have been for some time my interests, my allies. Someone has targeted my key infrastructure, and the truth is, I'm bleeding."

Fitch scoffed, shaking his head. "Why should I even consider involving myself in your mess?"

"Because my enemy is your enemy."

"We co–exist, Ray. Surely our last interaction proved that we're not friends. Don't overestimate the nature of our relationship."

Red shook his head. He could feel that damn tic in his cheek twitching. "By my estimation, we not only co–exist we depend on each other to survive. What I possess would lay waste to you and your
"Yes, and should that information ever become public, there would be no reason for us not to kill you on the spot." Fitch countered, calmly cutting his food.

"I have no intention of making it public. But this enemy of mine, if he prevails and, in so doing, finds himself in possession of that information he may very well choose not to be so discreet. You're already involved in this mess, Alan, and if I lose control of the information, you may be exposed. And if I die, it triggers my own protocol for release."

Fitch placed his knife and fork down on his plate and looked sternly at Red. "I don't respond too well to threats."

Red chuckled darkly. "I'm not here to threaten you. I'm here to see if we can work together."

\////////\\\

"Once again, you are looking at cellphone footage taken by a pedestrian near the Causeway Bridge. Patrick Chandler, a state assemblyman, was involved in a collision that forced his car over the side rail a terrifying hit–and–run. The assemblyman and his family were taken to a nearby hospital, where doctors were unable to resuscitate Mrs. Chandler. This is a tragic loss for the New York state lawmaker. Keep it right here on this news channel for all the late–breaking –"

Red clicked the TV off and turned to look at Lizzie. They were currently standing in the living room of his safe house. Lizzie had agreed to come meet him for an update on the case.

"You think he did this?" Lizzie asked.

"Some freshman politician is suddenly thrust into the spotlight, his selfless heroism on full display. I suspect Assemblyman Patrick Chandler's poll numbers are about to go through the roof. It just reeks of The Kingmaker." Red answered, his hands in the pockets of his suit pants.

Liz shook her head. "I just watched a man give CPR to his dying wife, and you're telling me it was a media stunt?" She pointed at the TV as she spoke, incredulous.

"Yes. Go out to the bridge. Perhaps you can figure out why there aren't any tire marks."

\////////\\\

Lizzie met everyone back in the war room where they were all currently standing around one of the tables.

"It just doesn't make any sense. Chandler's a Boy Scout, president of the high school student council, chairman of the Young Entrepreneurs Society at Princeton." Meera listed off all of Chandler's apparent merits.

"He also did a term in the county legislature before becoming the youngest assemblyman in all of New York's 150 districts." Ressler continued.

Lizzie shook her head vehemently. "This guy's been groomed."

"He was just elected. His term is two years." Meera argued.

Lizzie did a double take, looking up from the files she had of Chandler. "Wait. So he's not even running for anything?"
"So, what are we saying he risked his child's life and murdered his wife for what?" Cooper's questioned his team.

"Well, he also risked his own life." Ressler spoke up, rather unhelpfully.

"Listen to this." Aram demanded. "Allison is my everything, my moral center. She makes me a better man."

Lizzie barked out a short, bitter laugh. "Sorry. Husbands lie to their wives. I have no problem believing this guy is capable of just about anything." Lizzie stated, not looking up from the file and so missing the meaningful looks her colleagues passed around.

"All right, so," Cooper started, breaking up the silence. "Wind this up and get over to that accident site."

Lizzie and Ressler walked onto the bridge where the accident took place. Lizzie immediately began looking around, trying to form a picture in her head of what happened. Ressler simply stood on the sidewalk and stared at her.

"Okay, so, what's the deal?"

"Chandler drove up from the south." Lizzie began to try and walk through what happened.

"No. No, not with the case." Ressler shook his head, walking over to where Lizzie stood.
"Something's wrong, and it's not just the stuff with Tom. You're handling that… frighteningly well, actually. This is something else. What's up?"

Lizzie bit her lip and settled a hand on her belly. "This Kingmaker, he framed an associate of Reddington's. That's why he has us chasing this guy. Whoever hired the Kingmaker… he's worried."

"Why?"

"He thinks it's the same person who hired Tom."

Lizzie knew she needed to scale it back. She was giving away too much information. But he was her best friend, the only person she had in the world who wasn't from her crazy, messed up family.

"Is he worried this person is going to send someone else after you?" Ressler questioned gruffly, his face shuttered with concern.

Lizzie's only response was a helpless shrug.

Ressler pursed his lips for a moment before deciding against continuing this line of questioning. "So why from the south?"

Lizzie shook her head, gazing along the length of the bridge. "Why was Chandler even on this bridge at all? His house and his office are both in Werther County, which is the opposite direction."

Ressler sighed, placing his hands on his hips. "He planned to be here."

"And Red was right. The accident–investigation squad didn't find any skid marks leading up to the drop-off point. Chandler didn't even try to stop."
"Eh, he'll say he didn't have time." Ressler said, having been in an interrogation room enough times to know what sort of answers people came up with.

"Or maybe the plan was to go over the side."

"What about the other vehicle that hit him? The driver loses control and never slams on the brakes? Nah, he needed speed enough to drive Chandler's car through that railing."

Lizzie sighed, combing her fingers through her hair. "As crazy as it seems, it did work. I mean, this Chandler guy is everywhere every news show, talk show."

Ressler shook his head in disgust. "Let's go pay New York's newest hero a visit."

A fit man in his mid thirties with a full head of brunette hair stood in his driveway, waving off the police officers as they backed out. Ressler and Lizzie walked towards him and when he saw them, he huffed in frustration.

"Look, I need to get back to the hospital. My daughter's still there. I've already spoken with the patrol guys."

"We know you spoke to patrol, but we're not with the NYPD. We're with the FBI." Lizzie stated, flashing her badge.

"The FBI? I–I don't understand." Chandler appeared to become slightly flustered.

"Well, actually, we were hoping you could help us understand a few things." Lizzie said leadingly.

"Like why you and your family were crossing the Causeway Bridge from the south. You don't live in that direction. Where were you headed?" Ressler questioned.

"Nowhere. Um, we just stopped to get some ice cream, then decided to take a drive."

Ressler nodded thoughtfully. "It was your idea?"

"Yes. Uh, actually, no. Uh look, I'm not sure. it might have been my daughter's."

Just like a politician, always flip-flopping on the things that matter.

"It must be difficult to see her so traumatized." Lizzie said with false sympathy.

Chandler nodded. "She's heartbroken. Her mother was everything to her. She was everything to us both."

"I'm sorry for your family's loss." Lizzie murmured.

"We understand your wife suffered a concussion. Is that how she drowned?" Ressler questioned, playing along with the small game of good cop-bad cop.

Chandler shook his head backing away from the slightly. "I'm not sure, I'm really ready to talk about all this."

"We're just looking for the facts." Lizzie placated.

"I understand that, but we're gonna have to do this some other time. Right now I need to be with my
daughter." With that, Chandler took out his car keys and walked away.

The hesitated a moment, wondering if they should follow after him. It was decided for them when Ressler's phone began to ring.

"Hey, hold on." Ressler quickly answered. "Hey. Text me the address." Ressler hung up and looked over at Lizzie. "We got something. The 911 calls all give the same ID for the vehicle that hit Chandler."

Lizzie folded her arms in front of her chest. "Let me guess a van."

Ressler nodded. "A utility van with signage for a destination plumbing. It's a one–man shop owned by an Arturo Ruiz."

"Hello? Mr. Ruiz?" Ressler called out as he entered Ruiz's shop. Ressler slowly rounded the corner into Ruiz's office, his gun drawn. "Arturo Ruiz. Federal agent!" Coming around the giant metal desk, he sighed, putting his gun down as he gazed at the body of Mr. Ruiz.

"The Kingmaker killed Ruiz to tie up loose ends. Problem is, we'll never be able to prove it. ME report says it could be suicide, but it's not conclusive." Meera stated, as they all once more stood in the war room.

"There's only trace amounts of gunshot residue on the right hand. The stippling's inconsistent with a contact wound." Ressler spoke up, gazing down at the ME report.

Lizzie shrugged. "On the other hand, suicide is consistent with someone who just ran an entire family off a bridge."

"I also pulled his phone records. It primarily shows service calls on his business line."

Ressler looked over at Meera quizzically. "Primarily?"

Meera nodded her head. "Three days ago, Ruiz received a call from a phone booth off 11th and Lincoln."

Lizzie groaned as she walked down the street with Red, her hands deep in the pocket of her coat as the wind blustered around them. "I told you there's nothing here."

Red shook his head, exasperated. "If The Kingmaker chose that pay phone of all the phones in the city, there's a reason." He stated, pointing to the phone in question.

"Which is?"

Red turned on the balls of his feet and pointed to the muggy windows of a beat up old store front. "Le Claire's pawn shop."

Lizzie stared doubtfully but followed her dad into the shop only to come up short at the sight of a well dressed, burly, young man standing at the counter.

"Mr. Gibbons." Red announced himself, obviously giving an alias.
"Oh, of course. Right this way." The young man quickly lifted the hatched counter and opened a door behind himself, allowing them through.

"Thank you." Red murmured and Lizzie followed obediently after him.

"Mr. Gibbons. Welcome back. Would you like to check your coat?"

"No, thank you."

Lizzie looked around, her eyes wide in awe. She walked out of a pawn shop and into a five-star restaurant and bar. As they followed the waiter, Lizzie looked around and soaked in the sudden major shift in ambiance.

"Ah." Red took a large sniff. "Smells like decadence and vice." Red exclaimed as they slid into the booth the host had directed them to. "The Ohlbaum Philly, please. Make it two." He ordered before the host trotted off.

"What is – Who are these people?" Lizzie asked, still taking in the sights though she tried to be a bit more discrete this time.

"Exactly. The Kingmaker was here." Red smiled at a passing stranger. "That guy over there," Red pointed to a table across the way. "– Don't look!"

Lizzie's tried not to giggle at her dad's antics. "Okaaay."

"Okay look." He murmured. "With the hair."

Lizzie took a quick surreptitious look over her shoulder before looking at her dad. "Is he why we're here?"

"No. He won the gold medal for the clean and jerk for Belarus. Magnificent drinker, smokes like a chimney." As if this were some sort of segue, Red took two cigars from his pocket. He quickly trimmed one before putting it in his mouth and lighting it.

"Mm–mm." Lizzie shook her head in refusal as he tried to hand it off to her.

Red rolled her eyes. "Well, hold it, at least. Wave it around. At least look like someone who wants to be here. The owner will make his rounds soon enough."

Lizzie sighed, trying not to scrunch her nose at the odor as she took the cigar between her index and middle finger, causing her dad to smile brightly. The things that made her dad happy sometimes creeped her out. "You do remember that Pop died of lung cancer, right?"

Red hastily removed his own cigar from his mouth and looked contrite. "Mm. Forgive me, Lizzie. Should we go?"

Lizzie's smile warmed further at her dad's obvious over-protective reaction and shook her head. "However, I am pregnant so if anyone here questions why I'm not waving a cigar around, don't worry. I have a ready-made excuse."

"You sure you don't wish to leave?" Red questioned, not bothering to hide his concern.

Lizzie's smile warmed further at her dad's obvious over-protective reaction and shook her head. "Let's wait for the owner."

Red simply nodded as his gaze wandered. When his eyes lit upon the snuffed out cigar, he couldn't
stop a small chuckle from emerging.

"What?" Lizzie asked.

"Do you remember that time Sam caught you smoking?" Red asked her, still chuckling.

Lizzie thought for a moment before joining in with a laugh. "Oh my god, Billy Miles! Dad was on a job and Dembe was supposed to be watching me but he had a rugby match!"

Red nodded, his face alight. "Yes, he came home early and caught you smoking on the porch with that boy."

"Billy ran off so fast, he threw down his cigarette, nearly burned down the porch when it landed on his homework that he left behind." Lizzie giggled.

"Sam called me absolutely furious! I was in the middle of a negotiation with the Chinese ambassador, Sam calls up and immediately starts yelling about tanning both you and Dembe's hide. I ended up rescheduling that meeting to get home and stop him from murdering you too!" They both chortled at the shared memory.

Lizzie smiled warmly at her dad, reaching out and squeezing his hand. "Thank you."

"For what, Sweetheart?" He questioned, squeezing her hand back.

"I needed that. I need to laugh and I needed to remember him. We need to do that more."

Red's smile turned sad. "We will, Sweetheart. I'm sorry. I feel that we've been – "Red cut himself off as he noticed someone approaching.

"Charles! Good to see you again, my friend." Red cried out, standing up to greet the man heading towards them. "Ah, bless you, Charles. You are my friend. Natalie here is under the impression I don't have any." Red motioned towards Lizzie, laughing at his own joke as Charles nodded towards her in greeting. "Listen, Charles, I need to know whether this gentleman has been in recently." Red held up a picture of the Kingmaker, taken from the airport security feeds.

"Oh, I'm not in the business of revealing my clientele, but considering Mali" Charles barely finished his sentence before he began to laugh.

"Oh, my God! Mali! The tiniest lady on Earth." Red shook his head as if caught in another fond memory. "What a marvel. The things she could do."

"On her head." Charles giggled

Red laughed, pointing at Charles. "That's right on her head!" Red looked over at Lizzie. "I wish you could have met her."

Lizzie merely raised her brow in response.

"Anyway, about your inquiry, he was here for dinner a few evenings ago. Mr. King."

Red barked out a laugh. "How perfectly on the nose. Did he happen to leave a telephone number when he made his reservation?"

"No, but he was complaining about the heat register at the Brixton."
The tires of their SUV screeched as they pulled up in front of Senator Mitchell's home. They'd found schematics and photos of the man's home in the Kingmaker's hotel room, leading them to the conclusion that this man was the next target.

As Lizzie and Ressler climbed out of the vehicle, they saw heard a gun go off and saw the flash.

"Liz—"

"Don't even say it, Ress. I'm going in."

Ressler's lips pursed before he nodded. "I'll go around the back."

Lizzie entered from the front and slowly cleared each room as she went. Ressler met her in the center of the house and they nodded to each other in affirmation that it was clear.

"I'll call it in. I'm up." Ressler murmured before heading up the stairs.

Lizzie turned down the hallway and walked into what appeared to be a den. Rounding one of the large wingback chairs, Lizzie stopped short at the sight of Senator Mitchell laying prone on the floor. Just as she turned to find Ressler, someone came up from behind Lizzie, knocking her to the ground. She was only just able to put her hands out to stop her fall when the person straddled her thighs, wrapping their arms around her neck. Rolling onto one hip, to keep from crushing her stomach into the floor, Lizzie grasped and hit the arms around her neck as she choked for breath. Her fingers dug into her attacker's coat as she tried to loosen their hold to no effect. As her vision began to dim, she heard the bang of a gun shot and the weight above her fell to the side.

Lizzie flopped onto her back as she coughed, gasping for breath.

"I swear to God, Keen. If you don't stop coming out into the field, I'm going to strap you to a chair." Ressler muttered worriedly as he fell to his knees beside her, pushing her into a sitting position. He quickly pivoted to sit behind her so that she could sit with her back against his chest. "That's it, just breathe. An EMT is coming with the back up. You're fine." He soothed, wrapping one arm around her as the other ran through her hair as Lizzie continued to gasp.

"There's no way to convince you not to tell Cooper, right?" Lizzie wheezed.

Ressler snorted. "Not a chance."

Red sat in the uncomfortable red leather wingback and glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time. At the sound of footsteps, he looked up.

"I've been sitting here for almost 20 minutes." He said, clearly agitated.

"Yeah." Fitch sighed as he sat down across from Red.

"I can't remember the last time –"

Fitch held up a hand. "Ray, before you say what you're about to say, I was told not to come here at all. You're feeling disrespected, but the fact that I even walked in here is proof that the opposite is true."

Red frowned. "I take it you spoke with your colleagues."

"We're out, Ray."
Red stared coldly at Fitch. "That's a mistake." He said gravely.

Fitch sighed. "Yeah, so you said."

"And if the evidence in my possession is compromised?"

"We're big boys. We can do our own risk assessment." Fitch asserted. "Look, for what it's worth, I voted to step in, but others were not as forward-thinking. The Chinese delegation. There are some among us who think we should have killed you outright, called your bluff about whether or not you actually have this alleged evidence."

"And that would be another mistake. You know me considerably better than either of us would like to admit. I will win this war. This enemy of mine will lose. Even with you and your shortsighted brethren watching safely from a distant hill. Why? Because as bad as you may think I am, as far as you think I'm willing to go to protect that which I hold most dear, you can't possibly fathom how deep that well of mine truly goes. You think you've come here simply to say that you can't help me, but all you've done is ensure that when this is all over, I won't be able to help you. When the day inevitably comes that I settle up with your little Alliance, it will be you, Alan, alone in the dark."

Fitch stared at Red for a moment, attempting to read him. Whether he found what he was looking for or not, Fitch eventually shook his head and stood, walking away.

Before he could get up to leave, Dembe walked over and handed him the phone. "It's Elizabeth."

He murmured.

Red quickly took the phone. "What have you got, Lizzie?"

"The Kingmaker." Lizzie said hoarsely, her throat still raw.

"You have him? He was targeting Senator Mitchell so that Chandler could take his seat. Lizzie, listen to me very closely. I need you to hold him for me. That's all I need." Red said, a slight tone of desperation entering his voice.

"That's not going to be possible." She croaked.

"It's the entire reason I brought you this case."

"The Kingmaker is dead."

Red was about to make a scornful remark about the effectiveness of the FBI when he heard another voice on the phone. "Ma'am, you shouldn't be trying to speak. You should really be resting."

"No, it's okay, it's fine. I'm okay." He heard Lizzie murmur, her voice sounding distant as if she were holding the phone away from her.

"Lizzie? Lizzie!" He said, worry tingling his voice as he stood up, motioning to Dembe that it was time to go. He didn't pay attention as Dembe quickly trotted out to get the car. "Lizzie? Do you hear me?" He shouted into the phone, uncaring that he was making a bit of a spectacle in the middle of the members-only club.

"Yea, sorry Dad. I'm here."

"Elizabeth, what the hell happened? Where are you?"
"I'm okay, really."

"Tell me where you are." He demanded as he climbed into the back seat of the car.

"I'm at Mercy." She whispered hoarsely, resigned to the fact that her dad was about to swoop in.

"We'll be there in 10 minutes." Red quickly hung up. "Dembe, to Mercy Hospital."

Red and Dembe strode quickly into Lizzie's hospital room, both rounding her bed to take their own side.

"Lizzie? Sweetheart, what happened?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes in find exasperation. "I'm okay, Dad. Really. Besides a scratchy voice, I'm fine." She croaked.

"That's lovely, Dear. That does not, however, answer my question." Red questioned as he took her hand in both of his.

"The Kingmaker came up behind me. He uh… pushed me down and was trying to strangle me. That's why he's dead, Dad. I'm sorry." She murmured. "Ressler shot him to save me."

Red shut his eyes tight, guilt flooding him as he remembered how angry he'd been when she'd told him the Kingmaker was dead.

Leaning forward, he kissed her forehead. "Lizzie, there is absolutely nothing to apologize for. Ressler did exactly what he should have done. It's me who should be sorry, Lizzie. I didn't know… I shouldn't have gotten upset." Now it was Red's voice that had gone hoarse as he choked back his emotions. "Now, what have the doctors said? Did you get an ultrasound? Is the baby okay? I can have Kate–"

Lizzie's chuckle was aborted with a coughing fit. Once she'd gotten it under control, she shook her head. "No dad, I swear, a hoarse voice is all I've got. They just wanted to keep me for a couple hours for observation, because of the baby."

Red's head shot up in alarm, his eyes shooting to her stomach. Lizzie smiled reassuringly before smiling over at Dembe who'd silently taken her other hand at the news, his silent, mellow presence always reassuring.

"No, guys, I promise. Everything is fine. It's just a precaution. They're drawing up my release forms now."

Red sighed heavily, resting his forehead against their joined hands. "Lizzie, Sweetheart. My heart can't take much more of this." He kissed the back of her hand before looking over at her. "I implore you, Sweetheart, please take more precautions. You should not have been there tonight."

Lizzie bit her lip, knowing he was right and fighting down the guilt she felt for putting herself, her baby, in such a situation again. He was right, she knew he was. But she couldn't stand the idea of bringing her baby into this world without making sure she made it as safe for them as possible.

A few days later, after her throat had healed and after they'd arrested Patrick Chandler in a
wonderfully public display in front of journalists, Lizzie was heading towards the elevator at the post office, ready to go home for the evening.

"Hey. Uh, Agent Keen!" Aram called out from his desk. When Lizzie glanced back to look at him, he waved her over. Holding back a sigh, she walked over to him.

"What's up Aram?"

"Well, there was something bugging me about those photos you showed me, of Mr. Reddington leaving the hospital that your father was in."

"Um…okay. I'm tired Aram, if you could just–"

"Ah right, sorry. So I tapped into the security feeds of the hospital." Aram stated abruptly. "Just to confirm that those pictures were genuine and, I'm sorry Liz, but they are." Aram looked up at her from his desk chair, a sympathetic look marring his features.

"Oh…ok, wow." Lizzie was having a hard time mustering any fake shock. She was tired dammit.

"That's not all. I um… I looked at the ME reports in your father's files. They um…they estimate the time of death was around 4:30 – 5pm. Mr. Reddington left your father's room around 4:42." Aram stated gravely.

Lizzie swallowed, panic rising like bile in her throat, choking her. "Uh…I um… I have to go." She said, backing away slowly.

"Liz? Are you alright?"

Lizzie nodded her head shakily. "Yea, I'm fine. I just… Aram, can you do me a favor?"

"Yes, of course. What is it?"

"Keep this between us, okay?"

Aram's brow furrowed and his mouth formed a little O. "Are…are you sure Agent Keen?"

"Yea, um, I have to go now though. Thanks Aram." Lizzie muttered and quickly made a hasty retreat.

\///\`

Lizzie waited impatiently for Dembe to let her into Red's safe house. The moment he opened the door, she was walking down the hallway and into the living room that she knew Red found the least distasteful.

"Ah! Lizzie! How are you?"

"Aram knows you were in the room with Pop when he died." Lizzie stated abruptly.

"I see." He murmured.

"How can you be so calm? Aram knows! It's only a matter of time before he tells someone."

"Lizzie, why has this got you so upset? We can easily cover this under the umbrella 'well-I'm-an-international-criminal-what-do-you-expect excuse.'"
"Because Ressler also knows that Tom was hired to watch me by someone who is out to get you."

"Ah"

"And put that together with Aram now knows, and they're going to start asking questions, Dad." Lizzie was pacing in front of his chair.

Red stood up and grasped her by her upper arms. "Lizzie. Calm down, Sweetheart. You've been under a lot of stress this week. I promise you, everything will be fine. Come, sit down." Red guided her over to the couch and sat down beside her.

Lizzie had spent the last hour with her dad, allowing him to calm her down and talk reason into her. He assured her that he had contingency plans, though, of course, he refused to divulge them, only stating that he was sure it wouldn't come down to that.

After saying goodbye, she made her way to the door, passing Dembe in the hall. Stopping in front of him, she sighed.

"Elizabeth?"

"I need you to do me a favor." She whispered, worried about the large house carrying her voice to where her father sat.

"What is it?" His rich voice questioned.

"Get me a copy of Dad's immunity deal."

"Elizabeth--"

"Just… please Dembe. And don't tell him." Lizzie gazed up at her brother, holding his gaze with her own until he finally agreed with a nod of his head, though his lips were turned in a grim frown.
Lizzie and Ressler stood in the hallway of the post office. Rubbing her scar as she leaned against the wall, Lizzie stared at the door to the room where she would be "questioned" for who knew how long. In an attempt to calm her nerves, Lizzie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She had to do this. She had to prove that she had no knowledge whatsoever of Tom's actions if she wanted to get their marriage annulled.

Right at that moment, she knew there were agents raiding her old house…and the storage unit where she and Red had been conducting their investigation. That was what she was most worried about. There was evidence in that locker that the FBI didn't know about. About 'Berlin,' about Jolene Parker, the woman who was supposed to be Tom Keen's replacement. Hopefully they wouldn't deem this effort of full disclosure on her part as too little too late.

Looking over at Ressler, Lizzie attempted to smile but was fairly certain she only managed a nervous grimace. She was going to have to take him out somewhere nice soon, to thank him for being her rock in the last couple of moths.

"Hey, you're doing the right thing here, Liz. You finally can put that asshole behind you." He murmured, resting a comforting hand on her shoulder. Lizzie only managed a small nod of her head in answer.

They both turned to look as a door opened. Her interrogator was looking at them expectantly. Ressler looked back to her, squeezing her shoulder. "You ready?"

Lizzie nodded her head once more, letting out a shaky breath as she stood up to her full height, squared her shoulders, and walked forward.

Dembe hung up the phone and looked over at Red. Sitting back down in his chair on the opposite side of the plane, he sighed softly. "They lost the husband." He stated in answer to Red's questioning gaze. Red pursed his lips and shook his head before going back to analyzing the papers in front of him.

"How bad is it?" Dembe asked, pointing to the papers. They had obtained an encoded calculus book from one of Tom's known drops and had gotten an associate to decode it for them.

"Worse than I thought." Red murmured, rubbing his eyes tiredly with his thumb and forefinger.

Red looked over at Lizzie from where he stood in the war room, his hands in his pockets and his fedora tilted jauntily on his head. "This case relates directly to your husband and why he was here.
I have reason to believe an attack is imminent."

Lizzie took a shaky breath, looking at her dad steadily. They were operating on shaky ground now. Between her questioning and their raid on the storage unit, the task force now knew with certainty that Tom Keen was there to infiltrate her life to get close to Lizzie. She now had to balance on the high wire and pretend she was as clueless as they were as to why she mattered to #4 on the FBI's Most Wanted list. No big deal, right? Rubbing her rounded stomach, Lizzie gave Red a faint nod.

"There was a piece of evidence in your storage unit. Berlin. Is that what this is about? Something in Berlin?" Cooper questioned, his gaze switching from Red to Lizzie and then back again.

"Earlier today, a man died at The Westland Bank in Manhattan. Reports indicate the cause of death may have been the Cullen virus. Haz Mat teams have quarantined the bank. The deceased has been identified as a Paul Blankenship, an armored–truck driver. They're working to identify how he was infected. Paul Blankenship didn't pick up this bug while wandering through subtropical Africa." Red gazed around at the people in the room as he leaned against the table behind him. "I believe he was infected as part of a larger plot involving myself and this task force."

Cooper did his best pug impression as his brow wrinkled. "How does a man dying in a bank have anything to do with you?"

Red gave Cooper his best you're-so-stupid-it's-adorable smile. "Threats on my life are a constant. I monitor them closely. Two days ago, I received word of a biological threat."

"Does this connect back to Berlin?" Cooper questioned, growing impatient.

"I suspect this incident at the bank is not what it seems, but rather the first shot in a larger, coordinated assault aimed directly at me. I don't think Paul Blankenship was a victim of an outbreak. I think he was a foot soldier in a biological army. I think he was meant to carry out orders by a superior, someone who's willing to use one of the world's deadliest viruses to further their cause."

"An outbreak of Cullen could lead to a global pandemic." Meera stated.

Red nodded in agreement. "The very threat of an outbreak would cause panic, fear. And fear is a valuable tool to get people to do what you want."

"Sounds like an elaborate plan just to get to you." Lizzie challenged, biting her lip as she tried to keep up appearances.

Red cocked his head as he smiled gently at her. "Listen, I can't connect all the dots between the incident at the bank and the eventual outcome, but I sincerely doubt his death was part of the plan, a plan devised by someone who doesn't care how many people die, as long as I'm one of them."

Liz and Ressler ducked under the police tape and crossed the street, heading towards the bank full of quarantined people. As they got closer, a short woman with brunette hair down to her shoulders walked towards them with purpose.

"Dr. Nina Buckner, CDC's Epidemic Intelligence Service." She introduced herself, holding out her hand for them to shake.

"Good to see you again." Lizzie greeted as she took the woman's hand. "Thanks for taking the time. We don't want to interfere with your investigation."
"No, actually, you do." Buckner replied fiercely. "Especially after what I'm about to show you. We did a full work-up on the victim. He was infected with what we call Cullen, a virus strain so lethal that two dozen of the world's leading virologists declared a moratorium on all research." Buckner explained as she directed them over towards the mobile lab that had been set up on the street.

"It's too deadly to study?" Lizzie questioned, astonished.

Buckner nodded her head. "All known cultures are on lockdown. The risk is too great. The influenza pandemic in 1918 killed 50 million people. If this strain went airborne, it would wipe out that number in the first month."

"If it went airborne." Lizzie stated, having noticed Buckner's turn of phrase. "So you're saying you think it didn't?"

"Correct. We've checked everyone in the bank. Incredibly, nobody else is infected. It looks like this virus was intentionally mutated to contain itself in the original host. It doesn't spread."

"So you're saying that somebody designed this virus, built it to target the infected victim." Ressler asked as they walked.

"Yes. He was poisoned. I think we may have found the murder weapon." Buckner took a thin case off of the table in the mobile lab — aka a tent with a few microscopes, some computers, and a centrifuge. "This was in Blankenship's jacket." Buckner opened the case up to reveal an IV filled with a yellowish liquid.

"That's the virus? —" Lizzie asked, looking down at the case warily, placing her hands on her stomach as if to shield it.

Buckner snapped the case closed, as if realizing how uncomfortable it was making Lizzie. "Well, we don't know yet. We're taking it back for analysis now."

"Why would somebody send it to him? Did he inject himself?" Ressler spoke up, standing with his feet planted on the ground and his hands on his hips.

Buckner shrugged her shoulders as she looked at Ressler. "Well, that's your department. But I'll say this. There are not a lot of scientists proficient enough to mutate a virus like this. Anyone working with Cullen is doing so in isolation, illegally, and for no good purpose."

\------------------------------\n
Lizzie sat with her feet up on the couch of her dad's jet, a file in her lap as she sifted through it. "This doctor friend of yours tell me about him."

Red smiled over at Lizzie before wiping his face clean as he got down to business. "He was the lead research scientist on infectious diseases at USAMRIID and the foremost expert on the Cullen virus."

"'Was.' Now he's a criminal." Lizzie phrased it as more of a question.

Red shook his head, sipping at his scotch. "No, the work he's done has been criminalized, which is why he left USAMRIID. But if anybody knows anything about black-market viruses, it's Dr. Bruce Sanders." Red gathered up the large sheaf of papers and lifted himself from his chair to hand it over to Lizzie who fumbled with the file she had in her lap to take it. "This is a copy of Tom's code book. It was used to pass information between Tom and his superiors. I had my associate Borakove decode it. There's surprisingly little about myself and my organization, but it contains
speculation about our cases and a great deal about you. I suggest you use some discretion as to how you disclose any of it."

Lizzie nodded, looking over at her dad, her eyes shining with gratitude. "Thanks. I'm glad not everything we have on Tom is in FBI custody."

Red just nodded and gave a small sardonic grin. "Frankly, I'd give the thing over to the FBI right now if we thought it could help make Tom my ex-son-in-law sooner. Tell me again, Lizzie, why the FBI are interjecting themselves into your divorce proceedings?"

Lizzie chuckled as she flicked through the papers he'd handed her, not really paying attention to them. "You can't get an annulment without justifiable cause. Obviously I can't walk into a divorce court and say 'my husband was a mercenary undercover agent hired to gather intel about me.' So the FBI have to get the full story before they will willingly give testament saying that the marriage was a fraud." Lizzie paused, her good humor shifting quickly. "The reasons will then be classified." She finished softly, focusing on what was in her lap, and so unable to see the soft devastation in her father's eyes as he gazed at her.

\///\

"Dr. Sanders is incredibly well–respected by everyone on staff. I've never seen anyone quite as dedicated to his work." The nurse explained as she walked them down the hall of the hospital and into a large room where various patients sat at tables or on couches.

"Please, Monique, tell me he's not testing his pincushion voodoo on the patients. He's still doing research?" Red asked, laughing.

Monique chuckled. "Oh, yes. And, mind you, it's all over my head. But virology is Dr. Sanders' lifework." She stopped just a few feet from the man in question and swept out her hand in invitation to approach him. "I'll check on you in a bit."

"One of the brightest men I've ever met." Red murmured to Lizzie as they walked towards the man.

"Dr. Sanders. I don't know if you remember me, but –" Red spoke up, addressing the man at the table who sat surrounded by chalk boards and pin boards with pages of research data, newspaper clippings, an formulas taped all over them.


Red smiled, nodding slightly "Raymond." he supplied.

Sanders clapped his hands once, and did a little jig in victory. "Yes! Raymond! Sit down, Raymond. Sit, please." Sanders proffered one of the chairs at the table and Red sat graciously as Sanders too took a seat. Hesitating a moment, Lizzie quietly took the final remaining chair.

Red looked over at her, with a conspiratorial smile. "I met Dr. Sanders here through a mutual friend to discuss a very delicate and underfunded research project. As I recall, the science was awesome but financially precarious." Red then turned his attention back to Sanders with a chuckle. "We did, however, spend a glorious weekend in God's country with two snow bunnies who were dead ringers for the Swiss miss girl."

Sanders eyes lit up. "And we watched Space Ranger."
"Yes. Space Ranger." Red said with a wistful laugh. "What a memory. I heard you went through a bit of a rough patch. But it looks like you've landed on your feet."

"I've never been better." Sanders sliced his hand through the air in emphasis.

Red looked around them, pursing his lips as he apparently inspected their surroundings. "And you've relocated."

"The, um staff is not exactly what you would call 'top drawer.'" Sanders leaned forward and spoke in a stage whisper. "I have fired Monique twice, and she still shows up for work every day like clockwork. I don't have the heart to pull her security badge."

Red laughed, nodding his head before looking back over at Lizzie. "Dr. Sanders is at the forefront of virology. He's been working tirelessly to find cures for some of the world's deadliest illnesses. A few years back, he injected himself with meningitis and along with what he thought was a synthesized cure."

Sanders put his fingers over hips lips and giggled. "Oops!" He then waved his hand in a flourish. "But I'm no, I'm- I'm- I'm fine, really. Full recovery."

"Doctor, we've come to you on pressing business. What can you tell us about the Cullen virus?"

Sanders sat back, his eyes wide. "Oh, spooky. Spooky stuff. Bad news."

"You've researched it?" Lizzie questioned, finally feeling as if she was on more firm footing with where this conversation was heading. "Well, it was recently used as a weapon to target a man named Paul Blankenship."

Sanders nodded solemnly. "He must be the first. There will be more."

Lizzie's eyes narrowed in confusion. "How do you know that?"

"Cullen is the instrument of the Apocalypse." Sanders stated as if it were obvious. "The five horsemen are coming, and they will bring death and destruction unlike -"

"There are four horsemen." Lizzie corrected softly.

Sanders body tensed with ferocity as he slammed his hand down on the table. "There are five!" He shouted, causing Lizzie to jump slightly in her chair. "This I know."

"How do you know?" Red asked gently.

Sanders looked over at him as if seeing him for the first time. "The Space Agent. The Space Agent. UD-4126."

Red opened his eyes comically wide. "Is he still active?"

Sanders nodded his head frantically. "Active and operational."

"UD-4126 was never - " Red shook his head in consternation. "That wormy little bastard could barely land the simulator, let alone carry out an Alpha-level mission."

Sanders shook his head in exasperation. "Chesterfield cleared him. Two days later, he came to me for research. He wanted me to look at some some field tests, systematic observations."

"Anything you can share?" Red asked.
Sanders stood up and began rifling through his research notes. "Well, I've got research on Cullen, if that's what you mean, and activated carbon samples, absorption tests."

"Whatever you've got. I'd love our people at the lab – to give this a once–over."

"Yeah." Sanders nodded excitedly.

"UD-4126 is way out of line this time, way out of line." Red murmured as he gazed at the pages that Sanders had handed to him.

"Dr. Sanders, can we talk about Space Agent UD-4126?" Lizzie asked gently, trying to steer the conversation towards something more useful. She knew her dad would more than willingly play along with the poor man's delusions, and she loved him for it. But time was not on their side and they needed answers.

Sanders blinked owlishly at her before shaking his head decisively. "No can do."

"Did he visit you here?"

"Don't remember." Sanders began to subtly rock back and forth in his chair.

"Did he come to you for help?" Lizzie persisted.

"You said she was trustworthy. What are all these questions?" Sanders snapped at Red.

"She's been cleared Alpha level. You want me to get Chesterfield on the line?" Red asked, his hands out in front of him as if to pacify as his voice whipped in reprimand.

"I need answers." Lizzie stated firmly.

"Well, I – Yes, he came to me for help. He, uh, asked me to look at some fieldwork."

"Who came to you for help?" Lizzie questioned.

"UD-4126"

"You have to give me the scientist's name. Who's doing the experiments?"

Sanders' rocking became more obvious as he wrapped his arms around himself. "I told you his name UD-4126."

"His name." Lizzie demanded, her stomach churning in guilt.

"He doesn't know his name." Red cut in gently.

"4126. That's all I know." The man continued to rock.

"Bruce, lives are at stake. UD-4126 I need some way of knowing who that is."

"No! The horsemen! I told you what I know! It was a top–secret mission, this! That's all I know! UD-4126!" He cried startling the other patients around them. "Monique, Monique Monique Monique!"

Dr. Sanders' nurse trotted over quickly and leaned over to calm the man down, and that was when she saw it. Her security badge. Standing up abruptly, Lizzie left the room, her mind already jumping five steps ahead.
"What is it? What did you see?" Red called out behind her. She could hear the scrape of his chair sliding back as he hastened towards her.

Lizzie stood at one of the computer terminals in the war room, going over case notes and jumped slightly when Ressler slapped a large folder on the table beside her. "Reddington sent over the research notes from the doctor you met with."

Lizzie lifted his brow, her lips turned down. "The 'doctor' we met with. Sanders is a patient in a mental institution." She honestly didn't have much hope for his abilities to be of any use in telling them about the virus itself but at the very least, they had a lead on who was manufacturing it.

"Yeah, well, according to Dr. Buckner, he's created an antidote to Cullen."

Lizzie looked over at him in shock. "Sanders is researching a lethal virus from inside a psych ward?"

"That's not all – in order to test these theories, he'd have to synthesize the molecules, find out how they interact in vivo. For that, he'd need a lab." Lizzie looked over at Ressler as if he'd grown two heads, wondering where the hell all that jargon had come from.

When he noticed her face, Ressler scoffed, a smile on his face as he rolled his eyes, bumping his shoulder into hers. "What? I can learn."

Lizzie laughed and nodded her head. "And by that, you mean you asked Dr. Buckner."

"Shut up." He murmured good naturedly.

Lizzie had a difficult time wiping the smile off of her face. Only once she realized that they'd both been staring at each other with what were probably rather stupid grins right in the middle of the war room, did she look away, coughing slightly to cover her sudden awkwardness. "You really believe he's working with someone on the outside who's testing his theories, manufacturing an antidote?"

Ressler shrugged his shoulders, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "If Sanders has a partner, he may be the one who infected Blankenship. You've got to go back to him, find out who Sanders is working with."

Lizzie nodded but before she could reply, Aram came jogging over to them. "I ran every badge from every agency that responded to the incident at Westland Bank Homeland, FBI, FEMA and DCPD." He then made a beckoning motion with his hand as he walked back over to his computer. As they followed him over, Lizzie realized that he'd probably been trying to get their attention for awhile. With a furtive glance at Ressler, she caught him looking at her out the corner of his eye as well. And by his slight blush, she guessed he'd come to the same conclusion.

"Why limit the search to the bank?" Ressler asked once they reached Aram's work station, now refusing to meet Lizzie's eye.

"Because that's where I saw it a badge with the UD classification."

Aram nodded and hit a few keys on his keyboard. "Searching the preface 'UD' turned up nothing. So I widened to HHS, ADSTR, and I got a hit. The only department that uses the preface UD is the Center for Disease Control. 'Space Agent 4126' is Dr. Nikolaus Vogel. He lives in Arlington."

With a flourish, Aram hit another key and Vogel's picture showed up on the screen.
Lizzie watched Meera who sat in one of the chairs at the table and Ressler who stood in his signature position – feet firmly planted with his hands on his hips – through the two-way mirror as they were in the interrogation room with Vogel.

"We need to have a few words, Dr. Vogel. Who are you blackmailing and why?" Ressler questioned. "I asked you a question." He barked when his inquiry was met with silence.

"Whatever the incident is, we know it's scheduled to happen today. Tell us what we need to know. Help us stop this. We can help you." Meera said more gently, apparently being the good cop today.

Vogel shrugged his shoulders carelessly. "There's nothing to say. There's nothing you can do." A small smirk adorned his face. "He's coming."

"Who's coming?" Meera questioned, her eyes darting towards the mirror where she knew Liz and Cooper were watching.

"Let me go in there, sir. Let me talk to him." Lizzie looked over at Cooper who was already shaking his head before she finished speaking.

"Absolutely not, Agent Keen. I will not put my pregnant agent into a room with a man that uses germ warfare as a blackmail tool.

"Sir, I think that's exactly why you should put me in there."

"Tell me about the people you blackmailed. Who are they? You don't seem like someone with enemies." Lizzie questioned, her hands folded primly in front of her.

"Oh, no, they're not." He said with a small chuckle before taking a sip of water. "They're not my enemies at all. They're just different people from all walks of life."

"I'm gonna need names."

Vogel snorted derisively. "You can't have them. And it won't make any difference, anyway. How are you gonna help them?" He took another small sip of water. "I'm the only one that has what they want what they need. So, they're gonna carry out my instructions or die trying, no matter what you do. That's how blackmail works, sweetheart."

Lizzie smiled sweetly at the man. "I've got to hand it to you." She shook her head, her eyes alight with admiration. "It's a pretty sharp play. Infecting people with a fatal virus that only you have the antidote for and then telling them they can't have that antidote unless they do exactly as you ask. Such a smart plan that I borrowed it." Lizzie smirked as she took a thin case out of the pocket of her blazer and set it on the table, opening it up to reveal a vial of what she knew was the cure for Cullen. "Now, I'm no doctor, so I don't know how fast this virus of yours takes to set in, but I know it will kill you, soon." She watched in twisted fascination as his eyes flickered to his glass of water. His hand slowly crept up towards his upper lip where a trail of blood was beginning to trickle down from his nose. "So you're gonna do what I say and give me those five names, 'cause that's how blackmail works, sweetheart." She stood up, walking over to the door. "Let me know when you're ready to talk."
Lizzie stood in the war room, looking over the evidence boards – not just the ones from this case but they now had boards with the highlights from every case they've worked with Red thus far. Straightening her shoulders, Lizzie looked at them, knowing what she had to do. The pattern wasn't clear to her, but she at least knew enough about her dad, about what was going on to know that there was an end game. Now it was time to start letting the FBI in on the secrets. "Oh, my God. It's all connected." She gasped, still gazing at the boards.

"What is?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ressler's head pop up like a gopher's from where he'd been hunched over a table.

"All of it, everything the blacklist. We've been looking at it all wrong. We see these cases Reddington gives us as individual, as if they're disconnected, but what if they're not random? What is there's a larger pattern to all of it?" She asked, spinning to look at the team. They all looked back with varying depictions of wary curiosity so she continued. "Reddington got a number from WuJing, a code that he entered into ViCAP after helping us stop General Ludd in order to identify Lucy Brooks, also known as Jolene Parker, who he then tracked down using The Alchemist's client list." Lizzie rattled off as she pointed to each corresponding case photo or note as she mentioned it. "They're connected. Maybe not all, but some. Gina Zanetakos, the courier. I believe they all trace back to one entity."

"Putting aside the fact that a good bit of that was news to us," Cooper paused, giving her a pointed look, his lips pinched in displeasure. "Oops. I'm assuming you're referring to the entity in Berlin."

Lizzie nodded, her insides twisting as she worried that she'd done the wrong thing. Cooper had been the one to let Red use the ViCAP database. But he hadn't known why or who Red had been searching for.

"So Reddington's using us to clear the table, wipe out the competition." Ressler questioned.

"That's what I thought. That's what we're trained to think. But that's not how he thinks. Look at this like he would, like a criminal. Reddington said he's bracing for war. And in a war, you need allies." She took a deep breath. "Put yourself in his position. It's not just the FBI who's after him. What if there's someone else, someone he can't stop alone? What better way for a criminal to turn the tables on someone than to get the FBI on his side? Our resources and our protection not to expand his empire, but simply to survive."

"Why wouldn't he just tell us who's after him?" Aram asked.

"Because he doesn't know." Ressler replied before she could do so. True enough. Lizzie thought to herself.

"Sanders said there's an impending apocalypse, and Vogel's words to us? 'He's coming?' " Lizzie put her arms out beside her in question. "Who's coming? Berlin. It's not a place. It's a person. And that person is coming for Red today."

Lizzie had to swallow heavily as fear hit her. This stuff had always existed at the back of her mind. Her entire personal history was wrapped up in the things her father did to protect her from the entities that wanted to kill him, who would use her to hurt him. Voicing it, however, has made it so much more real. Her father turned himself over to the FBI in order to receive their assistance. The freaking F.B.I. He'd thrived for the last 25 years and now suddenly he needs help. As the terror from the implications of this gripped her, her path became that much clearer. As her emotions raged inside of her, she put on her best poker face for the rest of the people in the room.

/
/
/
/
/
/
"Dr. Vogel talked." Meera stated, hitting a button the the remote which brought up pictures of five individuals. "Meet our blackmail victims: an electrician, a maintenance person, a retired air–traffic controller, and an armored–truck driver."

"And they're connected how?" Cooper asked.

"Airports. Edger Pivens is a retired air–traffic controller. The others have contracts with various airports in the area. Waste management, security, and power upgrades. The driver of the armored vehicle? His company picks up payroll from regional airports."

"Paul Blankenship's replacement." Ressler added.

"This last guy, Dimitri Federov former pilot for Aeroflot, the Russian airline." Meera pointed to the man's picture.

"That's five victims," Cooper stated gruffly from where he stood at the back of the group as they all stared at the screen.

"Five horsemen." Ressler murmured.

Aram lifted his head up from his computer screen. "That's a great band name." At the varying looks of amusement his comment garnered, he quickly put his head back down as his cheeks became visibly red.

"And Vogel told you this was what? An attack?" Cooper asked, deciding not to comment on Aram's little outburst.

"He's not sure." Meera shook her head. "All he knows is that it involves some kind of prison transport."

Ressler blew out a harsh breath as realization dawned. "This isn't an outbreak."

"It's a jailbreak." Lizzie stated, having come to the same conclusion as Ressler.

"Notify the FAA and alert Tactical." Cooper ordered, pointing to Aram. "Put in a kite-runner to CENTCOM. Find that plane now."

As everyone else rushed off to do their jobs, Lizzie hung back.

"Sir, whoever is after Reddington is clearly coming after him today. I think we need to give him a protective detail."

Cooper nodded slowly as he gazed at her. "Something tells me that he isn't going to like that, Agent Keen. Meet with him. Convince him to come in."

Lizzie nodded and hurried off.

//\\

Lizzie walked across the park as quickly as she was able to, towards where her father was sat playing chess at one of the small tables.

"We need to leave." Lizzie stated firmly once she reached him

Red looked up and smiled at her, his eyes barely visible behind his rose tinted sunglasses.
"Lizzie! Have a seat! Would you like to join me for a game? It's so good to find a worthy opponent these days."

"I'm serious, we need to get out of here. Berlin is coming after you. Come with me to the Post Office. Please." Lizzie pleaded.

"Lizzie, sweetheart, sit down." Red gestured towards the chair that sat across the table from him. "All this stress really can't be good for you."

"We don't have time for this." Lizzie bit out.

Dembe stepped forward from where he'd been standing guard across the courtyard. "Raymond, I agree with Elizabeth. We should go."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to sit here and play chess, enjoy this beautiful day."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" Lizzie cried.

"Because the moment I hide, Berlin has won." Red stated firmly, his jaw set. He and Lizzie stared at each other for a moment, tension mounting between them. "Now Lizzie, on second thought, I think it would be a good idea, however, for you to head to the Post Office. Why Harold thought it was a good idea to send you out in the field today of all days, I will never know. Though I intend to ask him." Red looked down at the table in clear dismissal and Lizzie growled in pure frustration and fear.

Lizzie cursed under her breath. "Please Dad, Please. Let's just go. We don't even have to go to the FBI, please." She pleaded.

"Lizzie, what could that man possibly do to me that hasn't been done to me before? Kill me?" Red laughed harshly. "None of it is worse than losing you. I will not leave. But you should." Red nodded, his gaze flicking away from her. "Dembe." His voice was like a command.

Suddenly, Lizzie felt a hand grasp her elbow and looked down, her line of sight following the hand to the attached arm, the shoulder, and finally she glared directly at Dembe.

"No. Absolutely not." She shouted. "You don't always get to have your way. You can't do this anymore! You can't just ride off and leave me alone anymore!" Lizzie cried in anguish.

Red's lips pursed, his face constricting in despair. "Elizabeth, please Sweetheart. Trust me."

Before she could say anything, however, all three of them looked up at the sky at the sound of a terrible choked whirring noise. They stared in shock as a plane, with smoke billowing behind it, quickly lost altitude overhead, heading towards the Potomac river.

"Now it begins." Red murmured.

\\\

"What do we know?" Cooper demanded as he walked into the war room from his office.

Aram startled slightly, having been so focused on his task but he quickly righted himself. "Prison transport – eight dead at the scene."

"NTSB says the plane was retrofitted with restraints." Meera continued where Aram left off. "Two victims– still unidentified– were found cuffed to their seats."
"Survivors?" Cooper asked.

"Witness accounts vary. Sightings have been reported from midtown to Wall Street." Lizzie replied.

"What about a manifest – an official record of who was on that plane?"

Lizzie shook her head. "There's nothing official about this."

"The FAA say they were tracking a plane that was supposedly a commercial flight that originated in Bogotá. At 4:53, they lost radar contact, transponders, radios. They now believe that the flight plan was bogus." Meera expounded, rounding the table as she pointed to the bogus flight plans that were currently on the screen.

"Altimeter readings indicate they were flying below 3,000 feet and along the borders between various air-traffic-control centers." Aram scratched his forehead in agitation as he spoke. "They flew in radar dead zones to fly undetected across American airspace."

Ressler walked over to the group as he put his phone away in his pocket. "DCPD just apprehended two suspects in a carjacking. They think they were passengers on that plane– a Chechen mobster wanted for arms trafficking in Brazil and a Colombian drug dealer."

\///\///

The news reports about the crash had been relegated to a constant buzz as they played on the majority of the screens in the war room. Lizzie stood at Aram's side at his work station, watching the live feeds of the interrogation rooms. Ressler and Meera as well as several other agents were questioning the prisoners, all with heavy accents, that they'd been able to catch who had been in that plane.

"– You heard me. The man – the pilot – he was shooting people."

"– I hear two shots behind me. I turn around – I see the pilot. He goes into the cockpit, and he shoots the co-pilot."

"– People are panicking, screaming."

"– The next thing I know I open my eyes, and this guy – the guy with the hood on his head – monster of a guy."

"– He's handcuffed to a guard."

"– And he's cutting his hand off."

"– cutting his hand off."

"– his hand off."

"– cutting hand."

"– Berlin? Berlin? I've never been to Berlin."

"– I don't know anybody named Berlin."

"– All I know is, they brought on some guy. Okay? Big guy."
"– He got a hood on."

"– He was handcuffed to some guy—a guard."

"– And he's got this guard attached to a handcuff next to him."

"– And then, when the plane is going down, the guy in the hood is telling the pilot what to do, like he was in charge."

"– Mr. Hood."

"– I don't know names."

"– Types, yes. Colombian, Serbian, Russian. How do I know there was a Russian? Besides being able to smell him? I saw his marks—the tattoos. Those Russians, they love their tattoos."

"– You want me to draw you a picture?"

[News Report (in background):] Despite a citywide manhunt, three of the prisoners from that crashed plane remain at large. Local authorities are still on high alert after trading gunfire with a barricaded suspect outside Gramercy Park. He's believed to be one of the missing prisoners. The suspect opened fire on police with a 9–millimeter semiautomatic before retreating into a nearby warehouse along with two hostages…

//\\\\

Red sat at the table of his favorite coffee shop—they made just the most delicious bagels—with a small file in front of him as he munched on his food. As the chair across from his pulled out, loudly scraping against the linoleum floor, he trained his face into a disinterested mask.

"Hello, Ray. I got to tell you, Ray, this concerns me. I'm in the intelligence business. That means knowing things. We tried to trace where that plane originated, where it was headed—hell, even who it belongs to. We've come up dry. Why do I think this is connected to your adversary?"

Red gazed at Fitch and shook his head disbelievingly, a small huff of a laugh escaping his lips.

"Perhaps if you had accepted my offer of alliance, neither of us would find ourselves in this position now—you managing a massive intelligence failure and national-news spectacle and me with a ghost adversary with a rather large grudge beating down my door."

"My people made their decision." Fitch countered before shrugging. "That said, I think they made the wrong one. Having you disappear into some black hole somewhere doesn't serve either of our interests."

Red smirked as he closed the file on his lap. "Does that mean you intend to help me?"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple. My hands are tied. Like I said, I can't find anything on the plane or this apparent enemy of yours."

"Then why the hell are you here? Your mere presence is enough to make this delicious bagel sour my stomach." Red snarked, pointing to his half eaten snack.

Fitch shook his head, rolling his eyes at Red's antics. "You know, every time we have one of these little talks, I wonder if it'll be our last. But when I consider the odds, I usually figure you'll come out fine. This time I'm not so sure. You and your task force are now targets. Good luck, Ray. If you make it out of this, I'll be sure to make the rest of the group believe you next time."
Fitch stood up to leave but then paused, turning around as he buttoned his coat. "Oh and Ray, the key is your daughter's ex-husband."

Red quickly dialed Lizzie's phone number, looking anxiously around him as he stood at the pay phone a block away from the café. "Lizzie. Listen to me." He began speaking as soon as she picked up. "You're in danger. Everyone on the task force is a target."

"What are you talking about?"

"There'll be time to explain later. For now, pull everyone back. You are all in danger."

Lizzie stared down at her phone for a moment after Red hung up before looking over at Aram. "I'm calling Ressler and Meera back in."

After trying both of their phones several times and receiving no response, Lizzie threw her phone on the desk angrily. "I can't reach them. They're already in the field. I need an address."

Aram nodded meekly, before pulling something up on his computer.

Lizzie looked around her desperately, a hand over her stomach as she waded through the crowd of wreathing bodies. She tried not to think about how stupid she looked—a pregnant woman in a club—she had more important things to worry about. Looking up towards the VIP section, Lizzie spotted Ressler, in the middle of cuffing someone. "Ressler! Ressler!" She yelled over the thumping music.

Ressler's head jerked up at the sound of her voice. "Find Meera! Find her!"

Lizzie nodded before making her way towards the hallway that circled around the dance floor, hoping to get her bearings. As she walked down the hallway, peering through the latticed wall that gave a peak into the dance floor, Lizzie came around a corner and tripped over something, catching herself at the last moment. Looking down at the floor to see what she'd tripped over, Lizzie gasped.

"Meera! Meera!" Lizzie dropped to her knees at the sight of her colleague clutching her throat, blood seeping through her fingers. "Oh, my God. No! No. Stay with me." She tried to cajole Meera as she placed her own hands over Meera's, knowing it was futile.

"The aircraft that crashed into the East River earlier today is apparently being classified as a prison-transport plane. Rescue officials report that the cabin was retrofitted with restraints with the capacity for 10 to 12 passengers. No word yet on survivors. Its original flight plan is also still unknown. The plane appears to be similar in design to the C-47A, a common military plane—"

Lizzie muted the small television in the office she shared with Ressler before hitting #1 on her speed dial.

"Are you alright?" He greeted the moment he answered.

"Meera's dead." Lizzie said wetly. "You said we were all targets. Why?" Lizzie questioned, leaning back in her chair.

Red was silent for a moment as he closed his eyes, dwelling in his guilt for a moment. Guilty for
bringing this war to these agents' door. Guilt for being thankful that it wasn't his Lizzie. "The day I turned myself in to the FBI, you asked me why. There were many reasons. One of them was Berlin. That's why he's here – because the work we've done has forced him out of the shadows. He can't allow the task force to continue. Meera was a casualty in a war she didn't even know she was fighting. I'm afraid just by association, I've made you all potential targets."

Lizzie's resolve quickened as she set her jaw. "It was Tom. If Berlin had the names of the agents in the task force, he had to have gotten them from Tom. Sam's name was also in that book. Why? How is Sam involved in this?"

"It's all just pieces of a much larger puzzle, and until all the pieces are laying in front of you, it won't go together. What I do know is this – Sam's involvement was as your Pop. And no one can pervert or distort that. Right now, our task is to identify our enemy – our enemy today. Berlin wasn't the only prisoner on that plane, and whoever wanted him wanted the others, as well. You need to find out who that someone is."

Ressler strode into the war room and set a file down on the table as he came to where Lizzie and Cooper stood. "This was an SVR op. This guy's a Russian fugitive being stolen back by his own country." He stated, pointing to the file of the man he'd just been interrogating. "No wonder the damn plane's unmarked."

Cooper shook his head in dismay. "The Russians are never gonna say a word about it, let alone release the manifest."

"You want me to get the State Department involved?"

"No." Cooper looked over at Lizzie. "I want you to get Reddington involved. Maybe he'll pay the Russian ambassador a visit."

"Tuzik? Tuzik! Come! Tuzik." Red could hear the man calling for his dog as he entered his home. Red didn't have to wait very long before the man himself rounded the corner and found him sitting at his dining room table, a napkin tucked primly into the collar of his shirt, a bag of peaches beside him, and a cut peach on the plate in front of him which he was eating with the knife he'd cut it with.

"Mmm." Red chuckled as the small dog in his arm licked his cheek. "Good evening, Ambassador." He greeted brightly.

The man had stopped short in the doorway but slowly began to creep towards Red, rounding the side of the table. "Who the hell are you?"

"No need to worry. Tuzik and I are getting along splendidly. Care for a peach?" Red asked, gesturing to the bag. "I rarely enter someone's home for the first time without bringing a gift, and there's a wonderful little produce stand around the corner."

"I'm calling the police."

Straight to business then. "Mr. Ambassador, as we speak, there's an unmarked plane being pulled from the Potomac. I think we both know that plane is Russian."

The Ambassador stood to his full height, feeling now on firmer ground. "That plane has no ties to
the Russian government."

Red chuckled softly, taking a bite of the peach he'd stabbed at the end of his knife. "You really should try the peaches. They're perfectly ripe-- and freestone. Unlike a clingstone, the pit of a freestone separates more freely from the flesh, making it ideal for consumption. The prisoners on that plane-- I need the manifest."

The ambassador's glance flicked to his dog and back to Red's face. "I swear if you hurt him"

"Oh, my goodness, no. I'm not a monster." Red laughed, putting the rest of the peach slice in his mouth and chewing thoughtfully. "You really think I'd harm a dog? You, on the other hand --" Red turned the knife in his hand and expertly threw it, watching with satisfaction as it embedded itself in the man's thigh.

\\\nLizzie walked into the war room. "The manifest." She shouted, waving a sheet of paper above her head. "I just received it from Reddington."

Cooper walked over to her and she handed him the manifest. "According to this, there were three guards. Two were killed in the crash."

"The third is in ICU. They're just bringing him out of surgery now."

Ressler cleared his throat. "Based on everything we know, there were 10 prisoners on that transport. Three are in custody, four are confirmed dead, one of which is burned beyond recognition. Coroner's working to ID the John Doe now."

Lizzie nodded. "That leaves three convicts at large."

"Alexei Fayer, Bogdan Chrikoff, and Vadim Okecka." Ressler said, reading off of the manifest which Cooper had placed on the table between them.

"One of them has to be Berlin." Lizzie stated definitively.

Cooper nodded his head. "Talk to that surviving guard. Bring photos of our fugitives. Nobody sleeps until Agent Malik's killer is found."

\\\nLizzie stood off to the side as Ressler showed photos of the prisoners that had been onboard the plane to the guard laying in the hospital bed, pointedly not looking at where the man currently had a stump instead of a hand.

"No. No, no, no, no, no, no." The bearded, shaggy maned man muttered as he looked at each photo.

"Look, we know the situation you're in." Ressler sighed, unable to keep his impatience from leaking into his voice. "The people you work for -- they know you're here, so whatever secret you're trying to protect--"

"We know about the man they call 'Berlin.'" Lizzie interjected. "We know he's one of those three, and we need you to tell us which one."

The man shook his head, laughing quietly. "You don't know who you're dealing with."
"Why don't you tell us?" Lizzie asked.

The man sighed, pausing a moment as if to gather his thoughts. "I don't know his name. No one knows his name. All I know is the story."

"Story? What story?" Ressler pressed the man.

"They say he started in the Red Army and then the KGB, and he was notorious for sending off his enemies to the war camps in Siberia. Then, towards the end of the Cold War, some stories began to circulate that his daughter had fallen in love with a dissident. She was captured, imprisoned. But, you see, the Colonel – he knew his way around. He arranged so she could escape. When the Kremlin found out, they decided to make an example of him, so they sent him off to Siberia to rot away with his enemies. It is said that they could hear him every night praying for his daughter's safety, that she would never be found. And one day, something arrived in his cell. It was a pocket watch he had given his daughter, and inside was a picture of her. And a few months later, something else arrived– her ear. And then a finger. His enemies sent her back to him piece by piece. No one knows how he did it, but he did– some say that he carved a knife from one of his daughter's bones– and slaughtered all the men that had held him captive for so many years. Then he vanished, disappeared. A ghost hunting, searching for the man responsible for his daughter's death." The man smiled at Lizzie, shaking his head. "The man you're looking for is not on those photos. The man you're looking for was never on the manifest."

---------------

"Cooper's been attacked." Lizzie greeted her dad when he answered his phone, a tear sliding down her cheek. "He's in pretty bad shape."

Complete radio silence was her answer and just as she was beginning to worry that he had hung up, she heard his peculiarly scratchy voice. "Lizzie, I am so sorry, Sweetheart."

Lizzie cleared her throat, trying not to break down completely. The Director wasn't dead. She would mourn when she needed to. "He was at the park, apparently meeting with Agent Martin to give him an update, check in with the Washington office. When he got into his car, his driver was dead. Someone was there waiting for him, tried to strangle him with a garrot."

---------------

Lizzie watched through the two-way as Ressler interrogated the man they'd rounded up.

"We have an eyewitness. You were picked up six blocks from the crime scene."

When the bald hulk of a man gave only a small smirk in answer, Ressler continued. "We have a bloody fingerprint inside the vehicle, surveillance from that club. You have one chance right now– who commissioned the hits? I want a name and location." The man's smirk widened before he puckered his lips in a clear mimic of a kiss.

Ressler huffed out a laugh tinged with anger. "Okay. All right. Funny thing, you know– I used to be a real Boy Scout, strictly by the book, followed all the rules." Ressler rounded the table to sit atop it next to the man shackled to his chair. "Then this thing happens. My fiancé, she gets killed– murdered right in front of me. The guy I did it– the only way I could get him was to forget all the rules. It was a real crossroads for me. Had to choose which path to take. The thing is, I think it's real important for you to know – the path I took there wasn't any rules. And the thing I realized was that sometimes, that's okay. Like when some greasy Russian starts murdering my friends!" At this, Ressler swung himself behind the man with incredible speed and grasped his collar, tightening
it around the man's neck. "I want a name. I want a name! I want a name."

Just as Lizzie was about to intervene, the man choked out an answer.

\\\\

Red sat at the wingback across from where Fitch sat, having charmed and bribed his way into the man's club. Again. "Milos Pavel Kinsky – sometimes known as 'Berlin.' He's a Russian national, former Spetsnaz Commando, trained in the KGB's 45 Division. Organized crime is now his fancy."

Fitch gazed at Red, a look of annoyed disinterest shaping his features. After a moment, his curiosity got the better of him, however, and he took the folder out of Red's outstretched hand. Red leaned forward and poured himself a measure of Scotch from where it'd been sitting on the small table that sat between them as Fitch read.

After several quiet minutes, Fitch looked up, shaking his head. "Makes Putin look like a Christmas elf. Now that you know who he is, what exactly did you do to put him in such a bad mood?"

Red shrugged. "I'm just as curious as you."

"And you're here because you want…?"

"Access. The kind even the FBI doesn't have. All those spinning satellites that record every keystroke, every phone call, everybody's dirty little secrets. You find him for me, and I'll do the rest."

"I heard about Harold." Fitch evaded.

Red pursed his lips and stood, placing his fedora back on his head and tugging at the brim. "Find him."

\\\\

Lizzie sighed as she slouched in the backseat of her father's car, her dad sitting right beside her. It was one in the morning and Red had convinced Harold to let her go home to get some sleep. She knew she should be embarrassed but she was just too damn tired.

"I'm not sure how long we're going to be able to keep up this charade."

"To which charade are you referring to, Lizzie?"

"This whole thing, Dad. The Blacklist, the FBI, keeping our relationship a secret – or rather, apparently, the worst kept secret in the criminal circles." She huffed, shaking her head.

"Lizzie, we must. To publicly acknowledge that you're my daughter would put you in grave danger."

Lizzie's eyes snapped towards her father as Dembe drove them to her house in silence. "Meera is dead. Cooper is laying in a hospital bed, his throat sliced. I'm pretty sure I'm already in grave danger, Dad." She bit out.

"Because you are FBI, because you a part of the task force. If it came out that you were my daughter, not only would you lose your job but a whole new slew of threats will surface Lizzie." He argued, his eyes pinched.

Lizzie bit her lip, trying to stave off the tears. Luckily, Red's phone began to ring.
"Yes?" he answered.

A pause.

"I'm listening."

Another pause before he hung up.

"Was that your source?" Lizzie asked.

"Yes." He murmured.

"Did he find Berlin?"

Red cleared his throat and pointedly looked out the window. "We'll have to keep looking."

//\//\ //\//\//

Red walked purposefully towards the beat up apartment building, his gun at his side. As he came
level with two thugs on the street, clearly guards, they fumbled with their holsters, giving Red
ample time to shoot both in the chest.

He ambled up the stairwell, towards the apartment where he knew Berlin was hiding. Silently
picking the lock for the front door, he entered the apartment. Walking in, he found the man –
Kinsky – sitting with his back to the door, on the phone.

"Let's deal with the other female agent first. Then I want you to take care of the ginger."

Rage boiled inside Red's veins as he realized who the man was referring to. He quickly rounded
the table, his gun pointed at the man's chest as he smiled benignly, not an ounce of his anger
twisted his features.

"You must be the one they call 'Berlin.'"

The man looked at Red, then at the gun pointed at him and smirked.

"I must say, I'm very good at finding people. I've tracked enemies far and wide. I once found a
hedge–fund manager hiding in the Amazon with the Yawalapiti on the banks of the Kuluene River.
You know what the key to finding your enemies is? Remembering everyone's name. It's critical to
my survival. Anyone knows the head of some drug cartel in Colombia, some politician in Paris.
But I know their wives, girlfriends, children, their enemies, their friends. I know their favorite
bartender, their butcher. I remember the name of the baker I stole the strawberry bismark from
when I was 11 years old and his wife–Trudy Svoboda. But you– I have no idea who in the Sam
Hill you are." Red threw his hands up in the air in exasperation before aiming his gun back at the
man. "I have not a clue what I've done to you, what I've taken from you. And yet, of all the people
I've hurt, none of them have come after me with half as much vim and vigor as you. I don't even
recognize your face." Red shouted. "I'm stymied. And yet, here we are. You found me."

Kinsky laughed drily. "Through your weakness." He said softly. "I searched for one for years– a
weakness that would allow me to get to you. I nearly gave up. And then I find out about her.
Seemed so implausible that someone so careful could be so careless. And so I exploited it and
waited. And here we are thanks to Elizabeth Keen."

//\//\//\//\//\//\//\//
Lizzie sat at Cooper's bedside. According to the nurse, he had woken briefly before she'd arrived, but had yet to awaken again. She couldn't stand to see the man that she'd come to see as a mentor in such a state, with bandages around his neck and his hands from where he'd tried to pry the weapon away from his neck. "You, Meera, it's all because of me." She murmured, finally allowing more tears to fall.

After sitting with him for awhile longer, Lizzie finally made her way out of the hospital and to her car. Looking in the rear view mirror, intending to check her face for tear marks, Liz gasped when she saw Tom's reflection. He sat in the backseat, a gun pointed at her.

"Hey, babe." Tom greeted with a small grin.

///

"Help me understand what horrible thing I did to you that could possibly make all of this worth it. Who on God's green Earth are you?" Red didn't give the man any time to answer him before he shot the man in the hand. Kinsky screamed in pain, twisting in his seat as much as he was able to in his restraints, his face reddening in agony.

"What was that? Being shot in the hand is just an absolute bitch– all those little bones. At least it goes right through." Red shrugged, not a care in the world as the man breathed heavily. "Worst part, honestly, is needing somebody to help zip your fly. Tell me your story. I'm not leaving here without a story."

Red paused for a breath before raising his gun once more and shooting Kinsky in the hip. The man threw his head back, screaming in sheer agony as he stomped his feet against the floor. "Being shot in the hip, on the other hand– Jiminy Cricket. Thick bone, large artery not to mention the fact that it makes walking upright forever impossible. Just don't pass out. Stay focused." Red leaned towards Kinsky. "The story. What did I do to you?"

The man grunted, breathing shallowly before he leaned forward as much as he was able and spat in Red's face. Rearing back in disgust, Red fished in his pocket for his kerchief. Whipping it out with a flourish, he quickly wiped down his face. Placing the kerchief back in his pocket, Red rested his gun against Kinsky's knee. "How about the kneecap? The IRA always loved a good kneecapping."

"Beirut! Beirut." The man finally yelled.

Red took a step back, shaking his head in disbelief. "The Campolongo Incident."

At the sound of footsteps, Red looked up and stopped short at the sight of Lizzie walking into the room, followed closely by Tom who held a gun to her head. His poker face slipped for a moment as terror sketched valleys in his face.

"Slide it. Slide the gun now." Tom ordered.

"No." Red answered, his poker face slamming back across his features. Red's eyes flicked over to Lizzie as he kept his gun trained on Kinsky. "Are you hurt?"

"Do it! Kill her! Pull the trigger! Do it! Now!" Kinsky yelled at Tom, disallowing Lizzie from answering her father.

"Don't do it. Do you hear me?! – Tom. Please." Lizzie pleaded, tears making fresh tracks down her face.

"Shoot her! This man – he take everything from me! For what? For nothing. For money – business.
He snaps his fingers, and my life was–"

Red shot Kinksy in the head, bringing a sudden and gory end to the man's rant.

"Well, that simplifies matters. Just the three of us. Red now kept his gun trained on the small amount of Tom's head that peaked out from where he shielded himself behind Lizzie. Red slowly walked closer to them, his eyes never leaving Tom as Tom's never left him. "Tom, put the gun down before you do something you'll deeply regret. I'm the one you want. Make the right choice, Tom. But make it fast. Because when I get over there, I'm gonna take that gun away from you."

The bang of a gun rent through the air as Tom shot at Red, though his view was obstructed by Lizzie's hair. Red flinched, hissing as he looked down at his now bleeding arm.

Taking her chance, Lizzie elbowed Tom in the gut, causing the man to reflexively lower his arms to protect his vital organs. Spinning quickly, Lizzie grasped the gun in his hand, yanked it from his grip and aimed it at his stomach, before firing three shots before she could even allow herself to think. They looked at each other in shock. Tom slid down the wall as Lizzie backed away, dropping the gun as her jaw dropped in shock.

Red came up behind Lizzie, wrapping one arm around her shoulder, he gently reeled her in towards him so that she was facing him, her head resting against his shoulder. Wincing slightly as he brough his wounded arm up, he quickly took aim and shot Tom in the head.

"Shhh. It's alright." He murmured softly in Lizzie's ear as she jolted at the sound.

It took a moment for the meaning of that sound to perforate her shock. When it did, Lizzie began slamming her fist into her father's chest. "You had no right! You son of a bitch! How could you do that? He was my – "

Stepping back, Red grasped Lizzie's chin. "He was an imposter."

Red's words cut through Lizzie's rant and she swallowed thickly as her tears flowed. Staring at her dad, her face crumpled in anguish and she quickly threw her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry! I shot him and then you… and I can't…"

Realizing Lizzie was in the middle of a full blown panic, Red quickly untangled her arms from around his neck and stepped back. "Lizzie. Lizzie, sweetheart, I need you to listen to me. I need you to breath, Darling. Can you do that for me?"

Panicked eyes met his as she shook her head, her lips shuddering as she gasped.

"Yes, yes you can, Sweetheart. Deep breath in" Red allowed his chest to visibly expand as he showed her what to do. "And out." He said on an exhale. "Yes, that's good, Lizzie. Again."

"Good, you're doing great. Keep doing it."

After a few moments, Lizzie's breath evened out and Red drew her back towards his chest, cradling her head in his hand. "I swear to god, Lizzie. I'm making Baz drive you from the Post Office to home, no stops in between. I can't take much more of this." The thought Your baby can't take much more of this sat unsaid between them.

"How am I ever supposed to reconcile with what we just did?" He heard her murmur into his shoulder after several minutes of silence.

"You don't." He stated simply. "You can only find the thing that heals your soul, wipes away every
misdeed, and continue forward."

Lizzie stood at Meera's desk, slowly packing the woman's personal effects into a cardboard box. Picking up a small picture frame, Lizzie bit her lip as she gazed down at the photo of Meera's kids. "Her kids were only 8 and 5." She murmured as she felt Ressler's presence walk up beside her.

Ressler wrapped an arm around Lizzie's shoulders and she gratefully leaned into him. "Any update on Cooper?" He asked softly.

Before she could answer, Aram walked over to them. "Um the coroner, uh, just called in the results on the John Doe– the charred body found at the scene." He stated, trying not to look at the way that Ressler's arm was wrapped snuggly around Liz but failing miserably. "He wasn't a prisoner." He finished flatly.

Ressler and Lizzie pulled away from each other simultaneously. "He had to be. I mean, we accounted for everyone," Ressler argued.

Lizzie took the papers that Aram held in his hands and read through them quickly. "This report identifies him as the third guard on the manifest."

"What?" Ressler asked sharply. "No. I mean, the third guard – he's in a hospital. Berlin cut his hand off."

Aram froze, his eyes shifting as his brain raced a mile a minute. "Oh, no."

Ressler blew air out of his nose, clearly impatient. "What is it?"

"He cut his hand off." Aram murmured with dawning horror.

"Yeah, that's what all the prisoners said – he cut his hand off." Lizzie said, confused by Aram's hang up on such a detail.

"No, no. It's, um, it's a lexical ambiguity. He cut his hand off." Aram explained.

Lizzie froze as well as it dawned on her. "Berlin cut off his own hand?"

Ressler swore, running a hand through his hair. "The guard."

After the incident with Tom and Kinsky, Lizzie was more than willing to agree to Cooper's terms that she was not to leave the office except to go home. So the moment she took Ressler's call, she had been sat at her desk with only her desk lamp on and dozing. His announcement that Berlin was gone and a male nurse had been stabbed with a femur woke her up rather quickly, however.

After they hung up, Lizzie hit #1 on her speed dial.

"The man you killed wasn't Berlin."

Red sighed and Lizzie could hear the distinct sound of glass clattering together as he set a glass down. "Yes, I know."

"You know? How?"
"He spoke of Beirut 2010, the Campolongo incident– an unfortunate mess, but Berlin's attacks on my business started years earlier. The moment he said it, I knew."

"But you didn't say anything?" Lizzie grumped.

"Berlin needs to believe I think he's dead. It provides us with an advantage."

"So, he's still out there." Lizzie furiously beat her rising panic back down.

"We will find him, Lizzie. I promise."

"Can I come stay over at your safe house tonight?" Lizzie practically whispered, embarrassed that she needed the reassurance.

There was silence for a moment before she heard him heave a sigh. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart. I'm half way across the Atlantic right now. I've got a few trees to shake."

"Oh uh…yea. Ok. That's fine. I'll talk to you when you get back."

"Lizzie –"

She hung up before he could hear her sobs.

.removeAll

Red awoke, his head pounding, to a cacophony of children's laughter and gunfire. From his limited view, he could tell that he was laying in the back of a jeep and could see the children shooting at a military Humvee as it chased them through the jungle, that is, until one of the children took them out with a rocket launcher. Lovely.

Red allowed the children to lead them toward their "leader" who sat on a tattered airplane seat.

Red chuckled as he drew near, watching as the man in front of him took a large chug of rum straight from the bottle. "Oh, my stars. Is that how you cope with this insufferable humidity? I couldn't do it."

"We had an agreement." The man muttered.

Red nodded as he looked behind him at the ripped and torn bench seat of a car which was moonlighting as a couch before sitting down on it. "We did."

"I told you if I ever found you in my territory again, I'd kill you."

Red smiled pleasantly, cocking his head towards a boy who was currently pulling Red's fedora down on his head. "Tell the boy not to pull on the brim of the hat, Yaabari."

"What's in the box?" Yaabari nodded his head towards the large, heavy duty plastic crate that some of his men had unloaded from the jeep.

"I've come to propose a business transaction."

"No, we have no business. The box."

One of Yaabari's men attempted to shoot at the lock of the box, to no avail and he began arguing with one of his associates in Bantu.
Red sighed wistfully. "Typically, I steer clear of tin-pot dictators who employ boy soldiers, but I'm afraid this situation is unique."

The man who had attempted to shoot the box open, walked up to Red and began yelling in Bantu, holding his gun at Red's head.

"Well, now you're being shortsighted." Red muttered, his eyes boring into the other man who continued to yell in Bantu.

Red looked over at Yaabari. "Tell him to put the gun down."

Yaabari sighed before he lazily raised his hand and shot the man.

Red looked down at the lifeless body and gave a nod. "I'm glad to know you're a man of decisive action. You see, Yaabari, you didn't actually find me. I found you. And while your prepubescent ruffians may not know it, they brought me here to strike a deal that could benefit all of us."

Yaabari threw his head back and laughed. "What kind of deal?"

\///\///

"A man calling himself Berlin hired a bounty hunter to find me and my associates. That bounty hunter worked for you. I've since dispatched of him, but if Berlin hired one bounty hunter, he hired five. I want their names. I'm willing to pay $3 million." Red gestured beside him to where a couple of Yaabari's men held the now opened box aloft and large wads of money poured out of the box. "We do need to move quickly, though. You have –"

"Or what?"

"Or you give me the names for free." Red laughed, shaking his head. "We really should act swiftly."

Yaabari began to laugh as well. "We really should kill you and keep your money." He stated with a large grin.

"Now, there's a point of view that I can relate to." Red chuckled darkly before his face grew serious and drawn. "Yaabari, look at me. Give me what I want, or so help me God, I'll make it rain fire on you."

Yaabari's face twisted into a cruel smirk as he slouched in his seat. "Kill him." He ordered one of his boy soldiers. Before the boy could carry out his orders, a distinct whistling noise grew closer and closer before a sudden explosion rocked the camp.

Red laughed at Yaabari's sudden panic as the man jumped up and began barking orders before turning back to Red. "Funny thing I recently acquired three hellfire missiles at a considerable discount. If you give me what I want, I can still call off the other two. But I'll need to borrow your phone."

"I know nothing!"

"Mm. I think you do, Yaabari. I think you've heard things. Who else has Berlin hired to hunt me?"

"The Cuban." Yaabari quickly stated, looking at the sky warily.

Red shook his head, grabbing one of Yaabari's bottles of alcohol and poured it over the pile of
money. "Orci. I've dealt with Orci. Who else?"

"I told you I don't know!" The distinct whistle followed by another, closer, explosion. "Okay. There was someone. I-I can't remember his name. They call him something the, 'The Prince,' 'The Lord.'"

Red frowned. "Lord Baltimore." Taking a cigar out of its case, Red quickly clipped it and lit it. Grinning at Yaabari, he threw his match onto the pile of money which ignited quickly.

//\\\\

Red chuckled as Lizzie walked up to where he sat on the park bench. "Did you take a different route?" He teased.

Lizzie shook her head before wordlessly handing him a small rectangular piece of paper. "I can't believe you forgot." She muttered with no real heat.

Red stared down at the ultrasound photo, smiling brightly. "Oh look at that! They've got my head shape. Poor child."

"Poor boy." She corrected.

Red began to laugh before choking it back as her words hit him, causing him to do a double take. "Really?" He breathed.

Lizzie smiled, her eyes glittering with happiness. "Yep. You're going to have a grandson."

"Oh Sweetheart!" Red cried, standing up and grasping her hand to pull her up into a tight hug which she gladly returned, laughing at his excitement.

"I'm so happy for you, Lizzie." He murmured in her ear.

"Thanks, Dad." She wasn't going to cry. She wasn't going to cry. Dammit, stupid hormones.

//\\\\

It had taken quite some time and quite a few promises of a celebration meal before their shared excitement died down enough for them to remember that they were meeting for a reason.

"Justice is freaking out." Lizzie stated, her glum tone a far cry from what it'd been just minutes before. "Hellfire missiles? – Seriously?"

Red shrugged, cocking his with a small smile on his face. "Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about."

"Martin won't protect the task force." She stated, speaking of the interim Director who took over while Cooper is out. "He doesn't care that Berlin is still targeting us. And without Cooper to defend our actions -"

"People love to decry big brother, the NSA, the government listening in on their most private lives, yet they all willingly go online and hand over the most intimate details of those lives – to big data." Red cut in.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Most people don't care that Google knows their search history."

"They know more than that." He stated gruffly. "They know your habits, the banks you use, the pills you pop, the men or women you sleep with. Every piece of information is worth something to
somebody. And in the hands of the wrong person, that could be deadly."

Lizzie gazed at her dad for a moment before shaking her head as she picked up his trail. "You have a lead."

Red gave a sharp nod. "Lord Baltimore is in town."

"Lord Baltimore?"

"He's a tracker by trade, but his methods are thoroughly modern. He's made an art of combing through cyberspace, finding the status updates, financial records, and location blips that virtually everyone leaves behind in the modern age."

"And he has a new target?"

"Yes. Me." At this, Lizzie's eyes widened. "Follow this, Lizzie. It's our first lead. If we find Lord Baltimore, he may very well point us to Berlin."

\/

"Berlin has hired a skip tracer who calls himself Lord Baltimore." Lizzie said, looking from Aram to Ressler as she spoke.

"The man burns three million dollars and rains down Hellfire missiles and Reddington brings you a bounty hunter?" Martin asked from behind her.

Lizzie resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Barely. "He's more than a bounty hunter. He's a statistician."

"Even less impressive. What does he do, find them with a slide ruler?" Martin chuckled at his own joke.

"No. With data analytics." Aram spoke up.

Ressler turned to Aram. "You've heard of this guy?"

"Yeah. Lord Baltimore is an urban legend." Aram enthused, his face nearly rapturous. "They say he roams the deep web, hunting those who don't wish to be found. Uses some sort of collection algorithms to build a dossier based on the information that people give away online."

"He's a data miner. Aram, can you pull up that file you showed me? Rowan Mills. She works as a data engineer at Quancord Analytics." Lizzie requested, turning to face the screen as Aram brought up the file.

"Agent Keen asked me to look for any irregularities in the accounts of employees at the six big data firms. I found several, but this was especially odd: a $250,000 payment that went into Mills' I.R.A. out to an offshore account." Aram stated in explanation of the data and figures they were seeing.

\/

The petite woman who sat in front of Liz and Ressler twirled her ring around her thumb nervously as she spoke. "Yes, $250,000 was deposited into my I.R.A., but as soon as I saw that, I changed my passwords and I reported it. I'm telling you, I'm the victim here."

"And you said this wasn't the first time you were targeted?" Lizzie asked gently.
Rowan nodded her head. "There was an incident in August."

"What kind of an incident?" Ressler questioned in his usual gruff manner.

Rowan shrugged her shoulders. "Someone accessed my systems."

"Looking for what? Bank accounts? Credit-card numbers?"

"It would be impossible to know what they were looking for because the data we gather has no limits."

"They were looking for someone who doesn't want to be found." Lizzie said, trying to point the woman in the right direction.

"Could the data that was taken help them do that?" Ressler asked.

Rowan scoffed, a small smirk adorning her face. "Yes. That's what we do."

"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"

"Did you hear what she said?" Lizzie looked over at Ressler as he drove them back to their hotel.

Ressler chuckled under his breath. "We just interviewed the girl for a half hour, Liz. You're gonna need to be more specific than that.

Lizzie rolled her eyes, a small smile gracing her face. "The bit about how their whole purpose is to find people who don't want to be found. Isn't that… creepy? How easy it is to track someone? I mean, I just feel like – I don't know – someone is watching me."

Ressler glanced over at Liz for a second before putting his eyes back on the road. "Hey." He said softly, reaching out one of his hands and grasping hers where she had it resting on the seat next to her. "You can't think like that. Tom's dead. That whole thing is behind you now." He murmured soothingly.

Lizzie merely nodded, biting her lip as she looked out the window. Though she squeezed his hand in gratitude, happy to notice he didn't let go.

"You talk to Dr. Friedman yet?" Lizzie asked after a moment, looking back over at Ressler.

"Don't change the subject." A small twitch of a smirk on his lips told Lizzie he could see right through her.

"The visits are mandatory." She persisted.

"Look, the Bureau isn't interested in our mental health. They've assigned a shrink to talk to us to cover their asses in case one of us wigs out, but that ain't gonna be me."

Liz snorted in derision. "You're too healthy to talk to a shrink?"

"I talk to you all the time." He teased. "Aren't you board certified?"

"Yeah. And in my professional opinion, I think you need to talk to Dr. Friedman."

"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"\"

Just a few hours later, Ressler and Lizzie were sitting in Rowan Mills' apartment. She'd called them
up, absolutely terrified about a voicemail. So they figured they'd come take a listen.

*Hello, Rowan. I know about that little chat you had today with the FBI. So, I'm going to make this real simple for you. I'm warning you, do not talk to them again. I know where you live.*

Liz and Ressler trade glances as the voicemail – complete with automated voice to disguise the caller – ends. "This person calls you by name," Lizzie pointed out.

Rowan sighed, twisting the ring on her thumb once more. "I don't know. It could be anyone."

"It's as if they know you, though." Ressler persisted.

"What about the apartment? Any reason to believe there might be something missing, – out of place?" Lizzie asked.

Rowan looked around them nervously. "You think someone's been in here?"

Lizzie held up a finger, grimacing apologetically as she rummaged in her pockets for her phone. Taking a look at the Caller ID, she quickly answered it. "Hey, perfect timing. I'm gonna need you to trace a call."

"Okay. Great. But I have something. Our suspect, Mills, she's telling the truth. Security at Quancord Analytics confirm her terminal was hacked from the outside." Aram's voice came on the other line.

"Any idea what was taken?"

"Uh, yeah, like, a gajillion bytes of online data, – which makes no sense."

"Why?"

"Because Mr. Reddington's a Luddite. No e-mail, no computer, no digital communication of any kind. I mean, Dembe uses disposable flip phones for God's sakes. Why would Berlin hire Lord Baltimore to track him? Unless –" Aram cut himself off, apparently unwilling to finish the thought.

"You think they might be looking for one of us?"

"Not a day goes by where I don't think about Agent Malik." Aram murmured.

"Me too."

After a slight pause, Aram sighed. "What number do you need me to trace?"

"Rowan Mills received a message last night. I need a location."

slashes

The tires screeched as Ressler, Liz and a unit of agents pulled up outside of the location where the call had originated from.

"You're staying in the car until we clear the scene." Ressler demanded then held up a finger as Lizzie opened her mouth to argue. "No arguments! That little boy needs you to keep your ass in this truck. You got me?" Ressler stated, pointing a finger at her stomach.

Sighing in defeat and knowing that he was right, Lizzie nodded her head and watched as he hopped out of the truck and jogged after the team of agents entering the building.
Within minutes, Lizzie's phone rang.

"Hey, it's clear. You're gonna want to see this."

Lizzie looked around the apartment she was in. There were various gadgets, a rather impressive computer system, and shockingly, a few photos of Rowan with some friends. Though they didn't seem to be photos a stalker would take then hang up as some sort of shrine. It seemed, to Lizzie, as something someone would do to remember the moments captured with their friends.

"Ressler. Let's get Mills in here. I want to see how she reacts to this."

"Sure, but you're leaving the moment she comes."

"Oh come on!"

"Nope. No arguments. You know the rules. But you suck at following them. That's why I'm here.

Red smiled sweetly at Cooper as the man came slowly down the stairs to his own living room, leaning heavily on a cane. "Hello, Harold. Please apologize to Charlene, your side gate may need a new lock. A get-well present." Red said breezily, holding out a flash drive which Cooper took hesitantly.

Red leaned forward, squinting as he inspected Cooper's neck where a thin scar stretched across the entire front, right below his Adam's apple. "It looks so soft. Shea butter?"

Cooper ignored the question and waved the flash drive. "Is this what I think it is?"

"When are you coming back to work?" Red evaded the question with one of his own.

"I'm not."

Red shook his head in disappointment. "Things are at a tipping point, Harold. Your replacement has the unfortunate distinction of being both untrustworthy and incompetent."

"I've informed the Bureau. It's time to be with my family. Charlene's from the Dominican. I've always promised we'd spend more time there."

"I hate sand." Red stated, pursing his lips in distaste.

"If this is some kind of threat?"

Red laughed, shaking his head. "It's not a threat, Harold. It's a bribe. That is my only copy of Our Little Adventure in Kuwait. I'm giving it to you only to underscore the urgency of our situation."

Cooper sighed but pocketed the flash drive. "I'm not coming back."

"You need to get back on your feet. There's no shame in being a cripple."

Cooper glared at Red, shifting unsteadily on his feet to take weight off his bad leg. "I'll remember you to Charlene."

"I know what they found while you were at the hospital. I know about the diagnosis. Let's get the
job done."

Lizzie sat back in the chair. Having convinced Ressler that she would be perfectly safe since the petite woman was currently shackled to the opposite chair in the interrogation room, he'd allowed her to take point on her interrogation. "I mean, you got to do better than that."

Rowan shook her head. "It's the only possible explanation."

"And this Nora – She died?"

"In Mosul, seven years ago. But if what you're saying is true, if all of this is real, then it's the only explanation. My twin sister is alive."

"It's nice to have you back, Mr. Howe. Your rib eye is on its way to your room along with a complimentary bottle of '82 Margaux." The Concierge simpered as he followed Red and Dembe towards the steps of the hotel.

"Thank you, Steven." Red murmured.

"Are you sure you want to take the stairs?"

"Doctor's orders. We'll be fine." Red stated in clear dismissal as he headed up the aforementioned stairs. "I don't remember him." He murmured to Dembe. "Find out who he is and put two more men on detail downstairs."

Both Red and Dembe paused on the landing at the growing sound of helicopter blades.

"You hear that?" Red asked, looking around. Suddenly, a helicopter took up the entirety of the view out the window next to them. Glass began to shatter as the men inside the helicopter began shooting into the hotel. Ducking for cover in the melee, Red covered his head and so didn't notice the men using ropes to jump into the hotel. He did, however, hear the distinct sound of Dembe's weapon, able to recognize his preferred pistol. Red looked up only to be plunged into darkness as a hood was placed over his head and he was dragged away.

The hood was removed and Red found himself tied to a chair inside of a warehouse, a rather very attractive Persian woman wearing boots, khakis and a tank top, was stood near him, leaning over a computer.

"Lord Baltimore. Aren't you a surprisingly saucy minx." He flirted.

The woman quickly spoke in Hebrew to the armored man next to her, never taking her eyes of the screen. The man soon left, off to follow her orders. "Unbelievable." The woman murmured before looking away from the computer. "I'm sorry. Who is it exactly that you think I am?"

Red took a second look at the woman, his eyes wandering over her body from head to toe. "You're Mossad." He stated before chuckling. "Please don't tell me this is about that little dust-up in Haifa."

"That 'dust-up' claimed the lives of two agents and a Turkish diplomat."

Red threw his head back and laughed. "A diplomat? I had nothing to do with it."
The woman raised a brow and shrugged her shoulder. "Then you have nothing to worry about."

"Oh, you have no idea how I wish that were true. I have tens of thousands of things to worry about. Fortunately, you, my dear, are not one of them."

"And why is that?"

"Because the person you just informed of my capture is going to release me within the hour." Red stated with a smirk.

"Aren't we confident today?"

Red flashed her a smile. "I'm confident every day."

The woman couldn't wipe a small smirk from her face. "And I thought we had nothing in common."

\\\\

"Your younger brother, Shahin, was killed in the 2009 Pishin Bombing. In Farsi, Shahin, means – "

She looked at him sharply, unable to mask her confusion. "Falcon. How did you know?"

"I know everything about the people who are tasked with finding me. Your turn. How did you do it?"

The woman smirked, leaning against the table behind her. "You possess an affinity for Zegna ties."

Red chuckled. "So do millions of other men."

"Thousands, actually at least in the Northeast Corridor. Nonetheless, this sample was far too broad to be of any practical use. However, we couldn't help but notice that you lean toward a darker, earth-tone palate – chocolate and oxblood – geometric shapes, rarely stripes. We introduced a diblock copolymer nanoparticle marker into the brown dye in their factory in Novara, which supplies all the vendors on the Eastern seaboard."

Red laughed, shaking his head. He had to admit, even if only to himself. He was impressed. "Effectively turning every earth-toned Zegna tie into a homing device. Brilliant. Just like a bloodhound."

\\\\

"Hey, I got something! I got something." Aram cried out from where he sat at his desk. Lizzie and Ressler hurried over to see what he'd dug up. "Okay, so, the collection algorithms – that Lord Baltimore uses?"

"Yeah." Lizzie replied.

"I applied them to the data he hacked, and, uh, I think I see how he does it. It's amazing. He's using personal details about his target's life to create markers to narrow his search. So he's looking for someone who lived in D.C. before 1990, has a prescription for Lipitor through Medco, downloads World War II documentaries on Netflix not Amazon and has a digital subscription to both the Wall Street Journal and CatFanatic."

Ressler's brow raised in morbid fascination. "Reddington has a subscription to Cat Fanatic?"
"No. Turns out Lord Baltimore's not looking for Mr. Reddington."

\\\\

"Your suspect's been remanded into my custody." Martin stood at the entrance to the warehouse, holding out a sheaf of papers which the lovely Mossad agent snatched from his fingers and read.

"This references a task force. What task force?"

Martin smiled tightly. "It's a matter of national security."

"Perhaps next time." Red said to the woman as he was released from his handcuffs and walked over to the FBI agents.

"Keen wants you to take a look at these." Martin muttered to him as they exited the building. Red took the documents before spinning on his heel.

"Ms. Navabi." He called, happy to see that she stood at the entrance to the doorway. "Jundallah claimed responsibility for the bomb that killed your brother. They had nothing to do with it. I can give you the name of the man who did."


Red laughed, shaking his head. "Are they?"

\\\\

"What the hell is going on? Martin said you were extracted by Mossad." Lizzie answered her phone when he called her. He had refused any FBI transport and so waited for Dembe, who'd only been just around the block. He now sat in the back of his car, languishing in the air conditioning.

"We'll discuss it later. What am I looking at?" He asked, looking down at the rather large folio with what appeared to be ID's of various women.

"Targets. Turns out Berlin didn't contract Lord Baltimore to find you. He's looking for a woman."

"What woman?" He asked, rifling through the pages until he noticed a familiar face. Snatching the page out of the stack, he stared at it, his spine stiffening.

"We're not sure. We only know her profile. Aram was able to narrow the search, but that still leaves us with over 200 potential targets."

"Naomi Hyland." He murmured.

"Who? W-who is Naomi Hyland?"

"You need to get a unit to her right now."

"She's in protective custody. Wait. I don't understand. Uh, how do you know?"

"Listen, Lizzie." Red said urgently. "Berlin is coming for this woman. You have to move now."

"Why? Who the hell is Naomi Hyland?"

"She was my wife." Red stated, closing his eyes and bracing himself for impact.
"What?" Red pulled the phone away from his ear at her screech. "I'm going to kill you. You're dead. No. Wait. I amend that. I'm going to have this baby and then I'm going to kill you, it'll be so much easier for me that way." Lizzie ranted. "She's alive?!"

"Elizabeth, I didn't know until I just saw her picture. You must believe me. We can discuss this later, but right now, you need to send people out to retrieve her and bring her in."

"Oh we are definitely talking about this." She demanded before hanging up.

Lizzie looked down at her caller ID as her phone rang. She'd been catching up on paper work in her office and relished the distraction.

"Hey Ress, what's up? Did you visit Rowan's mother?"

"Yea, that's what I wanted to talk to you about. I just found Nora Mills' body. I don't know. Either Rowan is the greatest liar in the world, or some kind of split happened."

Lizzie was silent for a moment as she shifted in her chair. "With what we know, I'm going to guess that a split happened."

Once again, Lizzie had had to wait until the agents cleared the scene and allowed the U.S. Marshalls to approach the woman first since she was technically under their jurisdiction. Walking up to her, Lizzie felt like she was in some sort of Twilight Zone. This was her… step mother? Who was alive. Apparently. Her life was one step away from an episode of Jerry Springer.

"Mrs. Highland?" Lizzie questioned hesitantly.

The woman looked around her, at the Marshalls and FBI agents milling around and her party guests who sat on the couches, looking lost and confused…her husband. "I had a life, you know?" She started, her voice cracking. "My daughter had a life with a house and a dog. And then I woke up one day. You can't imagine what it's like to have a man like Raymond Reddington turn your life upside down." Lizzie swallowed thickly. Yep she had definitely entered the Twilight Zone. And she was not enjoying it. Or this woman. She was really going to have to discuss his taste in women with her father.

"They accused me of being a part of it?" Naomi continued. "Somehow, I was a suspect. Put my life under a microscope every call, every charge. My assets were — "She sighed, taking a deep breath. "I finally convinced them I was innocent. They said I had to go, give up everything. I remember it was a Wednesday afternoon. My daughter wasn't even out of school yet. And by Thursday, we were in Philadelphia, fending for ourselves."

Lizzie looked towards Naomi's husband and nodded towards him. "You're gonna have to tell him." She stated, trying to get the woman away from this line of thought. Selfishly, she really couldn't handle this can of worms right now.

Naomi nodded shakily. "We can be ready in 20 minutes."

"Okay, I'll let them know."

Just as Lizzie went to walk out of the kitchen, the front windows shattered and men came rushing into the house, guns firing. Lizzie quickly ducked behind the kitchen island, pulling Naomi down
with her.

"Get down!"

Grabbing blindly for her radio, Lizzie could finally feel it in her grasp and pressed the button. "I need backup! -"

Before she could finish, she cried out in pain, her muscles contracting as she was tazed. Thankfully, whoever was doing it, didn't hold it very long and the pain soon eased, though her muscles would not stop contracting and so she watched helplessly as the strange men took Naomi.

She could hear the woman yelling "What are you doing?!" As she was led away.

//\//\//\//

The moment Lizzie could stand, she did so, putting a hand to her belly and letting out a sigh of relief as her baby kicked her. Logically, she knew that the taser only affects the muscles directly under the skin. That didn't mean it was a good idea to tase a pregnant woman. The assholes.

Hurrying out of the house, Lizzie looked up and down the street. Her eyes locked on the sight of Rowan/ Nora walking out of the house next door, a large case, one typically used to house a sniper rifle, in her hand. She smirked at Lizzie and continued walking, without a care in the world. Lizzie quickly shouted out to the agents standing nearest her.

"Hey! That's her!"

//\//\//\//

Lizzie and Ressler stood at the evidence board, trying to figure out if they were missing something.

"You're the expert, but from where I sit, this is the perfect setup." Ressler murmured. "One personality hiding behind the other, able to commit a crime and yet have no memory of it."

Lizzie shook her head. "Well, that's not exactly how it works."

"Rowan passed the lie-detector test."

"That's because Rowan's unaware of Nora and Nora's unaware of Rowan. That's how dissociative identity disorder works. The two can't conspire."

Ressler chuckled darkly, shaking her head. "Well, then we're screwed because we have Rowan and we need Nora."

"What we need to do is identify the trigger the image, sound, memory that flips her switch." As her gaze swept across the board, her eyes stuttered to a stop at the picture of Nora and Marcus – the man they'd detained along with Lord Baltimore. "Of course. It's him." She said excitedly, snapping the picture off the board.

//\//\//\//

Lizzie walked into the interrogation room where Nora/ Rowan was still languishing away in shackles. "You know I think you were right. I think Nora survived that incident in Mosul." Lizzie stated, cutting straight to the chase. "I think she escaped, came home, and killed Rowan."

"What?" The woman questioned, looking at Lizzie as if she were crazy.
Lizzie simply smiled and pressed "play" on her cell phone. "We Three" by the Ink Spots began to play and Rowan immediately began to become agitated, shifting in her seat as her eyes flickered about the room.

"Th-That's impossible."

Lizzie leaned forward, bracing herself against the table. "Nora killed Rowan because she envied her. She wanted to become her. She wanted to be the good sister, the sister who didn't get abused by her uncle."

Rowan began to rock in her chair. "You're lying. Nobody murdered Rowan! I'm Rowan!"

"No, Rowan is dead. You murdered your sister, didn't you, Nora? That's what caused the split – the trauma and guilt of the murder."

"No, I- I'm Rowan Mills!"

"It was playing that night, wasn't it?" Lizzie nodded towards her phone. "Do you remember how it felt that night? Do you remember what you were feeling, Nora, when you killed your sister? It's over, Nora. Marcus cut a deal. Tell me where you took Naomi Hyland."

In that moment, it was like a curtain had lifted. Rowan stopped fidgeting, her eyes cleared and a smirk crept across her face. Lizzie was looking at Nora now.

\///\///

"We got here too late." Lizzie spoke into her phone as she looked around the warehouse.

"Describe the scene." Red demanded.

Lizzie sighed, unsure where to start."It's... bloody. Lord Baltimore's men, they're all dead, – all but one, and I don't think he's –"

"Let me speak with him." Red requested urgently.

"What? Why?"

"Because he didn't survive. He was left alive to deliver a message, and it won't be to you. It's for me."

Lizzie rushed after the paramedics who'd just wheeled the injured man away.

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!" She called, after them, coming up beside the gurney once they'd finally stopped. "The man with one hand, what did he instruct you to say?" Lizzie instructed the injured man, holding the phone closer to him.


\///\///

Dembe and Red walked silently down the hallway, their weapons drawn. A scantily clothed was banging on one of the apartment doors, yelling in Spanish. Yet when she turned to look at them, she gasped and ran in the opposite direction.

Stopping at no. 604, Dembe looked to Red who gave him a tight nod. Stepping back, Dembe kicked the door down with a crash. The two men rushed into the apartment, moving from room to
room. Growling as he rubbed his head, Red looked around him, lowering his weapon. That was
when he noticed a small glint coming from the bed. Walking over to the bed warily, his lips turned
down into a frown at the sight of the pocket watch laying there. Taking ahold of it, Red opened the
watch and sucked in a breath at the sight of a cut out polaroid picture of Naomi’s face.

\/

"Hey, did you find her?" Lizzie asked, having answered her phone the moment "Nick's Pizza"
flashed across the screen.

"No. They were gone." Her dad's gruff voice came over the line.

"You'll find her, don't worry." She murmured in what she hoped was a comforting tone. When she
received no response, Lizzie sighed. "Hey, you know, I've been thinking."

"Oh dear, should I be worried?" He teased though Lizzie could hear how utterly exhausted he
sounded.

"That depends." Lizzie answered.

Red sat up in his seat on the couch, his eyes glancing at Dembe as he walked back to his seat after
putting Red's luggage into his room. "What are you think about doing, Lizzie?"

"I think it's high time I do my part in protecting our family."

"Lizzie, Elizabeth. What the hell are you thinking?" He demanded but it was too late. She'd already
hung up.

Red sighed, rubbing a weary hand over his face. Both he and Dembe looked up at the sound of a
knock at their hotel room door. Dembe quickly stood, heading towards the door, his gun drawn.

"This was left at the front desk for Mr. Hirschfeld." The Concierge murmured, handing Dembe a
package. Dembe quickly tipped the man and walked back to Red, handing him the package.

"Raymond." Dembe encouraged when it didn't appear as though he was going to open it. "You
want me to open it?"

Red shook his head. "No, I got it." He murmured.

Just as he opened it, the sound of a phone ringing emanated from the package. Reaching in, he took
the phone out and quickly answered.

"Ah, Mr. Reddington, I presume."

Berlin immediately knew who it was. "Where is she?" He demanded.

Berlin chuckled. "Oh, here and there, out and about. You know women. I can only imagine how
dearly you must be missing her after all these years, huh? So I made you a little something to
remember her by. You see I'm gonna do to your wife what you did to my daughter. I'm gonna send
her back to you piece by piece by piece."

Berlin hung up and Red tossed the phone onto the couch beside him, reaching hesitantly into the
package when he noticed there was still something in there. Removing an ornate rectangular box,
Red paused, gathering his courage before opening it. Letting out a harsh breath, he gazed down at
the index finger of his ex wife.
"I talked to Reddington. He couldn't find her." Lizzie announced as she walked over to Ressler.

Ressler shrugged his shoulders as they headed towards their office. "A win's a win. Lord Baltimore's off the street. Did I hear right? Was Reddington detained by some, uh, Mossad agent?"

Lizzie snorted. "Yeah, apparently Martin had to negotiate his release." She stated as they walked into their office and both went to their respective desks.

Ressler smirked, shaking his head. "Well, any agent who can track down Reddington, I'm buying them a beer."

The both looked up at the sound of a knock on their open door.

"Congratulations. " Dr. Friedman, the task force's psychiatrist spoke to Ressler. He'd been expertly avoiding her for the last few days – the last few months, really. "I heard you captured the man you were after. I thought maybe now we could go over a couple things, maybe take stock." Ressler snorted in derision, shaking his head.

"Agent Ressler. I will recommend you for suspension." She said sternly, following him out of the office as he made his escape. Lizzie trailed behind them, worried for her partner.

"Look, I don't mean to be a prick here, but I'm not sure what you think you're gonna fix."

"Yeah, I'm not sure either – Until we talk."

"About what?" Ressler demanded. "Those agents who died today? About the fact that we lost a woman that we were supposed to protect? How do I feel about that? I feel like crap. But I know the good we do here, why it matters. And am I worried that someday it's not gonna be enough? Yeah. And when that day comes, you'll be the first to know."

Lizzie watched as Ressler made his way across the way room.

"Why are you all smiles?" Lizzie asked, a smile of her own adorning her face at the sight of Aram's happiness, temporarily forgetting about her partner's run in with the psychiatrist.

"Guess who's no longer Interim Director."

"What? Martin – he's gone?" She asked excitedly. "Well, who do we answer to now?"

"That would be me." A welcome voice said from behind them. Lizzie whipped around and let out a happy laugh, grinning at Cooper.

"What are you waiting on, Agent Keen? Tell me where we are with Berlin." He demanded as he limped, still relying heavily on his cane, further into the war room. The moment he did so, the entire staff at the Post Office erupted in applause, Lizzie happily joining in.

Lizzie knocked on Cooper's door, having given him a little while to get settled.

"Sir?"

"Come in Agent Keen."
Lizzie smiled shakily as she walked into his office, sitting down in one of the chairs at his desk.

"What is it, Keen?" He demanded, after watching her fidget in the seat for a few moments, rubbing the scar on her wrist.

"Sir, due to recent events I feel it necessary to lay everything out on the table, full disclosure."

Cooper's brow furrowed in confusion as he took off his glasses. "What do you mean?"

"Sir, I know why Reddington turned himself in."

At this, Cooper sat back in his seat. "Please, do enlighten me." He said, waving his head in a 'please continue' gesture.

"Well actually there were several reasons. Reasons that I'll be more than willing to tell you all I know." Lizzie gulped. "But the reason he wished to only speak with me." Her voice caught in her throat and she had to take a deep breath. "Was to stay close to me, to protect me."

"And why would he feel that necessary, Agent Keen?" Cooper questioned, frowning.

"Because I'm his daughter."
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lizzie watched as her father marched towards her, his hands clenched at his sides and his jaw set. As he stopped a few feet away, Lizzie quirked a small smile and looked around her at the glass walls of the Box.

"Well Dad, it looks like the tables have turned, huh?" She joked tremulously.

Red's eyes flared as he ground his teeth. "Don't you dare!" He thundered. "Don't you dare make light of this, Elizabeth. What the hell were you thinking?" Red aggressively scratched the top of his head. "25 years. You have demolished 25 years of trying to keep you safe, trying to give you as normal a life as I possibly could. For what? Please enlighten me, Lizzie. I am just dying to know!"

Lizzie swallowed as she stood up from the uncomfortable metal cot and walked towards her dad, her body warming with self-righteous anger. "To save your ass, Dad." She stated between clenched teeth.

"Oh? And why exactly did my ass need saving?" Red questioned, looking her directly in the face as he couldn't bear to look elsewhere, to see his little girl, caged.

"Because you're too much of a stubborn jackass to admit when you need help." Lizzie snarked, crossing her arms atop her rounded belly. "You came to the FBI with the list but you kept them out of the loop on the bigger picture. You're using them to fit your needs while at the same time, you're crippling them." Lizzie shook her head in exasperation. "The FBI are your three-legged work horse, Dad."

The tick under Red's right eye began to flutter. "I don't see how that has anything to do with saving my ass, Lizzie."

"Your wife has been kidnapped, she's being tortured, Dad!" Lizzie yelled. "Berlin found her when you couldn't. I think that means you're a bit over your head, don't you?"

Red began to grind his teeth once more, his eyes hardening as he stared at her before spinning on his heel and walking away from her.

Lizzie's eyes widened in anguish at the sight of her father's receding back. She'd never seen him so angry, at least not at her. As he walked away, she couldn't help but wonder if he was coming back.

---

She shifted in her seat under Ressler's intense scrutiny. He was angry, fuming really. His cheeks flushed red to match his hair. Was every man in her life pissed at her?

"What was your game plan? Did you really think that you could just admit that you'd been harboring a fugitive for 25 years and, what, we'd just let you continue on as an agent? That you'd get to keep your badge?" Ressler spat, springing out of his chair that it scraped loudly against the floor before tipping backwards. "I trusted you!" He yelled, slapping his hand against the desk, causing Lizzie to jump in her seat. "You were my best friend!"

"I'm still your best friend, Ress." Lizzie said tearfully.
Ressler scoffed, shaking his head as he paced.

"I knew what I was doing. I know I can't be an agent." She stated, ignoring the fresh tears sliding down her cheeks. "I also know that my dad wrote a clause into his immunity deal. Any family members who either knowingly or unknowingly were a party to his criminal offenses fall under the umbrella of his immunity deal."

Ressler's eyes narrowed as he stared through her in silence.

"I can't be an agent anymore. But I can be an asset."

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Red looked towards the door as it closed behind the newcomer, his cheek beginning to feel tight as the blood splattered there began to dry. "You're late." He gruffed.

Mr Kaplan pursed her lips but apparently chose to ignore his comment. "How many?"

Red directed her into the next room. He imagined it was a living room at some point, but it was now nothing but a shell used by the homeless and addicts. "Three."

Mr Kaplan looked at him askance as she carefully got to her knees and examined the first body. "This is the second time this week."

Red shrugged, looking around dispassionately at the carnage. "Everything was very polite, a few questions, a few answers. Then things got contentious."

Mr Kaplan shook her head as she searched for spent bullet casings. "This business with your wife, this pursuit, and what's going on with Lizzie…it's pushing you in ways that I don't like."

"Don't start with me, Kate." Red snapped. "I'll handle my business, you handle yours."

"Raymond."

Red turned around at the sound of Dembe calling his name to see the man holding out that day's burner phone. "It's Worboliski." He said in his soft, deep voice, handing the phone over to Red.

"Henryk." Red greeted

"It's Warsaw." Worboliski's gruff voice came over the line, his thick German accent reverberating through phone.

"What happened?"

"They were hit 20 minutes ago."

"What do we know?"

"Professional crew. Military precision. Six minutes in and out."

"We have an inventory?"

"Safe-deposit boxes popped, some cash missing. They're running numbers now."

"But you and I both know what they were after."
"Notify Dubicki. See if he knows anything about the team. I want a report within the hour." Red shut the phone with a click. "Interesting."

Red walked over to Mr. Kaplan where she kneeled on the floor, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Mr. Kaplan, I'm sorry. You're right. I'm out on the far end of the limb."

She grasped his hand and held it tightly in comfort, her eyes misty. "Take a moment. Read a book. You will find your wife. Have faith in your daughter." At the sound of a soft groan, Mr. Kaplan looked over at one of the bodies. "Oh, dear."

Red heard the next groan and pursed his lips, walking over where the man lay prone on the floor. "Aw, hell." He murmured, raising his gun and calmly shooting the man in the head before leaving the room, a small nod in good bye to Mr. Kaplan.

\///\\

"When Reddington came to visit you in the box, you referred to the FBI as 'them,' like you didn't include yourself as one of us. Why?" Ressler questioned gruffly.

Lizzie smiled bitterly, looking down at her hands, clenched in front of her on the table. She supposed she should be happy they didn't cuff her. "When I made the decision to do this, I knew what it meant. I knew that no matter what happened, I wouldn't be allowed to keep my badge. So I distance myself. I need to."

"Why?"

Lizzie gave Ressler a wounded look. "I know what you must be thinking, Ressler. You're thinking that this is some elaborate ploy. That I got into the FBI to aid my father in his criminal endeavors." Ressler opened his mouth to speak and Lizzie quickly spoke over him. "I didn't. When I was fourteen, I had a bit of a ... rough patch. My dad and Pop had taught me how to pick locks, pockets...among other things. They did it to prepare me, make sure I could handle any and all situations. I used it to rob stores." Lizzie's lip quirked wistfully. "When Dad found out, he was so furious. Told me that he'd taught me those things for my protection. That he wanted me to run as far from what he was as I could, to never be like him. So I did."

Ressler gazed at her solemnly, nodding his head. "Why wasn't that on your criminal record?" He asked quietly.

"I was lucky. I reminded the Sheriff of his daughter who had died in a car accident." Lizzie stated, smiling sadly.

\///\\

"Agent Ressler." Aram whispered urgently as Ressler passed him.

Backpedaling, Ressler came to stand next to Aram's desk. "What's up?"

Aram nodded at the screen. "She's been like this for the last ten minutes." He murmured, grimacing in sympathy at the sight.

Ressler stared at the footage of Lizzie curled up on the cot in the box, her shoulders shaking. As they watched, the movements of her chest and shoulders became more frantic.

"Can we get sound?" Ressler questioned quietly.
"Uh yea…"

Within moments, the sound of Lizzie's sobs came through the speakers, causing both Ressler and Aram to wince. Ressler leaned forward, trying to hear better. What had at first been sobs had turned to gasps for breath.

"Shit!" Ressler cursed, running towards the holding area.

/L//\/

"Liz! Hey Liz!" Ressler shouted as he squeezed through the door as it swung slowly open. Falling to his knees beside her, he gently set his hand atop her head. "Hey. c'mon it's alright." He tried to soothe but she couldn't seem to hear as she hyperventilated, her eyes closed.

"Liz, you gotta breathe for me." He murmured as he stood, hoisting her up and sitting down on the cot, pulling her up so that her back was to his chest. "C'mon, you're alright. Breathe with me."

He seemed to finally be getting through to her as he continued to murmur in her ear. Her breaths stuttered as she tried to take deep breaths. "Good, you're doing good." Ressler ran his fingers through her hair soothingly. After several minutes, Lizzie's eyes fluttered open and she turned her head to look at him.

"Thanks." She said, her voice slightly raspy.

"No problem." He said softly, feeling no inclination to pull away or stop petting her hair. "What happened? What's wrong?"

Lizzie snorted bitterly. "What isn't wrong, Ress? My father is Raymond Reddington. He killed my husband in front of me… though in all fairness I had shot him too." Lizzie took a deep breath as her voice tinged on hysteria. "I'm not an agent anymore, everyone hates me."

"Hey, that's not true!" He argued. "I wouldn't be here right now if I hated you."

Lizzie looked at him once more, sniffling slightly. "Why are you here, Ress? I thought you'd be the first to join the mob with a pitch fork."

Ressler rolled his eyes, smirking slightly. "I was and I mean, I'm still pissed at you." Ressler cleared his throat, looking away for a moment as he continued to run his hands through her hair, holding her body against his. "But you're still my best friend and I guess…I'm trying to understand, Liz."

/L//\/

"Harold!" Red greeted jovially as he walked into the war room of the Post Office.

Cooper looked over when he heard his name and gazed at Red dispassionately. "No."

Red laughed loudly. "I didn't even say anything, Harold."

"You're going to ask if you can see Lizzie and I'm going to repeat myself. No."

Red rid his face of any pretense of good will and stared coldly at Cooper. "Let me assure you, Cooper. I had no intention of asking. You will let me speak to my daughter or I will make Garrick's little incursion look like a damn tea party."

"Are you threatening me?" Cooper growled.

"Uh yea…"
"Yes."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Ressler shouted, coming forward.

Red's gaze slid dispassionately towards Ressler. "I'm Raymond Reddington. I believe you, Agent Ressler, know more than most exactly what that means."

When the only reply he received was an angry snort, Red turned his sights back to Cooper. "Now, you're going to let me speak to my daughter. Isn't that right, Harold?"

\////////

"Uh… Mr. Reddington, sir." Aram stuttered as Red walked passed, heading towards the holding area where Lizzie languished in the Box.

"Yes Agent Motjai?" Red questioned pleasantly, walking over towards Aram's work station.

"Well uh… I thought, cause you seemed angry the last time you left… and um—here, let me just show you." Aram turned his chair to face his computer and quickly opened a video file.

When he hit play, the screen showed a high angled view of one of the Post Office interrogation rooms. Red bit his lip at the sight of his daughter on the wrong side of the table.

"Why did you never turn Reddington in?" Ressler's voice came over the speaker.

Lizzie appeared to pause a moment, biting her lip as she blew a small breath out of her nose before she began to speak. "He is the Concierge of Crime – the dealer of death. He is the man that the world's most horrific people go to when they want to demolish entire cities – entire countries. Or when they want to disappear afterwards. He has murdered, pillaged, and maimed countless people."

Red winced, hurt at his daughter's blunt listing of his sins.

On screen, Lizzie blew out a shaky breath. "But he is my dad. He read me bedtime stories – even when he couldn't be there, he would buy two copies of every book so that he could call me and read to me. I would sit in the kitchen, the phone cord wrapped around my ankles as I followed along with him. He's the one I went to when I was upset with Sam. He was the one who set me right when I was heading down a path to Juvenile Detention. I always felt safest when he was home." Lizzie smirked, despite the tears leaving tracks down her face. "After all, he was the boogie man's worst nightmare."

"My father is the reason I went into criminal profiling. I am all too aware of the monsters in the world. But I also know that men like my father exist. My dad is not a monster." Lizzie stated passionately. "But he does do monstrous things. And I'm still trying to come to terms with that. But I know that everything he's done in the last 25 years has been to protect me. I don't know why, I know very little about who he is protecting me from, which trust me, frustrates the hell out of me."

"But he has literally burnt the world down for me." The side of Lizzie's lip curled in a sad smile. "Because I'm his light. He thinks I don't know that sometimes his random phone calls come after he's just killed someone or when he's feeling particularly self- recriminating and can't sleep. He calls me so that he can hear my voice and remember. Remember that he is my dad, that he is loved."

Lizzie stared at Ressler, and shrugged her shoulders. "That's why I never turned him in. The short answer, Ressler? He's my dad."
Red stared at the screen for a long moment after Aram pressed pause. Clearing his throat, he clapped Aram on the shoulder gently. "Thank you, Agent Motjabai." He whispered gruffly before walking away, continuing on to where Lizzie was being held with renewed purpose.

Lizzie sat up as quickly as she could from where she'd been laying on her side, her head cradled in the crook of her elbow on the hard metal cot. Thankfully she'd been given a couple blankets the day before and had been using them as cushioning.

Turning towards the sound of footsteps, Lizzie stood up at the sight of her father, warily stepping forward as he came closer. When he stopped right in front of the glass, Lizzie was happy to see he didn't look angry today just… sad.

Walking forward, Lizzie reached out her hand to place it on the glass. As his gaze flickered to her hand, his eyes softened as his lips turned up in a small smile, his hand migrating up the glass to lay mirroring hers.

"I hate seeing you in there." He said softly, gazing around her at the glass walls encasing her.

Lizzie smiled softly. "I know."

"You're not supposed to be." Red shook his head, wincing. "I've done everything I could to protect you from this." Red barked out a dark laugh. "I'm rather unfamiliar with the sensation of not being in control. But Lizzie, I don't… I'm not sure how to get you out of this."

Lizzie smiled, her eyes warming compassionately. "Don't worry, Dad. I do."

Red searched his daughter's face for some clue as to what was going on in her head. Nodding his head resolutely, he took a step back, allowing his hand to fall to the side.

"Harold!" He called loudly. "I know you're watching, Harold. I think it's time you let Lizzie out, don't you?" Red smiled brightly at Lizzie. "I believe we have much to discuss."

Red sat at the head of the large conference table, with Lizzie sitting off to his right. Cooper sat at the other end with Ressler stood behind him, his hands on his hips, trying to glare daggers into Red's forehead.

He was on his way towards forgiving Lizzie but apparently that didn't mean he liked Red any more.

"What exactly is it that you wish to discuss?" Cooper asked Red.

Red looked over at Lizzie pleasantly, sweeping his hand out in front of him as if to say 'this is your show.'

Lizzie took a deep breath. "I've said before, I have no delusions that I will be able to remain as an agent. But I can help you. I can be an asset." Lizzie said, gazing at Cooper steadily. "I earned my degree. Hell, with Raymond Reddington as my father, I earned my degree before I even went to college." She said, smirking at her dad who smiled pleasantly back at her. Both ignored Ressler's snort. "Not to mention, I believe my dad has made it clear that he will only speak to me." She stated, trying to stamp down the smile that was threatening. She really liked being able to call Red 'Dad' in public. "I don't believe that's changed." Lizzie looked over at her father in question.
"Nope!" Red popped his 'p' giddily.

"What exactly are you proposing, Ms. Keen?"

"Uh, actually it's Scott, sir. The divorce went through a couple days ago." Lizzie murmured before continuing. "I'm proposing that I work as an asset. I can be a contracted profiler as well as remain the go-between between my dad and the FBI."

"That's not possible, Ms. Scott. You were not just Raymond Reddington's go-between. He was an asset and you were his handler. You are no longer FBI so that can no longer be the case." Cooper stated gruffly.

"I understand that, Sir. I thought we could be a bit... unconventional." Lizzie answered, her gaze switching over to Ressler. "Which is why I thought Ressler could be both mine and my dad's handler."

"How exactly do you think that will work? If Reddington only talks to you, what's stopping him from just walking off one day and never coming back?" Ressler questioned.

"You answered your own question, Ress. Me. If there's one thing you can say about my father, it's that he will do anything to keep me safe. This list – the blacklist, it's the final play, the killing swing to that end."

"Lizzie." Red growled warningly, disliking where she was taking the conversation.

"No Dad." Lizzie stated firmly. "I told you, they need to know." Lizzie and Red stared at each other, trying to get a read on each other. Finally, Red huffed, throwing his head back as he huffed out a breath.


Red gazed over at Cooper and Ressler, gathering his thoughts.

"Alright, this is how it's going to go. You agree to our terms – including those that Lizzie has set out before you but I'm going to take it one step further. She will no longer be an agent in any official capacity, but we will all act as though she is."

"You've got to be kidding me!" Ressler cried in outrage.

"Shut up, Agent Ressler." Red ordered firmly. "I haven't finished yet."

Cooper held up a hand to cut off the retort that was on the tip of Ressler's tongue and nodded his head for Red to continue.

"Now, the reason this charade is tantamount to the continuation of this operation is well, quite frankly, if we continue the list with full disclosure, you will be committing treason."

"What the hell?"

"Excuse me?" Both Cooper and Ressler shouted at the same time.

Red chuckled, shaking his head. "Well, I should amend that to say that the group I am hunting – that I have been hunting for the last 25 years – are extremely powerful people all over the world. They hold positions in finance, government, the military, the justice systems." Red gazed at Cooper and Ressler steadily. "If these people were to find out you were knowingly going after their
criminal networks, they will label this task force rogue, bring you up on charges of treason and then blow this place to Timbuktu just because they can."

Cooper cleared his throat. "Why should we believe this… shadow organization even exists?"

Red laughed, shaking his head as he cocked it to the side. "Because I'm here, Agent Cooper." His face grew grim. "Honestly, have you never wondered about that?"

"It's obvious now, isn't it? Because of K-Scott." Ressler spoke up.

"Don't get me wrong, Agent Ressler. It has always been about Lizzie. But that isn't the only part of the story." Red looked over at Lizzie, his lips pressed thinly together. Lizzie smiled and reached forward to grasp his hand in hers. Red looked down at their joined hands and gave a firm nod of his head before looking back across the table. "No, Agent Ressler. Put the pieces together. I was a Naval Intelligence officer. Twenty years ago, I was led to believe my wife and daughter were butchered in our home on Christmas Eve. You were led to believe that I had abandoned them. Have you connected the dots yet, Agent Ressler?"

"You have information about them." Cooper stated gravely. "But why didn't they just kill you?"

"And why did you decide to become a criminal?" Ressler spat.

Red smiled sagely at Cooper. "I am currently in the middle of a Cold War. I don't leak the information, they don't come after me and mine."

Lizzie tried to stay still in her seat. This wasn't exactly the full disclosure she had meant but she understood why her dad wasn't telling them that they were bluffing, that they didn't have the information. Because to him, it was still a bluff. And she didn't want to tell him the status quo had changed. It still wasn't the right time. She could feel it.

"And as for your question, Donald, I do believe that you have the same choice before you. Remember a few minutes ago when I mentioned that should you take the road we've laid out before you, you will be branded a traitor?" Red paused, staring placidly at Ressler. "Well how does one defeat criminals who are seemingly above reproach? How do you understand their enemies, their friends, their families, their criminal networks?"

"By becoming a criminal." Cooper answered, his voice deadened.

Red nodded slowly. "Make no mistake, they will eventually catch on. But I would prefer to prolong their ignorance about well, your knowledge of them, for as long as possible. Hence why it is imperative that Elizabeth remain an agent to the public eye."

"So if it were known that Liz wasn't an agent anymore, it'd force them to question why." Ressler murmured before rubbing his face tiredly.

"Why yes, Donald. Color me impressed." Red said happily, causing Lizzie to kick his shin. They both didn't see Ressler's pinched face as Red looked to Lizzie with a muttered "ow," and Lizzie scowled at him.

"You've never actually said what this group wants." Cooper stated


"And you're asking us to betray our country in order to take these people down?" Ressler
Red laughed, shaking his head. "No, my dear Captain America. Your understanding is fundamentally wrong. You will not be committing treason. You will be labeled as a traitor. Hear the difference?"

Lizzie fidgeted in the ensuing silence as the weight of everything hit her. With a shuddered breath, Lizzie put her hand to her lips. "Oh God." She murmured.

"Liz?" Ressler's voice came as if through water as Lizzie pushed her chair back so that she could place her head on the table without her stomach getting in the way. "Liz? You alright?"

"I believe, Agent Ressler, that Lizzie has just come to the realization of exactly what she was asking of you when she asked for your aid in this endeavor." Red stated grimly.

Lizzie lifted her head as tears streamed down her face. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry, I didn't realize." She shook her head. "God, I'm so naïve."

"Yes." Red stated. "But only because I've only ever given you the talking points of this whole affair your entire life. You never had a true understanding of what is at stake. And this is exactly why, Sweetheart." He murmured, before looking over at Cooper and Ressler. "Because to know, is to be in danger."

Lizzie watched, sniffling, as Ressler came around the table and crouched beside her chair. "Hey, hey look at me." He murmured, taking her hand in his. "What's done is done, there's no going back now."

Lizzie laughed wetly. "If that's your idea of a pep talk, Ress, you really need to work on it."

"Luckily it wasn't." He said with a small smirk. "But this is: I can't speak for Cooper, but I'm glad I know. I needed to know. And whatever happens, whatever comes of this, I'll sleep easy knowing we did the right thing."

Lizzie's eyes skittered across Ressler's face, searching for his sincerity. Finding it, she nodded mutely, squeezing his hand in thanks.

"Wonderful!" Red shouted boisterously. "Let's get to it, then shall we? We've got a rogue task force to implement!"

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Lizzie yawned tiredly as the door swung open. She and Red had sat in the conference room with Ressler and Cooper until late in the evening and she was exhausted. But of course, as soon as she got home, her dad called her to his safe house.

Smiling wearily at Dembe, she allowed him to draw her into a bear hug and returned it with relish. "Hey big bro." She murmured.

Dembe chuckled quietly, kissing the top of her head as he ushered her further into the house with one hand on her back. "He's in the living room, Elizabeth."

Nodding her head, Lizzie headed off to where she assumed was the living room.

"Lizzie!" Red greeted her as if he hadn't seen her in days rather than hours, popping up from his chair and coming over to hug her as she passed into the living room. "How are you, Sweetheart?"
It's so good to see you outside of that abomination of a cage." He murmured, hugging her tightly.

Lizzie returned his hug, her smile quickly turning into a large yawn as she pulled away, taking the proffered seat on the couch. "I'm tired, Dad. Couldn't you have talked to me at the Post Office?" She asked, leaning her head against the back of the couch and closing her eyes.

"Sorry Dear." He replied with genuine sympathy. "If we're to continue with our little arrangement, I feel it prudent to have our little talks outside of the Post Office as much as possible."

Lizzie nodded in understanding before opening her eyes wide as she remembered something. "Oh! I have something I need to tell you first."

"Oh do tell." Red smirked.

"It's about Jennifer."

Red's face immediately closed off and he shook his head with a sigh. "Lizzie, I am begging you, do not go down that road."

"Dad! She's my sister, I have to try!"

"Lizzie-"

"No, listen. I looked into it. She was in Witness Protection until around seven years ago and then she dropped off the radar." Lizzie said quickly, afraid he'd try to interrupt her again. "She's alive, Dad." She whispered, almost reverently.

Red closed his eyes, wincing as if in pain. "I beg of you, Lizzie. Don't go looking for her."

"Why? Don't you want to see her?"

"More than anything!" He said desperately.

"But I can't…" Red sighed. "The last few days alone are proof of what being my child involves. I live with the guilt of bringing you into my world every day. By the time I realize just what I'd done, it was too late. I will not do that to Jennifer."

Lizzie reached over and took her dad's hand in hers, her eyes creased with worry. "Okay. I understand. I'm sorry." She murmured.

Red gave a curt nod, his lips thin.

After a moment, he took a deep breath. "Anyway! On to the reason you're here!"

Lizzie nodded, squeezing his hand once more before curling her legs up on the couch and pillow her head on her arms against the back of the couch.

"I'm listening."

"Monarch Douglas bank." Red stated as if she were supposed to know

"What?"

Red smiled at her, amused. "The preferred bank of international criminals, dictators, terrorists, hedge-fund managers. They're headquartered here in the U.S., deposits insured by the FDIC, which places them firmly within your Agency's jurisdictional bailiwick. They have branches in 63
countries, but their criminal operation is run out of an unassuming little branch in Warsaw." Red paused. "And it is the last place on earth that anyone would ever want to rob. Well, while you were languishing in the box, Monarch's Warsaw branch was assaulted."

Lizzie rolled her eyes at his little dig. "What was stolen?"

"According to the official statement, nothing."

"And according to you?"

"Everything." Red stated solemnly.

"Dante Stewart, the notorious arms dealer, the Juarez Cartel, the entire Marbella Crime Syndicate. Reddington claims these are just a few of the criminals who funnel money through Monarch Douglas. Our contacts at Treasury say Monarch's records are spotless," Lizzie looked around at the people in the war room. "They're in full compliance. Despite that, according to Reddington, they're legendary for laundering the money of the criminal elite without any traceable accounting. There has to be some kind of record. That must be what they're looking for."

"The ledger." Cooper stated, his gravelly voice carrying itself across the room.

Lizzie nodded. "Which is apparently more valuable than the millions in assets they left lying in that Vault."

"Well, the bank can't cooperate without implicating itself. We take down Monarch, we get the names of every criminal who funnels money through them." Ressler spoke up from where he leaned against one of the large metal tables.

"I'll contact our legal attaché in Poland. I want you and Ressler on the next flight to Warsaw."

Cooper pointed to Lizzie and Ressler.

"Yes, sir." Ressler murmured.

"Uh… sir." Lizzie said awkwardly, rubbing her stomach.

Cooper pursed his lips and shook his head. "Right. Sorry."

"I believe I can help out with your little predicament."

Everyone's heads turned to look towards the sultry voice to see a beautiful Persian woman with thick, curly hair walk towards them from the elevators.

Cooper smiled once he recognized the newcomer. "Ah, everyone, I'd like you to meet Samar Navabi."

"I can't believe Cooper expects me to just rush off to Warsaw with a newbie." Ressler grumbled as he hopped into the driver's seat of his SUV.

Lizzie smiled softly at him. "You'll be fine. Besides, I'm pretty sure my dad mentioned that she's Mossad so… she's hardly a newbie."

Ressler shook his head and snorted as he turned the engine. "Wait, what do you mean? Reddington
knows this chick?"

"Oh yea." Lizzie laughed. "She caught up to him last week. Questioned him."

"What!?!" Ressler yelled, not taking his eyes off the road as he drove them to their favorite lunch place. They'd decided to grab a bite before he had to fly to Warsaw.

"Yep. I think he was rather impressed."

"So uh… did Reddington…is she-?"

"A plant? Oh most definitely." Lizzie stated simply.

"Great." Ressler grumbled, shaking his head.

"Don't worry. Whatever he has tasked her with, it's to aid us, not hinder us."

Ressler looked over at her quickly. "Yea, why do you think that?"

Lizzie shrugged. "Because it sure as hell won't benefit him to break up the task force."

Ressler came to a stop at the red light and looked over at her. "I guess I finally understand why you're a damn good profiler." He muttered.

Lizzie laughed and opened her door to climb out once Ressler put the car in park. "Oh wow, I'm touched. It only took me telling you that Red is my dad for you to have a little faith in me. You realize how twisted that is, right?" She teased as he came around the car.

Ressler snorted, a grin taking over his face. "Yea well, don't let it go to your head."

---

Red looked up from his newspaper as he read it sitting at the dining room table of his suite. "What is it?" He asked Dembe as the man stood in front of him stoically.

"It was at the front desk." Dembe murmured, placing a package on the table in front of Red.

Gazing at the large envelope in front of him, the tick under Red's eye began to stutter as he winced. He knew damn well what was in that envelope. Taking a deep breath to bolster himself, Red hesitantly opened the package. Inside was another small ornate box. Holding it in his hand, Red paused, another attempt to fortify himself before opening the lid quickly.

Red looked away immediately with a hiss of pain. Closing the lid quickly, Red slammed the box onto the table, though he knew he would not be able to get the image of his wife's bloody ear sitting upon velvet out of his mind's eye for some time.

---

Liz stood beside Aram at his desk as they teleconferenced with Ressler in Warsaw. "No inconsistencies in the witness statements. They hacked the system, shut it down, deleted everything back to a half-hour before they hit." Lizzie looked over at Aram who was shaking his head. "What?"

"Traffic-police services forwarded their feeds." Aram said with a giddy smile.

Lizzie couldn't help but smile back, the man's smiles were contagious. "You got picture?"
"Yep. But lousy angle, though. Can't see what went down inside. But they caught the bad guys coming in and going out." Aram brought a video onto his screen. "I'm mirroring the feed now. You seeing this?" Aram aimed his question to the phone.

"Yeah. Got it. Go." Ressler's gruff voice came over the line.

"We got five subs." Lizzie stated as they watched.

Aram shook his head, fast forwarding the video. "Not so fast. Check this out."

As they watched, Lizzie counted six people coming out of the bank in hazmat suits.

"Six. I got six. Is that right?" Ressler questioned.

"Yep. Five went in, six came out."

Lizzie pointed to the screen. "Uh, Aram, can you zoom in on number 4?"

"Copy that." The techie murmured, doing as she asked.

"That's a woman. She looks scared." Lizzie let out a long sigh. "This wasn't a robbery. It was a kidnapping."

The sound of shuffling papers floated through the phone's speaker. "There was only one employee who swiped into the Warsaw branch the day of the incident who didn't swipe out – Kaja Tomczak." Ressler stated after a moment.

"Alright, find out what you can on her, yea?" Lizzie said.

"Alright, will do."

"Okay. Hey Ress, how you liking your new partner?" Lizzie teased.

"Shut up, Scott." Ressler said with a snort.

Lizzie tried to stifle her laugh as Aram muttered, "I think she's beautiful."

"I just got off the phone with Ressler." Lizzie stated as she hoisted herself up onto one of the stools in the war room. Her feet were killing her. "Apparently this…Kaja Tomczak is less of an employee and more of a slave. She is surrounded by guards 24/7. They take her food in an apartment owned by Monarch and they escort her to and from work."

"How do we know they aren't regular body guards, for protection?" Cooper questioned.

"Why would a regular bank employee need body guards?"

"Agent Ressler!" Red greeted warmly as he could hear the tell-tale click of someone answering their phone.

"What the hell do you want?" Ressler questioned peevishly.

"Your impeccable manners aside, Donald, I hear you've found a get away vehicle!"
"How the hell did you kn- nevermind." Ressler rubbed his face with his free hand, blowing air out of his nose.

There was a bit of a pause as someone addressed Ressler.

"Is that blood?" Ressler seemed to question someone at the scene. Red rolled his eyes, sighing impatiently.

"I don't think so." Red could hear Agent Navabi's voice through the phone.

"You know that's where people sit, right?" Ressler questioned while holding back a chuckle. Honestly, this was getting a bit rude. Red was dying of curiosity.

"Smells like roses." Navabi answered.

"Agent Ressler." Red stated, attempting to get the agent's attention. "Set a match to it See if it burns. Check if it's flammable."

"What? Why?"

"Just do it, Donald."

Ressler grumbled before pulling his phone away from his ear. "You got a light?" After a moment of rustling and a faint whoosh sound, Ressler spoke into the phone once more. "Yeah. It's flammable."

Red laughed, throwing his head back. "Jam. From the heart of the rum-soaked, rose-petal Paczki."

"I'm sorry, I don't know what a rum-soaked, rose—"

"It's a jelly doughnut." Red cut through Ressler's sass.

"Great." Ressler deadpanned. "Now what?"

"Now? Nothing. Just get some rest. I'll be there in less than three hours. Then something."

Red hung up before Ressler could answer and looked over to Dembe. "The copper mine will have to wait. We're going to Warsaw."

Dembe nodded his head before standing to go talk to their pilot.

\///\///

The door chimed as Red and Dembe bustled through the door.

"Raymond!" A stout older woman came hustling over to them.

Red chuckled, holding out his arms. "Apolonia."

"Oh!" Red bent to hug her, kissing her on the cheek.

"My darling." He enthused.

"Ohh!" Apolonia shouted. "And Dembe." She murmured, walking over to Dembe, her arms outstretched. "How is my sweet, gentle boy?" Dembe shrugged, smiling as he returned her hug with gusto.
"Mmm, I've been dreaming of Paczki." Red murmured, shaking his head as he sniffed the donuts that sat out on a platter atop the counter. "I tried to curb my cravings in this little shop in the West Village in New York, but they fill them with prune jelly. Can you imagine?"

Apolonia shook her head in horror. "Idiota." Walking over, she selected a donut from the tray and handed it over to Red.

Red reverently took the donut from her hands. "Ahhhhh." He took a huge bite. "Mmm! Tastes just like Patty Sutton. I must admit, madroja, I have ulterior motives." Red licked his lips, his demeanor becoming serious. "Little business."

\\\\

"Sales up, business good. I finish inventory. Then you have something nice to pick from. And maybe something for my little favorite, too." Apolonia winked over at Dembe as she lead them to the back of the industrial freezer.

"My grandmother used to keep flour in the refrigerator. Why is that?" Red questioned, pointing to the flour that sat upon the shelf.

"To keep the weevils out." Apalonia muttered, shrugging her shoulders as if it were obvious.

"Oh, of course Weevils." Red nodded his head solemnly, watching dispassionately as Apalonia turned an apparently inconspicuous nozzle, causing a trap door to open at the back of the refrigerator, displaying a large stash of weapons and ammo. "It's come to my attention that the Monarch Douglas bank was robbed yesterday by some of your customers. And if your customers come under scrutiny, Apolonia, your business comes under scrutiny."

"Majboja." The old woman cursed.

"God can't protect you. But I can."

\\\\

"We've got Kaja." Ressler's voice came through the speaker as Cooper, Liz, and Aram stood around the phone. "What's the rendezvous point?"

"The safe house just across the river. We're sending you the address now. Agent Salerno's on his way. Head toward the Vistula River." Cooper ordered.

"Have we identified her associates?" Ressler questioned.

"A Warsaw gang called the Mayerchak Group, known for armed robbery and money laundering."

"Rough trade for a bank clerk." Lizzie deadpanned.

Cooper gave her a withering stare before turning back to speak at the telephone. "Get her statement. I want to know everything she knows before this extradition deal blows up."

"If the police know where I am, so does Strickland." A woman's voice floated through the speakers.

\\\\

"It's called hyperthymesia. Highly superior autobiographical memory."
Lizzie and Cooper were standing in the middle of the war room, looking up towards the large screens which currently displayed a live video feed from an interrogation room in Warsaw.

"Like a photographic memory." Ressler stated.

The woman, Kaja, nodded, her blond hair falling over her shoulders. "It's why the bank hired me so there wouldn't be any paper trail. Pick a day: Any day, any year."

"Um, December 21, 2001."

"It was a Tuesday. I had dry toast for breakfast, bigos for lunch. I picked up a copy of the Fakt. Two earthquakes One in Japan, Bonin Islands, another in Iran, 6.5. There was a lunar eclipse."

"That's incredible." Lizzie whispered, incredulous.

"A sheet of paper, I- I don't just look at it and remember every word. I relive it the temperature of the room, the light." Kaja continued speaking.

"The cameras in your apartment, the guards. They were watching you."

She nodded again. "For my protection."

"Then" Ressler paused. "You became the prisoner."

"I staged it at the bank to ensure there'd be an investigation."

The sound of shattering glass could be heard as Ressler and Kaja stared to a point off camera, in the direction of the two-way mirror.

"Ressler!" Samar's voice could be heard, yelling Ressler's voice repeatedly.

As she watched, Lizzie gnawed on her lower lip, one hand rubbing her stomach as the other clenched at the desk beside her. At the sound of gunshots, Lizzie gasped, her face creasing in worry. She had to hold back her own cry for Ressler, knowing he wouldn't be able to hear her.

Ressler stood up quickly at the sound as well and unholstered his weapon, firing. He then went off camera, jumping through the glass.

"It's over, pal." Lizzie breathed a sigh of relief. If he was talking, he was okay.

"Who do you work for?" Samar questioned.

"You don't understand the national-security implications of what that woman knows and the damage she can do." Lizzie and Cooper shared a poignant look as the voice of Agent Salerno – an FBI agent stationed in Warsaw – spoke.

"Ressler! Red has a friend in Warsaw – Kaspar Dubicki. He's waiting for you under the Swietokrzyski Bridge, east of your current position." Lizzie spoke quickly, knowing that Ressler and Samar were currently being chased by who knows how many people in a stolen vehicle.

"There's a million dirty cops between here and there, and they're all after her." Ressler yelled, forcing Lizzie to pull her phone away from her ear for a moment.

"Don't worry. Red arranged for a small diversion. Just get to Dubicki."
"Can we trust him?"

She wasn't sure if he was referring to Red or Dubicki. "You can trust me."

/\\\\\

Red allowed his men to precede him into the train car, they're weapons at the ready. After a moment of silence, he hopped in himself, followed closely by Dembe.

"Reddington. How did you–?" Ressler looked at him quizzically, his hand pressed to the obvious bullet wound in Kaja's stomach.

"Enough with the guns." Red fluttered his hands, motioning for his men to put their guns down. "I love trains." He enthused. "My grandfather rode the rails. Have you ever seen 'The General'? Buster Keaton? Oh, my goodness." Red shook his head, laughing as he looked around the train car, wistfully, as if reminiscing.

"What are you doing?" Ressler barked.

"Dubicki said the bridge was swarming with police." With a motion of Red's hand, one of his men stepped forward and quickly picked up Kaja, causing the woman to groan and quickly left the train car. "We need to move quickly."

"And Kaja?" Navabi questioned sharply.

Red looked over at her, his face placid. "Quite safe, I assure you. On her way to my Gulfstream. I'll arrange for an onboard medic to tend to her wounds. We'll be wheels-up in 20. I've also booked the two of you first-class tickets home."

"No, you can't take her! No! Y--" Ressler yelled, rushing forward. He stopped himself as Red's men pointed their guns at him once more.

"Guys, guys. Enough with the pointing." Red spoke as if frustrated with a puppy who'd just peed on the couch. "Don't worry, Donald. They won't shoot you. But they will restrain you rigorously if necessary. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have business to attend to. Be sure they make their flight."

/\\\\\

"Yeah, hello?" Berlin's thick accent came over the line.

"I think it's time we met." Red stated darkly.

/\\\\\

Red sat at a bench, the noises of the crowd – laughing and shouting in merriment behind him as they enjoyed the pleasures of Coney Island – were tuned out as he focused on his immediate goal.

Red looked next to him, his face a pleasant mask as a man with slicked back hair and a loose fitting suit sat next to him.

"Well, well. This has been a long time coming." The man stated, laughing darkly.

"I hope it's been worth it. What a terrible waste." Red muttered, shaking his head. "Time, blood, money. And in the end, for what?"

"Revenge isn't a passion it's a disease that eats at your mind and poisons your soul." Red suddenly chuckled, incongruous of the current subject matter. "I attended summer camp with this little stick of a girl Twila Stansberry. Hell of an athlete - capture the flag. Had an unrelenting passion for fitness. Never skinny enough. A pound here, a pound there. Ran like a deer. Until one day she could barely walk. Turns out she was anorexic. The disease caused her to lose her sight. I've never known anyone more obsessed with their body than Twila. Spent her entire life chasing something that destroyed her. Make sure your passion isn't your sickness."

Berlin stared at Red for a moment before looking out at the water, sucking his teeth. "Your wife is coming apart nicely."

Red's face darkened. "We have a common enemy."

Berlin raised a brow at his sudden subject change. "Who?"

"Whoever told you that I killed your daughter." Red frowned. "You are finished with my wife."

Berlin laughed, shaking his head. "Think so?"

"Yes, you are. I have something I suspect you value far more than revenge. Your money."

Lizzie stood next to Ressler in the war room, almost rubbing elbows with him. She had found over that last few days that she really didn't like being separated from him. And according to the way he seemed to lean in towards her, he apparently felt the same.

"What you're telling me is we have totally lost control of the situation." Cooper paced. "Reddington and the witness are gone. Berlin gone. Red's wife gone. Can any of you tell me one thing that we've got going for us at this point?!"

"Coffee machine still works." Aram murmured, causing Lizzie to quickly cover a snort.

"Uh. At least it's finally clear now who our perpetrator really is."

Cooper raised his brow. "Is it? Illuminate me."

"Reddington. He's the one who put the spotlight on Monarch Douglas. My guess is, because he had significant funds on deposit." Lizzie didn't hide the hurt look as she gazed over at Ressler. He pointedly refused to look at her.

"And once he identified Kaja as their human hard drive, he put us on her trail, had us deliver her into his custody. Reddington double-crossed us." Cooper stated angrily.

"No." Lizzie stated emphatically. "He's up to something else. If that were the case, he would have just done it himself. He wouldn't get us involved."

Ressler and Cooper studied her. She knew they were trying to decide if she was blinded by her relationship with Red or if because of said relationship, she knew him better than anyone.

"We need to find that girl, find out where she's being held." Ressler finally stated gruffly.

"She's wounded. Reddington's going to need to find her a doctor, someone he can trust." Cooper agreed.

Lizzie smirked. "Rosa Heredia."
"Who?" Cooper asked, bewildered.

"His manicurist."

"Manicurist?"

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "I've met her several times. She was trained as a surgeon."

Cooper rolled his eyes. "Of course she was. Find her now."

"I have the girl." Red stated, gazing steadily at Berlin. "And because I have her, I have control of all your assets at Monarch Douglas. I've transferred every penny into a numbered, thoroughly untraceable escrow account. You're broke." Red leaned towards Berlin on the bench. "Shh. Listen. Hear that? That's the sound of your checks bouncing. From here to St Petersburg, from Bangkok to Mozambique." Red smiled pleasantly as he sat back. "So, my proposal: your money for my wife. You can give her back and we can continue this war, or you can kill my wife and I keep your money."

Berlin chuckled, shaking his head. "I almost gave up looking for you. You were like a ghost for 12 years. Heard rumors. And I followed them. From Barcelona to Melbourne to Stockholm. But always nothing. Until one day I made a connection." Berlin forward, his yellowing teeth inches away from Red's ear. The man's breath was awful. "Elizabeth Keen." He hissed, causing Red's spine to stiffen. "That's why we're sitting here today. Because of Keen. I know you care for her as much as you care for your wife. I think underneath it all, under that hat of yours, you're not much different from, uh, Twila Stansberry." Berlin chuckled again. "You have the power to destroy me, but you're offering me a way out because you're blinded by passion. Guess we both are." Berlin stood up to leave. "Have your associates set up the meeting. Okay?"

Lizzie walked up beside Rosa's car and leaned into the window. "Hey, Rosa. We know you're treating Kaja. Where's your patient?"

Rosa looked up at Lizzie wearily. "I– I don't know. I came alone."

Lizzie raised her brow in obvious disbelief, her lips pursed. "I don't want to have to call for backup."

At the sound of his phone ringing, Red stopped playing the arcade shooting game and answered the call.

"Lizzie! How are you, Sweetheart? When's your next appointment?"

"I know what you're trying to pull."

Red chuckled, placing the toy gun on the counter. "What I'm trying to pull? Is that how we speak to each other now. As if I'm some kind of cheap, dime-store confidence man?"

"Bank robber, embezzler, thief." Lizzie lifted off. "You put us on this case so you could get to the girl so you could steal Berlin's money."
"Once she left the bank, the girl was vulnerable." Red began walking down the boardwalk, a hand in his pocket. "I simply took advantage of an opportunity."

"You're gonna use her to get your wife back."

"Storybook ending."

"Not for the thousands of people who are gonna lose their lives because of his actions. This man is a psychopath! That money is going to fund terror all over the world, and I'm not gonna let that happen for the sake of one woman."

"You don't have a vote."

"I found Kaja."

"She gave you the routing numbers." Red murmured, closing his eyes as if in pain.

"We froze the escrow accounts where you parked Berlin's cash."

"My wife will die."

"Have a little faith, Dad."

"Oh? Faith in what? In the FBI?" He spat bitterly.

"No. In me. In Aram."

"He's FBI, Lizzie."

"He's good at what he does."

"Please, do elaborate."

"He's created a program. When you go to transfer the money, it will look like the money is going into his accounts. But it will just be numbers on a screen."

"That's what most money is these days, Lizzie." Red muttered tiredly. "No bank actually holds more than a few thousand physical dollars at any time."

"Yes. But these numbers will disappear after an hour. They'll be wiped, having never existed."

"Lizzie, that's not going to work." Red stated, rubbing his eyes. "It's just going to enrage him when he goes home to find that the money isn't there."

"Right. But he can't do anything about it without funds. He'll have to go back to whoever supplied him in the first place."

Red was silent for a moment, grinding his teeth as his eyes alit with pleasure. Chuckling richly, he shook his head. "Sweetheart, I don't believe I tell you I love you nearly enough."

/
///
\\\\

Red and Dembe stood stoically in the front of their vehicle, his men flanking them on either side, heaving armed. Red squinted as the lights from an approaching vehicle blinded him.

The car soon came to a stop a few yards away, the lights moving out of his direct line of sight as it
moved closer. Within moments, Berlin stepped out of the car, along with a couple of his men. Naomi was ushered out of the trailing SUV, a sack over her head as she was tugged along to Berlin's side, tripping in her heels as she tried to stay upright on the uneven gravel.

After a moment of tense silence, Red spoke. "Give him the codes." He murmured gruffly to Dembe who quickly punched in a few numbers on the tablet in his hands. Red prayed that this worked.

Dembe nodded once the transaction was completed and one of Berlin's men began to type away at his tablet, checking the accounts. He soon turned towards his boss with a nod of confirmation. At Berlin's signal, the men began loading up back into their vehicles, leaving Naomi standing there, blindfolded, her hands bound.

Dembe quickly walked towards her, Red frowned as she flinched away though she was quickly soothed by Dembe's gentle touch at her elbow. Red watched in silence, distraught at the sight of his wife after so many years, knowing that she would not welcome the sight of him and so almost thankful for the blindfold she still wore as Dembe slowly led her to the vehicle, carefully guiding her across the uneven ground.

//\\\\

Lizzie knocked on the door and shifted on her feet as she stood in the hallway. As Ressler opened his door, she bit her lip as stubborn tears fell down her cheeks.

"I'm sorry."

Ressler's brow furrowed in confusion. "For what?"

"Everything."

Ressler's shoulders sagged as he moved aside, inviting her in. As the door closed behind her, she turned to face him.

Unable to stand the sight of her crying, Ressler stepped forward, cupping her cheek in his hand, wiping away some of the tears. "Hey, it's fine." He murmured.

Lizzie snorted wetly, rolling her eyes in disbelief.

"Okay." He chuckled softly. "It's not fine. You lied, you withheld information, you're an accessory to all of his crimes."

Lizzie winced, taking a step back. When she tried to move her face away, Ressler grasped her chin gently.

"But I understand." He murmured, taking a step closer. "Liz, I almost shot my best friend a few months ago. I'm not Captain America anymore." He teased gruffly, causing Lizzie to huff out a laugh. "The world's not black and white. He's your dad. And if you say that everything he's done has been to protect you, that he's been taking down this mysterious shadow group, then I believe you."

"Why?" The question left her lips as a plea.

Ressler searched her face for a moment before taking a small step closer, capturing her lips in a gentle kiss. Her eyes shuttered closed as her lips slid against his, her arms slowly rising to wrap around his shoulders.
Ressler pulled away slightly, resting his forehead against hers. "Because I care about you, idiot."
He murmured, his eyes twinkling in mirth.

Lizzie laughed, pinching the back of his neck gently. "I care about you too, jerk."

Chapter End Notes

Yep. That's happening.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

I still own nothing.

Red and Lizzie sat back-to-back in the center of the room, their heads resting against each other as Dembe lay on his back beside them. They were all dressed in their crappiest clothes – Red in an old Navy t-shirt and worn jeans, Lizzie in a ratty pair of sweatpants and Dembe wore his usual jeans and t-shirt…just a few years old. All of their clothes had various levels of paint splatter.

"This looks wonderful, Lizzie." Red crossed his outstretched legs at the ankle as he gazed around at the light blue walls with white trim. "I love the color scheme. Very soothing."

Lizzie smiled as Dembe hummed in agreement.

"I'm a pretty big fan myself." Lizzie stated, unable to wipe the grin off her face as she looked around the room. "Thank you guys, I really appreciate this."

"Psh, Lizzie! I feel as though I'm the one who should be thanking you. I never thought I'd be…"

"Hey!" Lizzie shouted teasingly, trying to keep the good mood alive. "No maudlin today, okay? We just finished painting your grandson's room. This is a happy time, got it?"

Red chuckled and Lizzie could feel him nodding his head. "Got it, Sweetheart." He murmured.

"Now, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted." Lizzie giggled as her dad reached back and tickled her side. "Cut it out!" She laughed, slapping his hand away, both Red and Dembe laughing at their antics. "Again," she chuckled "as I was saying – Dembe, thank you, especially, for the fantastic artwork!" Lizzie stated grandly, clapping her brother on the shoulder as she gazed at the adorable mural of cartoon whales on the wall right above where the crib was going.

She still remembered the look on her dad's face when she'd decided on a nautical theme. It was one part sad, two parts hopeful.

"You are welcome, Elizabeth." Her brother stated.

Lizzie smiled down at him, squeezing his shoulder.

"Now! Onto a new subject, my dear." Red said boisterously. "What is going on between you and our dear Donald?"

Lizzie froze, looking over at her brother in panic. His only response was to chuckle at her situation. The jerk. She should have stabbed him with that colored pencil when she'd had the chance all those years ago.

"Uh, nothing. Where in the world did you get that idea from?" She stumbled over her words.

"Oh I don't know. Could it possibly be because the man so readily forgave the fact that you kept our relationship a secret? Or how about the way he's had no control over his facial expressions the
last couple weeks when you walk into the room?" Red paused and Lizzie couldn't help the stupid grin she knew was on her face. "Or it may be the picture that Baz sent me yesterday of the two of you kissing on your stoop. Really Lizzie? In public?"

"What?!" Lizzie screeched. "Baz is security, they're not supposed to spy on me! You promised!"
Lizzie shouted angrily, leaning forward and turning on her bum to face her dad, causing him to almost fall on his back as his support was suddenly removed. Grunting as he caught himself, Red turned to face her.

"He wasn't spying. More like… teasing me." He muttered, his cheeks reddening. "The picture may have come with a note saying something to the effect of 'looks like there will be baby banana peels in your future.' Honestly Lizzie, did I really have to find out about this in such a manner? I'm traumatized. I had to schedule an appointment with my psychiatrist friend out in California." Red's voice was verging on a distinct whine.

Lizzie shoved her dad's shoulder, shaking her head as a small smile crossed her face at her dad's silliness. "I'm sorry but it's still…new."

"How new?"
Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Just a couple weeks, Dad."

"Good."
Lizzie shook her head before looking over to her brother. "Hey, wanna help me up? I've got gelato in the freezer with your name on it."

Dembe shot up onto his feet, causing Lizzie and Red to laugh. "I would do it anyway, Elizabeth. But since there is ice cream…." Dembe trailed off with a smirk, outstretching his hands for her.

Placing her hands in his and planting her feet, allowing him to pull her up, Lizzie grinned. "I'm envious of that girlish figure you keep even with all those sweets."

Dembe's eyes narrowed playfully just before he smacked her upside the head.

"Ow! Hey! Dad, he hit me!" Lizzie whined despite the small grin on her face, looking to her father for comfort as she rubbed her head.

Red shook his head, rolling his eyes. "Children. Knock it off." He demanded, mockingly stern before they all left the room in a fit of giggles.

\\\\

Red sat at a small metal table on the rooftop balcony of one of the best restaurants in Chicago. He gazed out at the city below before turning back to his associate. "The Indonesian government has finally agreed to turn over all day-to-day operations at the port to a private company. I'd like that company to be operated by the syndicate."

Niko's eyes widened slightly, incredulous. "That's unlikely. Our logistics company in the region is too small."

Red nodded, taking a slow drag from his cigar before slowly blowing the smoke back out. "I agree. So I've taken steps to change that. I'm tripling our investment."

"And what if we don't get the contract?" Niko questioned, an arm outstretched in supplication.
"You're fighting a war with Berlin that drags all of us into the trenches with you. This is a time for caution, not risk."

Red smiled passively. "The fruit is ripe. Niko, I've made my decision." He stated firmly before sweeping his hand out to point behind his associate. "The men behind you will take you to your car."

\/

Lizzie pushed her desert plate away, smiling over at her dad. He'd taken her out to dinner after her latest scan, in celebration.

"Thanks Dad, this was amazing."

Red smiled softly. "We need to do this more often. I'm afraid too much of our time together is becoming about the list. I miss you, Sweetheart."

"I miss you too." She said simply, returning his smile. "Where's Dembe? He left the room after the scan pretty fast."

Red's smile turned tight. "He had some business to take care of, I'm afraid." Just as he finished speaking, his phone went off. Leaning to one side to take the phone out of his pocket and answer it quickly. His lips pursed as he listened to the person on the other end before hanging up, having not said a thing.

"Business that doesn't appear to have gone well." Lizzie murmured.

Rather than say anything, Red took a large swig of his scotch.

"Where's Naomi Hyland?"

Red closed his eyes tightly, his face contorted in a grimace. "Lizzie, I just finished saying that I don't like how much our visits are about the list. This dinner was an attempt to rectify –"

"And this is a part of our history. I can't help that our family history is so terribly intertwined with the list, Dad." Red cut him off, her voice a harsh whisper as she tried to keep her voice down in the packed restaurant. "I need to talk to her."

"You want to talk to her perhaps – some lingering personal questions you think my ex-wife can answer." He stated, his voice suddenly dripping darkness.

"You're hiding her from me." Lizzie accused.

Red stared at her for a minute before looking away, taking a small sip of his Scotch. "What do you know about Paul Wyatt?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes, sitting back in her chair as she decided to go along with the shift in topic. For now. "Same as everyone else, I guess. He ran an investment firm but was being investigated by the S.E.C. for fraud. He was stealing life savings and pensions. Only to turn up with his heart ripped from his chest. Police say that whoever did it was trying to make a point."

Red chuckled, shaking his head. "Oh, well, as much as I admire the police for their wonderful sense of irony, I'm afraid they've got this one wrong. The man who killed Paul Wyatt wasn't trying to make a point. He was trying to make a sale. His name is Dr. James Covington. A few years ago,
he was considered one of the top cardiothoracic surgeons in the country. Now he runs an illegal organ-transplant ring. His operation, if you'll indulge the term, is one-stop shopping for anyone who needs a life-saving organ transplant but who can't or doesn't want to go through conventional channels. That includes criminals and wealthy clients who don't happen to be first in line on the recipient list."

Lizzie raised a brow. "Now who's the one mixing father-daughter time with the list?"

Red merely smiled benignly at her. When she was certain he wasn't going to rise to her bait, Lizzie sighed, diving into work. "He's harvesting organs killing innocent people to sell off their parts?"

"Lizzie, some of the worst of the worst are still alive because Dr. Covington is saving them."

"And you know how to find him?"

"No."

As the group walked towards him, Aram swung around in his chair to face his computer. "Mr. Reddington was right. Covington was once a respected surgeon got his M.D. at Yale, fellowship in cardiothoracic surgery at Vanderbilt."

"So what went wrong?" Ressler asked, pulling out one of the high sitting chairs and helping Liz sit in it.

"He had some kind of meltdown. According to this, he falsified a document and stole a set of lungs from the donor pool. Did some kind of experimental operation on a 10-year-old child."

"Geez." Ressler grumbled as Lizzie sucked in a breath, unconsciously rubbing her belly.

"A few weeks later, the guy who was supposed to receive the transplant died. The D.A. considered charging Covington, but he was already off the grid."

"I'm sorry. Are those real-time NSA feeds?" Samar spoke up, looking at the large screens above their heads. "They would kill to see these in Tehran."

"How does an Iranian end up working for Mossad?" Lizzie questioned suddenly. She didn't really trust this woman. She sure as hell didn't like her. And now this woman is going to go all gooey eyed over their equipment and intel during a briefing? Timing, Sweetheart.

Samar looked away from the screens and threw a smirk at Lizzie. "How did the FBI end up working for Raymond Reddington?"

Lizzie's lips tightened but she was kept from replying as Cooper walked up. "Medical examiner just called. He needs to see you, stat."

"Mind telling me what that was back there?" Ressler asked softly, not taking his eyes off the road.

"How do we know we can trust her?" Lizzie grumped.

Ressler smothered a smirk before shrugging. "We don't. But she did save our asses. That buys her some good will, don't you think?"
"You know my Dad brought her in. There has to be something going on there."

Ressler couldn't stop the chuckle from bubbling out of his throat. "Sounds like someone's a little jealous." He teased.

Lizzie shot Ressler a glare before turning to look out the window. "Anyway, I'm just glad we decided to keep the big picture between the four of us." Lizzie said softly, referring to the agreement between Red, Cooper, Ressler, and herself to keep the rest of the task force in the dark for as long as possible. The less who knew the less likely it was that word got out. And she wouldn't never give Samar Navabi that sort of leverage.

\///\\

Lizzie and Ressler turned at the sound of the swinging doors opening. "Dr. Ryerson, what did you find?" Lizzie asked, walking towards the ME.

"Well" Dr. Ryerson cleared his throat. "I, uh, just completed my autopsy on Mr. Wyatt here. I was told that that your theory was that the – the the heart was harvested. It is." The man stopped to cough several times. "Yeah, well, buy a hat and hang onto it, because, um, that theory may have a little wrinkle. The incision in his chest was made over a prior midline incision. Tox screen was positive for immunosuppressive drugs, and, um, I am seeing scarring of the aorta."

Lizzie and Ressler shared a confused glance. "All of which means what?" Ressler asked.

"Well, t- there's there's residual foreign tissue left behind from when the heart was removed." When it was obvious that Lizzie and Ressler weren't catching on, the ME sighed. "This guy ha previous heart transplant. The heart that was taken from his chest – wasn't his to begin with."

\///\\

Lizzie and Ressler sat on the couch of the deceased investment firm owner's home, his widow sat across from them.

"Look, I wish I could help, but my life it's in disarray. We file for bankruptcy, and now this?" Mrs. Wyatt wiped her eyes with a scrunched up tissue.

Lizzie winced in sympathy. "Mrs. Wyatt, we really need you to look at the reports."

"We've been over your husband's medical files. There's no reference to a heart transplant." Ressler stated, his voice soft.

"I don't know what to say."

"We checked. There's no record of your husband ever receiving a donor organ." Lizzie pushed, noticing the way Mrs. Wyatt had shifted in her seat and attempted a nonchalant shrug.

Mrs Wyatt's face crumpled. "They'll kill me if I talk." She whispered, horrified.

"Unless you talk, there's nothing we can do to protect you." Lizzie stated sternly.

Mrs Wyatt sniffled. "Dr. James Covington." She said the name quickly, as if it were a curse and she was ashamed to utter it.

"Your husband was one of his clients?"

"Paul suffered from congestive heart failure." Mrs. Wyatt confessed, nodding her head. "He needed
a transplant. H– he could have waited, put his name on the donor list like everyone else, but not Paul. We had the money, so he found a way to get the transplant immediately."

"He bought a heart from Covington." Ressler stated, wishing for confirmation.

"Yes and no. The organs that Dr. Covington provides they're not available for purchase. You rent them $500,000 for every year you use the product." Mrs. Wyatt winced as she tore up the tissue in her hands. "When Paul's business was thriving, that wasn't a problem. But after the S.E.C. investigation, we couldn't afford to pay. And if you can't pay, you have to return the product."

Lizzie eyes widened in horror. "Excuse me?"

Mrs Wyatt's lips trembled, her eyes widening in an effort to hold back more tears. "My husband's heart wasn't harvested. It was repossessed."

"Repossessed for nonpayment like a house or a car." Cooper asked, shocked.

Lizzie nodded her head. "Exactly, he killed Paul Wyatt because he didn't get his 500 grand in the annual rental fee."

"How does that work, anyway?" Cooper questioned, his brow furrowed. "Once a heart's been transplanted, can it be reused?"

"Covington didn't kill him to reuse the heart. He did it to send a message."

"Where I come from, fear is the only deterrent." Samar stated, a small frown on her face.

"I'm from Delaware." At Samar's incredulous look, Aram cleared his throat awkwardly. "No, I– I'm just saying I'm actually half-Jewish. Well, a quarter, really. Half-Muslim, too, so but, um– " He leaned towards Samar. "Who's counting?" He murmured.

Ressler rolled his eyes, sharing a grin with Lizzie. "I've been tracking the info we got from Mrs. Wyatt. According to her, they paid the annual rental fee by making donations to a charity called the WellbrightFund. It's a registered 501(C)(3) nonprofit."

Cooper crossed his arms. "Did you pull a tax return, get a list of company expenses?"

"Yeah, and get this the fund paid over 200 grand to a Dr. Gordon Albee for consulting services."

"Consulting on what? –"

Red chuckled as he listened to the tale Niko was spinning about his and their other associates' interesting encounter. "Mr. Vargas. Sounds like some shady character in a Humphrey Bogart film. I like him already."

"He said he worked for Berlin." Niko leaned towards Red over the table as he spoke.

Red leaned away from the man. He had terrible halitosis. "And his offer?"

"He said Berlin's opening up a short window. If we break with you, he'll let us operate under his name."
Red's brow raised. "And you think some of the others were receptive."

"The others are supporting you at great risk. If the port deal goes south, it could bankrupt us. It's a very fragile proposition." Niko stated, barely able to restrain the heat in his voice.

"Thank you, Niko. I appreciate you coming to me with your opinion. But I'm feeling bullish." Red stated as he stood, palming his fedora and placing it atop his head. "Keep an eye on the others. If someone intends to defect, I want to be standing right in front of them."

Lizzie sat in the office she shared with Don, going over her profile of Covington, when her phone began to ring. Recognizing the number, she quickly answered, a small smile on her face.

"Hey Ress. How'd it go?"

"We got nothing." Ressler sighed. "Albee refused to talk and we don't have enough on him to bring him in."

Lizzie gnawed on her lip for a moment before sitting up in her seat. "Hey, I've got an idea. I'll call you back, okay?"

As soon as they hung up, Lizzie hit number one on her speed dial.

"Hey Dad, listen, can I borrow Katy Cat?"

Red walked over from where he'd been speaking to the caretaker. "Oh, my God. He wouldn't stop talking." He groaned. "But I was able to buy us another hour. We need to wrap this up quickly, though. He has bowling league at 6:00."

"Maybe this was a mistake." Lizzie questioned, her voice muffled by her hand as she covered her nose. Even though she was standing several feet away from the open coffin, the stench was bringing up terrible memories of morning sickness.

Red walked over to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and drawing her into his side. "It's not."

"You said yourself it would take weeks to secure the necessary court orders, and how many more victims will there be by then?"

Mr. Kaplan stood up from where she'd been performing an autopsy on the poor dead guy. "It's the same as the other three heart and lungs are missing. This one still has a liver, but I see signs of cirrhosis probably wasn't healthy enough to be sold."

Red walked over and stood beside her, gazing into the coffin. "Remember the time we made barley stew with that coroner from Des Moines?"

"It was Reuben soup." Mr Kaplan corrected, chuckling. "How can I forget? I was sleeping with his sister."

Red threw his head back and laughed. "That's right."

Mr. Kaplan smiled before looking over at Lizzie, grasping the camera around her neck. "Your Dr. Albee's in a lot of trouble, sweetie. This should be all you need." She stated, before taking a few
"What are the odds that Covington's courier – will inspect the organ?" Ressler stood in front of Dr. Albee's desk, his hands on his hips.

"Count on it." Albee murmured, placing ice packs in the thermal container. "He's gonna have to make sure the size and weight are a match for their patient."

"You don't think that he's gonna notice that he's staring at the heart of a 300-pound hog?" Ressler questioned, eyeing the heart in the jar warily as Albee carefully placed it inside its container.

"Human and porcine hearts are nearly identical. Unless he's got some expertise, he won't be able to tell the difference."

Both men's heads turned on a swivel as the door opened to permit Lizzie.

"Aram just finished the mockup for the medical file on our fictitious donor."

Ressler smirked as he took the file from her. "Old Porko's got a name." He joked as he read the file. "Gustavo Mosquera, 35, no history of heart disease. Killed in a hit-and-run. Time of death –"

"30 minutes ago." Lizzie finished for him. "Aram even generated a social and W-2 in case they run a background check. What's our E.T.A. for delivery?" She directed the last question to the doctor.

Albee looked at his watch. "Within the hour."

Liz and Ressler stood in the hallway of the doctor's office, about to take their positions. "I really wish I could go with you. I miss it." Lizzie murmured.

The plan was to identify the courier as he came into the office then Ressler and Samar would follow him to his destination.

"And you know why you can't." Ressler murmured, a soft smile on his face.

Lizzie rolled her eyes but nodded her head all the same, returning his smile as she took his hand. Leading him into an alcove, she wrapped her arms around his neck, giving him a quick peck on the lips. "Dinner at my place tonight? I'll cook."

"What have I done to deserve that?" Ressler teased, a mischievous grin on his face as he rested his hands on her waist.

Lizzie pinched his neck lightly, an affronted look on her face. "I can cook, jerk!" She laughed.

Ressler chuckled before he leaned in and gave her a lingering kiss. "Dinner at yours it is then." He said softly. "Now c'mon, lets go ID this guy."

Niko leaned forward, passing over a large manila envelope. "My men captured this two hours ago."

Red stared passively at Niko for a moment before taking the enveloped and opening it to find
surveillance photos inside. "Titillating." He muttered, putting the photos back into the envelope having only glanced at them. "But what Laskin and Russo do with or to one another in their spare time is none of my concern."

"Right, except a minute later--" Niko pulled out another photo from his lap and showed it to Red.

"A threesome? Interesting. Based on his sartorial splendor, I gather this is Mr. Vargas." Red squinted at the picture, peering at the third person who had apparently met with two of his associates. "Does that even look like real hair?"

"We have to assume they accepted his offer and cut the deal with Berlin," Niko implored.

"Why assume, Niko, when I can ask them myself?"

\-----------

Lizzie snapped a photo of the suspect as he left the waiting room with the organ transport bag in hand. With a couple taps of her fingers, the photo was sent to Aram whom she immediately called. "I just sent you an image of a man who matches our suspect's description."

"Got it. I am processing him through the database now." Lizzie could hear the sound of Aram typing away for a few moments. "Ah ha! Ronald Cassell. Check fraud, theft, battery. But he does have some medical training. Former army combat medic out of Fort Drum."

"Heads up, everybody. Target's on the move. Ressler, he's headed towards the front door." Lizzie muttered into her ear piece.

\-----------

"Gentlemen, thank you for meeting me on such short notice." Red walked into the warehouse with his usual swagger, a large grin on his face. "I know you two have had a very busy day."

Laskin and Russo shared a confused glance. "Nothing out of the ordinary." Russo stated.

Red raised his eyebrow in disbelief. "I hear you boys engaged in a little tryst downtown this morning."

Laskin frowned and shrugged his shoulders. "We had a meeting at the Corgate. This an interrogation?"

"Yes. I understand an offer was made by Berlin's representative." Red got straight to the point.

"Red, look--" Russo spoke up, shifting on his feet.

"What I don't understand is why only one of my associates thought to bring that to my attention."

"We didn't tell because there's nothing to tell." Laskin argued.

Red cocked his head and nodded, smiling innocently as he looked over at Russo. "J.P., I'm delighted you were able to hold dear Teddy's hand and help him overcome all his anxieties about me bankrupting our operation."

Laskin coughed awkwardly into his hand. "I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't concerned about this deal."

Red's lips thinned as he gazed at his associates. "If I were you, Teddy, I'd be more concerned about
"What? What? What are you doing? Wait a minute. Stop! Red, Red! – What's going on? – Ow! – Come on! What the hell? Don't do this. Don't Aah! Let me go!" They both shouted as they were carted off to the waiting vehicles.

"So you're saying we just lost our only lead to Covington." Lizzie muttered, frustrated as she spoke on the phone with Ressler. He'd called to tell her that the courier had led them on a chase that ultimately ended up with the man getting hit by a car.

"Maybe there's another way. I just found a medical file of Covington's next client."

"The one who's getting the pig's heart? Who is it?"

"His name is Bernard Babbitt."

"Bernard Babbitt, known as 'B.B.,' runs the Desobry Syndicate out of New Orleans moving drugs and weapons through the Fourchon." Aram listed off facts from the man's dossier as the team and Red gathered around his desk.

"Bureau's been trying to indict him on racketeering and murder charges for years." Cooper stated in his gravelly voice.

"So, you know him?" Lizzie asked, turning to face Red.

"Know him?" Red laughed. "Oh, my gosh. I once shared a ride with the man on a twin-engine prop from Port Au Prince to Baracoa. We had to counterweight the plane with three containers of Russian R.P.G.s just to accommodate his girth."

Lizzie rolled her eyes good naturedly as Cooper frowned at the off handed comment about illegal arms. "I would have thought he'd be more cautious about where he chooses to hang out." Lizzie pointed out.

"Well, B.B.'s an indulgent man. He loves to be surrounded with what he loves the most." Red's smile quickly turned to a frown as he looked over at Lizzie. "Lizzie?" He questioned, taking a step closer.

Lizzie winced once more, her hand rubbing her belly as she leaned against a table. "I'm fine, don't worry." She murmured. "He just really likes taking kidney shots lately."

Red's brow furrowed in worry as he placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you sure, Sweetheart?" He murmured, the rest of the team's presence fading into the background in his concern.

Lizzie looked up at her dad and smiled reassuringly. "I'm fine." She turned her head to look at Ressler who'd stood back, despite the obvious concern on his face. "Really." She emphasized, looking directly at Ressler.

"B.B!" Red called out, his arms outstretched in front of him as he made his way through the
restaurant. "Just like a bear at a campsite. You poor thing. Honestly, I don't know how you do it. It boggles the imagination." Red gestured towards the other man's girth as he sat down beside him.

Babbitt stared at Red dispassionately, grease covering his lips and chin as he threw down a chicken wing. "Red." He murmured in greeting.

"I suppose it isn't any wonder you can justify cramming all this grease-drenched gristle into your face given that you've already paid to replace that rotted nub you call a heart. How's that going, by the way?" Red leaned towards B.B. "I heard you had a setback a problem with the donor not coming through?"

Babbitt frowned before looking over at the beautiful woman sitting on his other side. "Give us a moment." He ordered softly. Once she was gone, he looked back to Red. "What do you want, Reddington?"

"The good Dr. Covington, he and I need to have a conversation." Red stated, his tone all business. "And since you happen to be in touch, I thought you could connect us."

Babbitt stared at Red as he took a large slurp of his fruity cocktail.

Red sighed, losing patience. "B.B Surely you have some way to get ahold of the man. You're in his care."

After a short stare down, Babbitt finally shrugged. "I have a number. But strictly for emergencies. So I sure as hell ain't giving it to you. Last thing I need to do is piss this guy off before he cuts my chest open –" Babbitt attempted to laugh though it sounded more like wheezing. "Talk to me after my surgery."

Babbitt's laughter/ wheezing suddenly turned to gasping for air.

"B.B., you don't look well." Red stated with mock concern. "Are you all right? Let me guess: irregular heartbeat, shortness of breath, perhaps a little tingling in your nether regions?"

Babbitt grasped the table as he took a large slurp of his fruity cocktail. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Those drinks you've been enjoying on the house? They weren't from the house. They were from me. I hope you don't mind. I took the liberty of adding a special surprise ingredient something to treat any localized dysfunction you may be suffering. Has the little man been falling down on the job?" Red crooked his index finger downward. "It's a miracle drug, not so much for a glutton with a bum heart, however. But look on the bright side, you'll die with a marvelous erection."

Babbitt's eyes widened as he quickly turned the nozzle on his oxygen tank to try and get more. "I can't I can't breathe."

"Well, the two gentlemen behind me happen to be paramedics." Red pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Put me in touch with Covington, they'll be happy to assist you. What do you think, B.B.? Does this feel like an emergency?"

\\\\

Lizzie knocked on the doorframe to Cooper's office as the door was already wide open. "You wanted to see me?"

Cooper looked up and smiled, whipping his glasses off his face as he stood up. "Close the door. – "Lizzie smiled shakily as she did as ordered. Cooper quickly gestured for her to take a seat as he sat
back down. "– I realized we haven't had a chance to speak since well, since you told the truth."

Lizzie winced, beginning to run her thumb along her scar. "Yes sir." She murmured, unsure of where this was heading.

"And I wanted to assuage any worries you may have." He intoned.

Lizzie looked over at him, her face twisting in confusion. "Sir?"

Cooper chuckled at her obvious discomfort. "Breathe, Elizabeth." He said softly. "I just wanted to say that I found that you're…that you were a fantastic agent."

Lizzie tried to hide her wince behind a smile at his compliment. She could tell that he meant it as a compliment but the past tense still stung a bit. "Thank you, sir." She murmured.

"I also wanted to assure you of my complete faith in you. I do not believe that your relationship with Reddington undermines your abilities or integrity as a profiler."

Lizzie's eyes widened and became misty. *I am not going to cry in front of my boss. I am not going to cry. Nope. Not gonna. Dammit.* "Th—thank you, sir." She choked out.

Cooper smiled with a small nod of his head. "You're dismissed." He said kindly, understanding that she may not wish him to see her cry.

Lizzie merely nodded and levered herself with some difficulty out of the chair before hurriedly waddling away.

"I need you here. We have a removal at 5:00." Covington continued speaking.

"All right. I'm on my way in now." A second voice replied before both hung up.
"Oh, no, no, no, no. Damn it." Aram muttered angrily. "I was only able to narrow his location down – to this five-block area." Aram pointed to a small area on a map.

"He said he had a removal. He's gonna repossess another organ." Lizzie said in horror.

Ressler frowned, the worry lines on his forehead becoming more prominent. "Well, we got to move. If we don't find Covington in 43 minutes, we're gonna find another body."

Lizzie was once more in her office when her phone rang. It was Ressler. Either they found Covington's base of operations or they'd struck out again.

"Ressler?"

"Liz, he's operating on kids." Ressler said, clearly agitated.

"What?" Lizzie questioned, horrified, her hand automatically going to her bump and rubbing circles.

"He's taking adult organs and transplanting them into kids, Liz. He has a kid on the table right now, ready to get a lung transplant!"

"Oh god. Is he… Is he saving them?"

"What?!" Ressler cried, not believing what he was hearing.

"Ressler, if he's giving a kid lungs… Ress, if he's giving that child a chance—"

"No! Hell no, Liz! We cannot allow him to perform an illegal surgery!" Ressler yelled in her ear. "Covington's not just a surgeon, Liz. He's a killer."

"Yeah, and right now, he's that kid's only chance. Look at his parents, are his parents there? What if that were your kid?" That's sure as hell what was going through Lizzie's mind right now as she gazed down at her belly.

Ressler blew out a loud breath. "And what if something goes wrong? What if he dies on the table? How do we explain that?"

"And what if he doesn't? What if it works?" Lizzie asked softly. "I can cover with Cooper and Aram, buy you some time."

Ressler was silent for a moment and Lizzie began to bite her lower lip in anxiety. "Liz, this is way over the line."

"Please Ressler." She pleaded.

Red walked through the entry into the hangar, several cars containing his entourage sat outside as he and Dembe approached. "Niko, you're all in a sweat." He cried out as he walked towards his associate. "What's so important that it couldn't wait?"

Niko smirked as Red stopped in front of him. "We've been partners a long time, and we've had more than our share of success, so I wanted to pay you the courtesy of looking you in the eye when I tell you you're out."
"I see." Red murmured with a small upturn of his lips. "And you're speaking for…?"

"Everybody." Niko stated grandly, stretching his arms out to the side. "We're united. You've become a liability."

The tick under Red's eye began to twitch. "Don't forget who you're talking to." He said darkly.

"How could I? Especially since it's our last conversation." Niko laughed, turning to his left as Mr. Vargas came out of a shadowed corner. "Raymond Reddington, Mr. Vargas." He introduced as Mr. Vargas cocked a gun, aiming it at Red's head. "I may have misled you. Someone did take Berlin up on his offer, but it wasn't Laskin and Russo. It was me."

Red chuckled under his breath. "Well played, Niko. I didn't think you had it in you."

"Kill him" Niko ordered without taking his eyes off of Red. When his order was not carried out immediately, Niko began to shift on his feet.

Red calmly walked up to Mr. Vargas who still had the gun pointed directly at him. He stopped when he was an arm's length away, the gun almost kissing his cheek.

"I find chrome to be a bit ostentatious. Don't you?" Red questioned lightly, taking the gun from Mr. Vargas' loose grip before turning back to Niko, a brilliant grin on his face.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Demakis." Vargas demurred "The truth is I'm the one who misled you." He stated as Laskin and Russo also made an appearance.

Red chuckled as he walked over to a small table and sat down, proffering a chair to Niko who flumped into said chair, his eyes glassing over as he began to connect the dots.

"You know, when I was 15, I had a summer job installing carpets for Albert Kodagolian on Lake Charlevoix. Horrible job, hot, indoors, forced to listen to 'The Gambler' on 8-track while the rest of the world was at the beach. Three days into the job, I knew I had to quit." Red paused, shaking his head nostalgically. "I asked my father for advice. All he wanted to know was whether I'd given my word to Mr. Kodagolian that I'd work the summer. I told him I had. My father suggested I stick it out. I'd given my word."

"Worst eight weeks of my life!" He cried. "Until the last day. Mr. Kodagolian shows up at the jobsite, pulls me aside, and tells me that in 27 years, no kid has ever made it through the summer, gives me a bonus $40. The most valuable money I've ever made. A priceless lesson about life." Red leaned toward Niko, his eyes becoming hardened. "Value loyalty above all else." He stated darkly before jumping out of his seat energetically, the gun still held loosely in his hand.

"Oh!" Red spun on his heel, having appeared to be readying to exit. "I buried the lead. Turns out the Indonesian government has chosen to contract our company to run the Port Of Tan Kulu. The Deputy Minister of Transportation was not a fan." Red stated with mock affront. "Fortunately, he was also gravely ill and in desperate need of a heart transplant. He died this morning. Apparently, the arrangements he'd made to secure a donor heart didn't pan out. The new deputy minister sees things our way. Lucky, I guess."

"I don't believe luck had anything to do with it." Niko murmured.

Red smirked, nodding his head. "You're right. Luck rarely has anything to do with it." He stated darkly, took aim, and shot Niko in the chest.

"Honestly," Red spun around to see Mr. Vargas clutching his chest, his face ashen. "How many
times have we discussed this?"

Red looked around, confused. "What?"

"You you know I don't like being around the bloody st–" Vargas swayed on his feet. "Oh. I need to
be allowed to leave the room before the blood. You know I don't have a strong constitution." He
said hurriedly before covering his mouth, turning away from the sight of the blood.

Red's eyes widened in concern as he walked over to where Mr. Vargas stood with a couple of Red's
security guys. "Give him his seat." Red ordered the men who quickly jumped to do his bidding.
"He's gonna faint. Oh, my."

Vargas breathed shakily as the men helped him into a seat. "Thank you." He murmured.

Lizzie looked up from where she was gathering all of her things to head out for the evening at the
sound of a knock at her door.

"You caught Covington, and the child is in recovery. It sounds like a victory." Samar said, smiling
kindly.

"Yeah." Lizzie muttered, attempting a smile in return but knowing she failed miserably.

"You guys don't celebrate when you close a big case?" Samar questioned. "Come on. Let me buy
you a drink – I mean – " Samar stuttered to a halt, wincing at her blunder.

Lizzie's smile was a bit more authentic this time, even if it was at the other woman's expense.
"Thanks, but I think I'm just gonna head out." She stated, heading towards the door, expecting
Samar to move out of her way. She didn't.

"All you know about me is that I found Reddington – and whatever you might have read in a slim
dossier." Samar stated, her demeanor hardening slightly, clearly sensing Lizzie's hostility. "And
now we're working together with all that that implies. I'm sure you don't know what to think."

"You're wrong." Lizzie stated simply.

"I'm not wrong." Samar countered. "You're right not to trust me."

"Oh, you're right about that." Liz scoffed. "You're wrong if you think you found Reddington. If he
was found, it's because he wanted to be and he wanted you to find him."

Samar's brow quirked and her lips parted in affront. "Or maybe I'm just good at what I do. Is that so
difficult to believe?"

Lizzie shook her head. "If he wanted you here, he has a reason." A small smirk crossed Lizzie's
face. "That's why I don't trust you – because I don't know what the reason is – and I'm guessing
neither do you."

Lizzie and Ressler sat on her couch, her legs in Ressler's lap as he gently massaged the arch of her
left foot. "Hey, I'm sorry about earlier today." Lizzie said softly. "I shouldn't have put you in the
position to make that choice."

Ressler smiled over at her. "Don't worry about it. I had to make the choice either way. You just
helped me make the right one."

"Really?"

"Yea. I mean, for every kid Covington saved, there were three killers like B.B. he kept alive to victimize innocent people. But today—" Ressler cleared his throat. "When we usually find these guys, they're rarely sitting down to dinner or watching t.v. Have you ever noticed that?" Ressler asked rhetorically. "They're always in the middle of doing something terrible. But today, that kid, he saved him. We saved him." Ressler paused and grabbed his beer, taking a quick swig. "I can definitely live with that."

Lizzie's face softened as she smiled sweetly at Ress. "Yea, yea we did." She murmured.

Ressler gave her one of his crooked grins. As he looked at her, his eyes skittered over to the clock on the wall.

"Shit, I should head home." He muttered, making as if to stand but Lizzie kept her feet in his lap.

"You could stay." She said under her breath.

Ressler froze, his eyes widening. "What?"

"I—I mean, to sleep. Just to sleep." She stammered.

"Oh uh—yea, right. Sure." Ressler muttered, coughing awkwardly, clearly disappointed.

"I'm sorry." Lizzie winced. "It's not that I don't want to, Ress. I promise"

"Then what is it?" He questioned softly. There was no longer a trace of disappointment on his face, though his eyes were pinched with wary curiosity.

Lizzie brought her legs up and rolled to her side so she could sit up. "I just—I'm not comfortable." She muttered, looking down at her lap.

"With me?" Ressler questioned, his voice tinged with worry.

"No! I mean, yes. Wait. Shit." Lizzie sighed, combing her fingers through her hair. "I just don't want the first time you see me naked to be when I'm—" Lizzie gestured down at her belly, wincing in insecurity.

Ressler's eyes softened as understanding dawned. "Liz, you're beautiful." He said gently, his cheeks reddening.

Lizzie smiled, her own cheeks gaining some color. "Thank you."

"Is that all it is? I mean, I get it, no pressure." Ressler backpedalled, not meaning to sound inconsiderate.

"No, I mean, that's part of it." Lizzie bit her lip and began rubbing her bump. "I just... don't understand how you could want to be with me." She murmured in a rush.

"Are you kidding me?" Ressler asked incredulously. "Liz, you're brilliant, you're beautiful, and you're my best friend, the only person I trust with everything. Of course I want you!"

Lizzie laughed wetly, embarrassed, before growing serious again. "I just mean that...I'm Raymond Reddington's daughter. I'm pregnant with a spy's baby. I've got a lot of baggage, Don. Do you
"Yes." Ressler stated simply, not even taking a moment to mull over his answer. "Liz, we talked about your dad. I get it, really I do. I don't look forward to the inevitable boyfriend intimidation I'm going to be subjected to, but I get it." Ress paused with a smile as Lizzie giggled, sniffling. "And the baby…as far as I'm concerned he's yours. No one else's. He's your baby. And I love the tyke just for being yours."

"Oh Don!" She cried, rocking on her bum a couple times before she was able to get enough leverage to launch herself at Ressler, landing in his lap with a small oompf. "Thank you." She whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck as she leaned in for a kiss. Ressler smiled softly at her and quickly reciprocated, his arms wrapping around her middle. She moaned as he nipped her lower lip with his teeth, parting her lips to allow him entrance.

Pulling away for breath after several heated moments, Lizzie rested her forehead against Ressler's. "Bed?"

Ressler searched her eyes for a moment, a soft smile sliding across his face as he found what he was looking for. Lizzie readily returned his smile with her own grateful one.

Yea." He said, kissing her on the nose. "Let's get some sleep."
Lizzie's eyes fluttered open as the sun streamed in through a crack in her curtains. Snuffling slightly, Lizzie wriggled, freezing immediately at the sensation of her hair being swept away and feather light kisses on the back of her neck.

The events of last caught up to her quickly, causing her to smile and let out a small, delighted little moan as another kiss was planted on her jaw. Lizzie cuddled further into the body behind her as she craned her neck, ensuring the next kiss landed on her lips.

"Good morning." She mumbled around a large smile.

"Morning." Don stated, his voice sleepy deep. She couldn't help but think that voice was like sex in sound form.

Don's arms squeezed her once more as he kissed her sweetly. Pulling his one arm out from under her head to hover over her on his forearm, he smiled down at her. Lizzie turned onto her back to gaze up at him, placing her hand over his where it lay on her belly.

"Thank you." She murmured, returning his smile.

Don's soft gaze took on a hint of confusion. "What for?"

"For staying with me."

Don snorted before he kissed her on the nose. "I didn't do it all out of altruism, Liz." He teased, as he lifted his hand to rest on her cheek, gently swiping his thumb along her cheekbone. "I'm here because I want to be." He said softly.

Lizzie lifted her head to kiss him soundly. Sliding his hand around behind her head, Don held her close, unwilling for the kiss to end.

After a few moments of sleepy morning kisses, Lizzie pulled away. "Lovely as this is, the Bump is on my bladder." She murmured.

Ressler chuckled, scooting away to allow her to roll out of the bed. Lizzie threw a sultry look over her shoulder as she walked away, able to feel his eyes appreciating the way she looked in just an over large t-shirt that doubled as pajamas and her panties.

"Get up, we've got to get to work soon." She ordered teasingly.

"And what exactly am I supposed to do while you're hogging the bathroom?" He asked, laughing.

"Make me breakfast, duh." She said, laughter jumping in her eyes as she closed the bathroom door.

Don snorted as he flopped back onto the bed, his chiseled chest peaking out from under the sheets as he stretched. He laid there for a moment, a stupid grin on his face before rolling out of bed, heading towards the kitchen.
Red walked into the old cabin to find her in the small living room, staring at a small picture on the mantel, framed with colored popsicle sticks and glitter. He stopped steps away from her as she slowly turned her head to look at him. "You look so different." He murmured in greeting.

"Not as different as you." She said, her voice tinged with bitterness.

Red watched as she took a step towards him and swallowed thickly, preparing himself for the inevitable. A crack echoed throughout the small cabin and Red's head whipped to the side at the force of her slap. There was a breathless moment before he turned his head back, his face a mask of indifference as he gazed into her tumultuous eyes. Red licked the corner of his lip and instantly tasted the tell-tale metallic bitterness.

"You always did have a nice backhand."

\/_/_/_/_

"The answer is no. I gave up one life. Do you think I'm gonna start over, do it all again?! You're crazier than I imagined!"

"You can't go back to Philadelphia. It's too dangerous." Red stated calmly as he watched her pace the length of the living room.

"What do you think I'm gonna do? Stay here in in this?" Naomi threw her arms out around her. "I can't believe you brought me here. I'll tell you where I'm gonna go home, with my husband. Frank has two daughters. You think he's just gonna walk out on them?"

Red's eye twitched at her mention of the cabin. She was right, the place did hold a lot of memories. Their old cabin that they'd use for weekend get-aways. He could never bring himself to part with it. "I need to know where Jennifer is." He said, trying to turn the conversation.

"I kept my end of the bargain, didn't say anything about you or Elizabeth." Red's face hardened at the way she spat out his daughter's name. "How much does she know?"

Red frowned at her. "Very little."

"A- are the" Naomi sighed, rolling her eyes to the ceiling as they began to glass over. Red winced in sympathy, his guilty conscious rearing its head at the fact that he's upending her life. Again. "Are the two of you, what, working together? I don't even want to know how you pulled that off." She scoffed.

"Listen to me about Jennifer." Red barked, not particularly comfortable with going down that road with her. "I can protect her."

"I'm never going to tell you where my daughter is. Because of you, I'm forced to finally tell Frank, a man who's never kept a secret from me not only that I was married before, but that I was married to — He sits me down, tells me he's sorry for me. Try and wrap your warped mind around that. The man's entire life is upended. All he can think about is me."

Red sighed, shaking his head as he stood up, palming his fedora. "The arrangements have been made passports, identities, a new life. Talk it over with Frank. If you love him, you'll let me help."

\/_/_/_/_

"Where's Naomi Hyland?" Lizzie greeted as soon as she accepted the call.
Red scoffed, letting silence hang for a moment. "In safe hands." He stated simply.

"What does that mean – you've already set her up with a cozy new life in Saint Kitts or Solvang?"

"Solvang?" He questioned as if affronted. "I never send anyone I care about to Solvang."

"She spent nine days with Berlin. We have to debrief her. She could know something his real name, his location." Lizzie argued, sitting down on the steps that lead to the offices from the war room.

"Did you read about that housewife in Reston? She shot a bank manager." Red deflected.

Lizzie sighed heavily. "You're not hiding her from the FBI. You're hiding her from me."

"Violent crime in D.C. is at a 20-year low, and yet in the last four months, there have been seven random acts of violence by individuals with no prior criminal record." Red paused and Lizzie could hear him take a bite of something. "Lizzie, what do you know about social psychology?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes but decided to play along. She recognized the signs of an impending blacklist. "It's the study of how our behavior is influenced by the world around us."

"Not influenced, manipulated. In what little time I devote to the judgment your government has made about my character and how I treat my fellow man, I can't help but think about how many of their own citizens they've treated like lab rats in the name of science. I believe this murder in Reston is part of an underground social-psychology experiment. Conducted by our government."

Lizzie scoffed and shook her head.

"Strap on your tinfoil hat, Lizzie." Red stated as if he could see her reaction.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

"According to Reddington, three recent incidents prove the U.S. government is still conducting mind-control experiments." Lizzie nodded to Aram and he quickly brought up a few pictures onto the screens behind Lizzie. "Terry Cho, a middle-school teacher who killed seven of his coworkers during his lunch break. Construction worker Henry Lee Bryce used a hammer and a box cutter. Killed by police. The third, Maddie Thornhill, single mom who opened fire at a bank in Reston." Lizzie pointed to each photo as she spoke of the person. "Reddington has alleged that these crimes weren't random, but orchestrated by spooks the government continues to finance through their black-ops budget."

Ressler shook his head as he braced his arms against the table in front of him. "Look, to be honest, I think this is a big distraction to keep us busy while Reddington spirits away his ex."

Cooper stood for a moment, gazing at the pictures on the screens above their heads. "Interview the shooters and their families. Then we'll worry about the wife."

As they dispersed, Lizzie made her way over to Aram. "Hey." She said, grabbing his arm. "What would you say if I told you to pull Frank and Naomi Hyland's phone records for the past five years?"

Aram looked around them shiftily. "I'd, uh, ask if you had a warrant."

Liz smiled slyly. "Would you ask me to show it to you?"
"Why would I do that? I trust you implicitly, Agent Keen." Aram stated before winking at her and continued his journey towards the elevator and his lunch.

They were once more back in the war room with the team gathered round. "Maddie Thornhill told us her life fell apart after a series of anonymous accusations." Lizzie stated from where she sat at Aram's desk. He'd kindly let her sit down after noticing her trying to massage her lower back, wincing in pain.

"The shooter I spoke to said the same thing." Samar spoke up. "In his case, it was accusations of pedophilia. There were no witnesses, no victims ever came forward, but the school didn't want to take chances, so they fired him."

"Their problems metastasized like a cancer, striking to the heart of these victims' identities." Lizzie stated.

Ressler rose a brow in incredulity. "Victims? These aren't the victims, Keen, these are the perps. The people they killed are the victims."

Liz glared at him and sighed. "All I'm saying is that some people aren't wired to handle stress, and someone took advantage of that."

"Agent Keen had me expedite DNA profiles." Lizzie rolled the chair over a bit to give Aram some room as he began rifling through some files on his desk. "All three perpetrators possess the MAO-A 2R gene."

"The extreme-warrior gene." Lizzie stated. She'd done a paper on this very subject in her junior year of undergrad.

"Clinical studies have proven people who possess this gene are prone to aggressive, antisocial behavior."

Ressler shifted on his feet, his hands in his pockets. "Are you suggesting the government has identified people with mild genetic abnormality and is turning them into killers?"

"That's exactly what we're suggesting." Lizzie replied solemnly.

Lizzie knocked on Cooper's door to announce her presence and walked into his office. Looking up from his computer, Cooper gave her a closed lip smile and took his glasses off, tossing them onto his desk.

"The perp in the freeway shooting I hear he had this warrior gene." He phrased his question as a statement.

"Yeah. Agent Navabi has identified 11 other cases in the last 18 months. No connection other than -"

"They share this gene."

Lizzie nodded. "And it's not just some statistical anomaly. It's as if they're being triggered."

"Close the door." Cooper ordered softly.
"Sir?" Lizzie backed up and closed the door before heading over to his desk and sitting in one of the chairs. "You know something?"

Cooper sighed, swiping a hand over his face. "Every word Reddington said about this program is true. In the army, officers sit in bars, and they talk sideways 'a guy who knows a guy who knows a guy.' MK Ultra was just the start. There were others quietly run in military bases and universities all across the country psycho-pharmaceuticals, electromagnetic pulses, microwaves that broadcast words and phrases into the brain." Cooper shook his head. "I love this country, but every once in awhile, you hear about something like this, some bone-evil crap that's almost inconceivable. That's what I hate most about this detail – Reddington pulling up the carpet and shoving your nose deep into the filth." Cooper smiled in apology and Lizzie nodded. No one was more aware of her father's relationship with the seedy underbelly of the world than she was. "After a while, it's all you can see." Cooper continued. "Subproject 7.I"

Lizzie held her breath and when it seemed as though he wasn't going continue, she shook her head. "I don't know what that is."

Cooper sat back in his chair. "It's a black-budget program. It's funded out of the D.I.A. The goal was to use genetic predispositions to train and trigger assets."

"If it's black-budget, how am I supposed to gain access?"

Lizzie and Ressler sat in chairs of the office of Senator Sheraton.

"I am a dear friend of Harold Cooper. He was a pallbearer in my daddy's funeral." Stated Senator Sheraton in his deep southern drawl. "But I told him when he called only yahoos are interested in Subproject 7." "So you're saying it doesn't exist?" Ressler questioned.

Sheraton looked at Ressler with pitying amusement. "You're asking about mind control." Sheraton shook his head. "This government can't make up its own mind, let alone control one." He stated before continuing to gnaw on the toothpick in his hand.

Lizzie could recognize a deflection when she heard one, her father was the king of them. "Senator, is that a yes or a no?"

"It's a yes and a no. Have we studied mind control? Yes. Does it work? About as often as a blind squirrel finds an acorn."

"We've been tracking a spike in violent crimes, mass shootings." Lizzie stated.

Sheraton sat forward in his chair, clasping his hands together atop his desk. "I'm gonna pay you the courtesy of being blunt. You're wasting your time. If there's been an increase in the incidence of violent crime, you're not gonna find the answer to why in the black budget of the U.S. government."

"Understood. But I also understand that you do oversee that black budget, and Harold Cooper would appreciate it if you could provide us with any information you have on Subproject 7."

Sheraton smiled benignly at Lizzie. "Of course. My office will deliver all pertinent documents. Now, if you will excuse me, I am late for my next meeting."
"This is a mistake." Red stated gravely. "I can't help you in Philadelphia."

Naomi shook her head from where she sat on the opposite couch, her hand in Frank's. "We've made up our mind."

"You know I would stop at nothing to protect you."

"We don't need your protection." Frank spat.

"Yes, you do." Red paused, staring intently at Frank. "I understand it may be difficult for you to accept my help, given the history that Carla and I share."

Naomi snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. Carla Reddington was a miserable housewife married to a miserable man. That woman no longer exists. We're not going anywhere."

Red switched his gaze over to Naomi, the tick under his eye twitching as he rolled his tongue. Damn that stung.

Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair, leaning heavily on her elbows against the table. "Everything the Senator sent is redacted. Entire pages."

Ressler inched closer to her and covertly laid his hand against her lower back in comfort, though feigning as if he were leaning over her to read the pages. "Dollar amounts are omitted. Project names are code." He murmured.

Lizzie had to resist the urge to lean towards him. "Yeah, 'Elegant Lady,' 'Forest Green.' I mean, if any of these are Subproject 7, it'd be impossible to tell."

Samar's gaze became distant for a moment. "The Polyglot."

Lizzie sat up in her chair, forcing Ressler to sidle away from her. "What?"

"In Mossad, we have a contact. He's like a code breaker. You give him your black-ops budget, the redacted pages, he'll tell us what they mean."

Ressler reared his head back, his eyebrows inching toward his hairline. "You have our black-ops budget?"

Lizzie huffed out a laugh at his preoccupation before turning her attention back to Samar. "The Polyglot, how do we find him?"

Samar shrugged, wincing apologetically. "He was cleared level 4. I don't have that kind of access."

Red's laughter emanated from her phone's speaker. "Oh, my God. Is that what they call him in Tel Aviv? I haven't spoken to Haskell in years."

"But you know where to find him?"

"I do. But it's a sticky situation. Old Haskell and I had somewhat of a falling-out at the craps table."
"You're lucky I know this man is as harmless as a fruit fly." Red murmured grumpily. "I still can't believe you talked me into letting you come. You're pregnant, ready to pop." Red uttered, shaking his head woefully. "That face – god it was like that time when you were seven and you just had to have that doll that actually cries."

Lizzie snorted. "You're just put out that I know your weakness. My bright and shining face." She teased.

Red harrumphed as he lifted his hand to knock. Within moments a short balding man answered the door.

"Hask –" The moment recognition appeared on the man's face, he slammed the door shut, disallowing Red to finish his greeting.

Red frowned and glanced at Lizzie before knocking again.

"I have no interest in seeing you. Go away. You're not welcome here." The man's voice emanated from behind the heavy wooden door.

"Haskell, I told you I'm sorry." Red shouted in order to be heard. "What more can I say?"

The door swung open violently. "You knew I was in recovery."

"I didn't." Red defended. At the disbelieving look on Haskell's face, Red shrugged. "Okay. Yes, I did. But you were having such a great time. And after everything that happened with Sheryl and that Cuban, the boxer – what was his name?"

Haskell's face pinched with anger. "I'm not talking to you about this."

"Yasiel! God, that hair. Beautiful hair. I thought you could use a little distraction. You forget we won $25,000 on one roll."

"Yes, and I lost twice that much after you left." Haskell fumed. "I woke up in that Hotel. I still don't even know how I got to mesquite. That kind of money means nothing to you, but to me …"

Red opened up the duffel bag he'd been holding and revealed the many bundles of cash inside. "It's an olive branch, with interest." Haskell leaned forward to take a peek and silently opened the door wider to let them in.

"My friend Miss Watkins is a blogger looking for her first scoop." Red finally introduced Lizzie as they entered the foyer.

"I write mostly about social-science experiments. Researching one right now, actually the black-ops project Subproject7." Lizzie stated as she shook Haskell's hand.

Haskell's smile turned a little bit creepy. "Why don't we take this into my office? It's V2K-shielded." Haskell turned around and headed off down the hall. Lizzie looked back at her dad, her face a mask of worry and slight fear. Red merely smiled genteelly and swept out his hand as if to say after you.

"Here she is – government white paper on Subproject 7." Haskell stated, whipping a folder out of
its place in the filing cabinet before slamming the cabinet shut.

"I've seen the white paper. It's heavily redacted. Wha– " Lizzie broke off as Haskell chuckled, placing the file in front of her and opening it up to reveal full, non-redacted, pages of the report. "How did you?"

Red smiled, shaking his head as if in awe. "Haskell's quite a puzzle man. Spends his days combing through thousands of pages of redacted government documents, comparing them to defense-authorization reports, executive orders. He's found a way to read between the lines. I wouldn't have the patience."

Haskell bowed his head, accepting the praise graciously. "Subproject 7 was born out of the human genome project. Some genius in government figured that if DNA could be used to identify people who were predisposed to cancer, it could be used to identify people who were predisposed to become assassins."

Lizzie picked up a photo. "Who are these people?"

"The Team. They used the brains of mass murderers and reverse-engineered from there, fine-tuned a three-phase activation process. First phase disruption of schedule, routine, daily life. Second destabilize sense of self-worth. Final phase was to sever the primary emotional bond. Get all three: jackpot."

Lizzie continued studying the photo as she listened. "This man here who is he? I've seen his face before."

Haskell leaned over to get a better look. "Oh, yes. He was their lab assistant, Dr. Linus Creel."

"Dr. Linus Creel, PHD in clinical psychology from N.Y.U." Lizzie stated, hitting the button on the remote in her hand to bring the man's image up onto the screen. "After Subproject 7 disbanded, he opened a private practice."

Ressler leaned against the table, in front of one of the computers. "It appears he supplements his income working as a locum tenens at six area hospitals."

"I cross-referenced Creel's name with the 11 warrior gene killers in the last 18 months." Samar stated, setting a large file down on the table. "At some point, he was on staff at each of the hospitals where the killers were receiving counseling, including our friend Maddie Thornhill."

"That's how he's recruiting them." Cooper said gruffly.

Samar looked over at Aram. "Can we access his network?"

Aram shook his head, ducking his head in apparent shame. "Already checked that. I can't break through his firewall. If I could somehow gain physical access, I could upload a program to deactivate it long enough to hack his patient list."

Ressler took a step away from the table and pointed at the computer. "Come here. Take a look at this." Aram hurried over and sent a mirror of the computer screen to one of the overheads for the slightly technologically challenged Agent Ressler. "Creel has this posted on his website, calls it an intake questionnaire."

"Some kind of I.Q. test?" Samar questioned.
Lizzie hopped off of her stool and walked nearer to read the contents of the questionnaire better. "No, it's a modified MMPI-2 the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory but it's heavily modified." Lizzie paused as she studied it. "He reconfigured the test questions to flag aggression and low impulse control."

Ressler rocked back on his heels. "That's how he finds the subjects with the warrior gene."

Lizzie waddle-walked over to Aram's workstation and leaned an elbow against the table. "Aram, if I asked you to create an E.M.R., could you feed it into their database?"

Aram's eyes shifted in thought before he gazed steadily at Lizzie. "You want a fake medical record?"

"Yeah family history, immunization records, billing addresses, but most importantly, we'll need a full psychiatric history."

Aram's brow furrowed in confusion. "Like what?"

Red gazed steadily at Naomi's sleeping form on the couch before slowly turning towards Frank as the man entered the room. "She's exhausted. Why don't you and I go for a walk?"

The two men quickly made their way up towards the small road that rolled through and vivisected the surrounding trees.

Coming to a stop at the side of the road, Red turned to face Frank. "This may be hard to understand, Frank, but after all these years, your wife has become more like an estranged sister to me. We can't really bear each other's company. But I've become somewhat concerned about her general well-being and sense of security."

Red's gaze flickered towards an approaching SUV.

"Are you threatening me?" Frank scoffed.

Red placed a hand on Frank's shoulder. "She loves you." The vehicle came to a stop a few feet away from them. "You've made her happy. Given her a life, stability." The sounds of doors slamming broke through the quiet of the forest. Red wasn't worried as he knew it was only Dembe and Mr. Vargas. "The one thing I could never provide." Red patted Frank's shoulder genially before walking around to the back of the SUV. "Come closer, Frank." When the man didn't move, Red trapped him with his steely gaze. "Frank. Come here." He ordered.

Red opened the trunk of the SUV and murmured softly. "Come on."

Frank stopped short as he came around the SUV to find a yellow lab happily waving his tail as Red pet him. "That's Monica's dog. What the hell have you done?"

Red turned to face Frank as Dembe quickly leashed the dog. "You're finished with Monica." He stated gravely.

Frank angrily took a step forward, his hands turning to fists. "Where is she?"

Red's brow raised, unimpressed at the man's apparent bravado. "We had a few words. And, thanks
to my friend's – " Red waved his hand toward Mr. Vargas. "— rather judicious rescue, we also have a dog."

"Monica – what did you do to —"

Red rolled his eyes. "She's fine." He stated, his words clipped with annoyance. "But from this point forward there is only Naomi. She believes you to be an honest man, Frank – faithful, and that is what you will become. You're going to accept my protection and leave Philadelphia."

Frank scoffed, shaking his head. "No. I'm gonna call the cops, turn you in. You're not gonna get away with this."

Red stared at Frank stoically before springing into action. Bending down quickly, Red grabbed a stick, snapped it in two and held it to Frank's neck, his other hand holding the man by the back of his head so he couldn't move. Frank's eyes widened and he began to breathe heavily.

Red smiled at the man's obvious terror. "You make her happy." He stated darkly, pressing the jagged edges of the stick into the man's carotid. "That is the only reason you're still here." Just as quickly as he put the stick to the man's neck, Red stepped back and tossed the stick. "Go get it, boy." Red spoke gently, watching as the dog continued to sit on the road. Red shook his head, chuckling. "City dog." He murmured.

/\\\\\

"I swear to God, you better know what you're doing." Don murmured as he stood in front of Lizzie in their office, his hands on her hips.

Lizzie smiled up at him and kissed him sweetly. "I'll be fine. I'm a trained psychologist remember? I know what actions and reactions he's expecting; I know what answers he expects on the questionnaire."

"Doesn't mean things can't take a turn. The guy's obviously a psycho." Don argued, taking a step closer.

"I'll be fine. I promise."

/\\\\\

"Hello. You must be Angela. My name is Dr. Creel." The doctor introduced himself as he walked in and quickly sat in the stool next to the bed that Lizzie was currently on, swinging her legs back and forth. "Says here you've been having some troubles with your husband." Dr. Creel stated, flipping through her records.

Lizzie scoffed, rolling her eyes. "That's an understatement."

Creel smiled benignly. "Now, I see that you've been treated for depression and anxiety before."

"In college, postgrad. I had, you know." Lizzie winced. "A rough patch."

"You were hospitalized." Lizzie looked down at her lap as he stated this.

"I know this must be difficult for you." He said, his voice pitched in sympathy.

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders, letting out a self-depreciating huff. "I took some pills. They had to pump my stomach."
"Was this deliberate or an accident?"

Lizzie appeared to deliberate. "Kind of both." She said slowly. "It's not what you think. I- it's not like I ever wanted to commit suicide. I took them in front of someone. I had this boyfriend Ronnie. I was so young, – and he – Was cheating. I was such an idiot." Lizzie chuckled lightly.

"Feel that you want to hurt yourself now? Now that your husband has left?"

"No." Lizzie looked down and rubbed her belly. "I couldn't."

"But you're angry at him." Creel persisted.

"I'd kill him." Lizzie didn't hesitate as she answered, she didn't need to. "I- I- I mean, I would never kill him." She backpedaled, laughing nervously. "That's not what I meant. It's just a figure of speech."

"I understand." Creel chuckled. "What's his name?"

Lizzie pursed her lips. "Tom. His name was Tom."

"And if you caught Tom cheating, if you walked in on him, – and you could – Kill him?"

Lizzie shook her head determinedly. "I'd never."

"But if you could do anything and get away with it, what would it be? No chance of ever getting caught? You're above the law. Have at him."

"I'd chain him up." Lizzie said darkly.

"Yeah?" Creel moved forward to the edge of his seat.

"And I'd force him to tell me about all of the lies, the secrets he kept. I'd make him my prisoner." Lizzie tsked, letting out a huff of a laugh. "It's pretty messed up, huh?"

Creel rolled his stool closer to her. "You know. We don't put people in prison for how they feel." Creel tapped her on the knee with his pen and all she wanted to do was knee him in the face, shove the cartilage of his nose so high up into his brain the next time he got the sniffles, he'd be leaking memories. "You can't control it. You are who you are. It's biology." The man gave her the creeps. "We never argue about height or eye color. But try telling someone their reaction to anger or love or violence is baked in." Creel smiled softly at her, his lips thinning as they stretched, before he rolled his stool back once more. "Now It says here that your parents died when you were 4. What do you remember about them?"

Lizzie shrugged. "Nothing, really."

"Perhaps if you did, it would be easier for you to accept who you are."

"Like the Sins of the Father. That it?" Lizzie raised a brow.

"Absolutely. The more time you spend with your parents, the more of yourself you see in them. For better or for worse, they're a glimpse into your future."

"My father died in a fire. I was 4." Lizzie stated, shutting down any thoughts of what her real father's identity could mean for her future. She knew it wasn't great. But she also knew she wouldn't trade him for the world. God she really was messed up.
"Is that how you got the scar on your hand?"

"Yeah. I guess." Lizzie murmured, bringing her hands together to rub the scar. "I don't remember, actually." The lie fell easily from her lips.

"Early trauma scars us in ways we don't often recognize or admit."

Lizzie just raised a disbelieving brow.

"Look, Angela, I am here to determine whether you are a danger to yourself or others. I know that you don't want to spend the night here. So, I am going to see if I can expedite the blood tests. Meanwhile, I would like you to take a simple personality test I developed for my patients." Creel leaned over and grabbed a pad of paper with the questionnaire on it to hand to her. "It's a standardized psychometric test that's gonna give me a deeper understanding into issues you may or may not have."

"When the nurse drew my blood, she said that you ordered a genetic screening."

Creel stood and smiled. "Too many of my colleagues focus on the nurture side of the equation. And sure how your parents treated you is important, but the genes they passed on matter more. There are no wrong answers. Just – Whatever comes to mind."

"Okay, got it."

Lizzie watched the man leave and head over to the nurse's station. Propelling herself off the bed, Lizzie grunted as she got to her knees and quickly removed the doctor's laptop from the bag he'd left in the room.

Opening the laptop, Lizzie fingers hovered over the keys. "Go." She murmured.

"Hold down power, shift, 's.'" Aram's voice floated into her ear.

Lizzie quickly did as instructed. "Okay. I see white letters on a black screen."

"Perfect. Okay. Type forward slash b-n. It's running a dictionary attack. Should take a few seconds."

"Got it." Once more Lizzie did as asked.

Okay, it's gonna give you a password. I need you to write it down."

As an apparently random set of numbers began appearing on the screen, Lizzie reached into the bag and grabbed Creel's prescription pad and began writing.

Sitting up a bit to look out the window, Lizzie saw Creel heading back to the room. Cursing, Lizzie shut and threw the laptop back in his bag and ripped the page with the password out of the pad before making her way back to the bed as quickly as she could, grabbing the questionnaire as she hid the prescription pad under her thigh.

"The blood panels won't be done – " Creel seemed to pause as she fidgeted on the bed. "for another 20 minutes."

Lizzie smiled sweetly. "Okay."

Creel sighed heavily. "Did you really think you could just come in here, lie to me? I know why you're here."
Lizzie's eyes widened in apparent fear. "I told you I-I need your help."

"You are a junkie. You're trying to forge scripts." He yelled angrily.

Lizzie shrugged innocently, pasting on another sweet smile. "Maybe my father was an addict, too."

Creel frowned at her. "Hand them over!" He held out his hand. "Now! Let's go. You're pregnant for Pete's sake!"

Lizzie laughed a little crazily as he stepped forward. "They're under here somewhere. Okay, got them." She stated victoriously as she removed the pad from where it'd been hidden. "Are you calling the cops or something?"

Creel's smile sent shivers down her spine. "No. Now I'm only more interested in your test results."

Creel sat back down on the stool and indicated towards the questionnaire still in Lizzie's hands. "Please continue."

\\\\

Lizzie breathed heavily as she opened the door to the surveillance van parked outside the hospital. "Oh, my God." She said dazedly as Samar helped her into the van.

"You okay?" Aram asked worriedly. Looking her over, he sighed sadly. "You didn't get the password."

Lizzie looked at him incredulously. "I mean, what do you expect?" She asked, exhaling sharply. At Aram's forlorn face, Lizzie laughed, and with a flick of her wrist, a folded scrap of paper appeared between her fingers. "Course I got it." She teased. "Magic." She stated with faux mysticism as she handed it over.

\\\\

Lizzie paused on her way out as she saw Aram running over to her out the corner of her eye. "Hey."

"Hey."

"I followed up on Frank and Naomi Hyland, like you asked." Aram whispered as he drew along side her. "Both phones are dead."

"Mm-hmm." Lizzie encouraged, knowing Aram well enough to know that wasn't all.

"I identified the five numbers they called the most to see if any of those people were getting calls from new numbers. People that Frank and Naomi might have reached out to."

"And?"

"There's a woman. Monica Lyons." Aram whipped out a sheet of paper with a list of phone calls made. "She got six calls today, all unanswered. All came from a pay phone at a gas station in rural Maryland. Only a handful of homes in that area."

"What gas station?"

\\\\

"Oh, he must belong to someone." Naomi stated as she kneeled beside the dog, happily petting
him. "Maybe we can see if he has a chip or something, see who his owners are. If he doesn't have any, we could bring him back to Philadelphia."

Red looked at Frank pointedly and the man cleared his throat. "We can't go back."

Naomi's head whipped up to gaze at her husband. "What? We- we already decided."

"No, uh, If there's any chance you're in danger, I couldn't live with myself if something were to happen to you." Frank said pleadingly, taking Naomi's hand and leading her over to the couch where he sat next to her.

Naomi's stony gaze turned towards Red. "You did this. You threatened him. You threatened his girls."

"No, this had nothing to do with him. This is about us what's best for us, for you. That's all that matters."

Before Naomi could reply the sound of the cabin door slamming caused everyone to turn their heads towards it.

"Hello, Mrs. Hyland." Lizzie greeted cheerily as she walked in. Looking towards her dad, her smile widened. "Hey Dad."

"Oh you have got to be shitting me." Naomi stated incredulously.

"Lizzie." Red groaned.

"I'm sorry Raymond." Dembe murmured as he tailed behind Lizzie, having had no success in stopping her.

Lizzie turned her head towards her brother. "Colored pencil, jerk face." She said snottily, causing Dembe to laugh and shake his head as he headed back outside.

Turning back towards the rest of the group, Lizzie stepped back as the weight of Naomi's furious gaze fell on her before turning back to a suddenly exhausted looking Raymond.

"What is this? Are you kidding me?" She cried, standing up and pacing towards Red. "You bring your bastard daughter here?" Naomi threw an arm out towards Lizzie. "And she's pregnant?!"

"That's enough, Naomi." Red growled.

"Mrs. Hyland – " Lizzie attempted.

"Shut up." The woman snapped at her before turning to Red. "You abandon me and our daughter and then what? Raise her? And now you're going to be a grandpa?" Naomi scoffed. "You ruin our lives and then go on to have a perfect little life of your own."

Red opened his mouth but Lizzie lifted her hand to silence him as she stepped towards Naomi.

"My dad sent me to live with his friend, Sam. My Pop. He visited as much as he could. Want to know what happened on one of those memorable visits?" Lizzie's voice was a dark murmur. "I was six. Pop and I had just sat down to dinner when Dad came in, screaming my name, yelling for me. When he found me, he held me so tightly, I was afraid my ribs would collapse." Lizzie paused as she felt her Dad clasping her hand in his.

"Lizzie." He murmured, shaking his head.
"No. She needs to know." She argued, turning to face Naomi who stood there, thunderstruck.

"He was crying – sobbing. But he wouldn't tell me why. So I snuck downstairs that night when I should have been sleeping. He was telling Pop about what happened." Lizzie stepped closer to Naomi. "How you and Jennifer had been brutally murdered. There was blood, so much blood,' he'd said." Lizzie got a certain satisfaction at the horrified, stricken look on Naomi's face. "He thought you were dead." She whispered harshly.

"So listen here, bitch. Next time you hold a grudge for over 20 years, make sure it's warranted."

Naomi gulped, looking away as she folded her arms over her chest defensively.

In the ensuing silence, Lizzie reached into her pocket and pulled out her badge. "Now, if you don't mind, Mrs. Hyland, I have a few questions for you about Berlin."

They all stood outside, Naomi, Red, and Lizzie stood on the porch of the cabin as Frank and Dembe packed the SUV with Naomi and Frank's belongings.

"Mrs. Hyland, no matter what you think of my Dad… if you could – " Lizzie paused, taking a breath. "I'd really like to meet my sister."

Naomi looked at her in sympathy. "I don't know where Jennifer is. She knew you – " She glanced at Red. "Would come for her one day, and she left. I don't know where she is."

Lizzie bit her lip and nodded, walking away.

Red watched her walk towards the cars before turning back to Naomi.

"If you need anything… Ever …" He murmured gruffly.

Naomi smiled shakily, nodding her head. Red stepped forward, took her in his arms, and kissed her forehead.

Both Lizzie and Red slouched into the cushioned leather seats in the back of his Mercedes. Looking over at her dad, she smiled sadly at the sight of him with his eyes closed as if he were wishing for sleep to take him.

"Seriously Dad, worst taste in women ever." She teased.

Red snorted, shaking his head as he opened his eyes to look at her. "She's had quite a few years for her anger to stew, Lizzie."

Lizzie scoffed and looked at Dembe in the rear view mirror. "Why don't you stop him, bro? Clearly the man needs help!"

Dembe chuckled as Red gave a long suffering sigh. "I wasn't there for that one, Elizabeth."

"No excuses."

"Okay, there has got to be 70." Aram murmured as he sifted through the various files of Creel's
computer which he now had remote access to. "He was documenting them, searching for the perfect candidates. Hold on. Wait. I have got a hidden subdirectory here."

Lizzie moved closer. "The killers. Everyone in this file has murdered someone."

Aram nodded and sent an image towards the large screens. "Except one: Duncan Prince."

Ressler looked up at the picture, his arms folded over his chest. "He must be next. Where do we find him?"

"I got an address in College Park."

They were back in the war room, having only found Prince's laptop and an empty gun case at the address but no Prince. Though the laptop had led them to find an apparent online relationship between Duncan Prince and an Amber Deveraux.

"We've looked at every conceivable database. There's nothing on an Amber Deveraux." Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair.

"Well, I don't know who the hell he's been talking to, but this Amber Deveraux just crushed the kid an hour ago."

Ressler turned towards Aram. "Listen to me this kid's gacked up and gone. The Stoner roommates have no idea where. The girl's in trouble. You got to find her."

Lizzie froze, her mouth widening with realization. "Amber Deveraux doesn't exist. That's how he's triggering his clients. Anonymous allegations that can never be verified. Poor reviews online, blind accusations at work. And by girlfriends who don't exist."

Cooper's lips pursed in thought. "You think he's catfishing, that he invented the girl to trigger Duncan Prince, push him over the edge?"

Lizzie nodded. "Yeah."

"Find out where he thinks she is."

"Hold on." Aram shouted, drawing everyone's attention. "Prince's fake girlfriend posted a very real photo from a community forum on gun violence." Aram posted the image to the screens above their heads.

"Duncan must have seen this." Lizzie looked towards the corner of the image. "Senator Sheridan." Lizzie stated, pointing to the man sitting in a chair off to the side of the photo. "That's where our shooter's going. To the gun rally. Creel posted the photo. He's gonna be there. Observing his experiment."

"You can't be serious, Liz. You're staying in the car!" Don yelled angrily. "Hell, you shouldn't even be coming with us!"

Don swerved to avoid a car not paying attention as their sirens blared and Don sped through and around traffic. Lizzie winced, shifting awkwardly in her seat as the rough ride did nothing for her
already aching back.

"No, I'm coming out there! I'm the only one of us with a background in negotiating with a suspect in hostage situations!"

"We don't know if it will be a hostage situation!"

Lizzie scoffed. "He's going to a gun rally to find that his girlfriend doesn't exist, of course it's going to be a hostage situation!"

Don shook his head. "You're not going. That's final."

Lizzie glared at him before stretching her arm behind her. She quickly pulled a Kevlar vest out from the back seat.

"You have got to be shitting me." Don murmured incredulously as he gazed at the custom vest. Complete with extra fabric, perfect for covering a pregnant belly.

"Red had it made for me." Lizzie murmured as she took off her seat belt to put the vest on. "Said he knew me too well."

"Liz." Don groaned.

"No. I have to do this Ressler."

The brakes squealed as they came to an abrupt stop in the courtyard of the community center. Lizzie and Ressler hopped out of their SUV and heard several doors slamming around them as their colleagues did the same. Most of them stayed back as Lizzie, Ressler, and Samar moved closer.

"You're here to kill me, Duncan." Creel stated, his eyes wild.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Duncan yelled, beginning to lower his gun.

"'I didn't mean to hurt you.' 'Whatever.' 'Here to talk.' 'With Paul?' 'He's a great guy, really. I.D.G.A.S.'" Creel petulantly listed off the private conversations Duncan had had with his supposed girlfriend. "Why do you think you never met her? Because she's not real! The picture she posted, the one that brought you here, I posted it."

Duncan gave an unintelligible shout as he cocked the gun.

"That's right. Pull the trigger."

"Duncan, no!" Lizzie shouted moving closer, ignoring Don's warning whisper of her name. "Listen to me. You. Put the gun down. You don't want to do this. He lied to you, manipulated you. It's not your fault." Lizzie pled with Duncan.

"Pull the trigger, Duncan." Creel persisted. :It's what you came to do. You're all part of my experiment." Creel's eyes danced wildly around as he gazed at all the people watching the spectacle. "Read my research! We can save them!" He shouted to no one in particular.

"Duncan, listen to me." Lizzie lifted her hands in supplication as she slowly walked nearer. "He's making you believe that you don't have a choice!"

"Do you think that I want to die? I don't. But I have run out of ways to get people to pay attention.
Do this, and the world will listen. They'll examine my life, my research. That can't happen unless you pull the trigger."

With a cry, Duncan shot Creel. Lizzie quickly made her way over to the man as Ressler tackled Duncan to the ground.

"Medic! I need a medic!" Lizzie shouted as she kneeled next to Creel, holding her hand over the wound in his arm. Within seconds, the man grabbed her around the waist, forcing her to stand with one arm as the other withdrew from his pocket.

Lizzie inhaled sharply at the feel of cold metal being held to her neck. Ressler looked up and his eyes widened at the sight of Lizzie with a gun held to her head, Creel using her as a human shield.

Ressler quickly stood, leaving Duncan handcuffed on the ground. Lifting his weapon and seeing Samar do the same, Ressler took a step towards Creel and Lizzie only for the man to take two steps away. "Take it easy, pal. Creel, listen to me. You have to understand. If I have a shot, I'm gonna take it."

"Put your weapon down!" Samar shouted.

Creel shook his head. "I shoot her, you shoot me! That's how this works, right?"

"Make you a martyr?" Ressler spat. "Not today."

Creel leaned closer to Lizzie to whisper in her ear. You should know I saw your test results. You know what they said?" Before he could finish, the sound of a gunshot rang out and Lizzie barely stayed upright as Creel fell backwards, a bullet between his eyes.

"Where did it come from? Where the hell did that shot come from?!" Ressler shouted, his head on a swivel as he lunged forward, wrapping Lizzie in his arms protectively.

Samar searched the area before pointing upward. "There on the roof." She shouted. "Go!" Samar directed towards the other agents.

Lizzie focused on Don, her eyes still wide in fear. Distantly, she saw Samar walking Duncan Prince to one of the vehicles but it was as if she were watching a movie.

"Hey! Hey, you with me?" Don murmured as he slowly lowered them to the ground. "You're alright, we're gonna get an ambulance to check you out."

Lizzie swallowed. "You may want to get them here quick." She murmured.

"What? Why?" Don pulled away and began searching her for injuries.

"Because my – my water just broke."

Chapter End Notes

I still own nothing.
"Don!" Lizzie shouted suddenly as the paramedics loaded her into the ambulance. "Get your butt in here!"

"Ma'am, he can't - "

"Shut up." Lizzie growled at the paramedic before looking back at Don. "Get in here, please." Her voice quickly turned from demanding to pleading. Don smiled sympathetically and climbed in, grabbing Lizzie's hand as he sat next to her.

"Hey you're doing great." He murmured and kissed her forehead as he swept some of her hair from her face. "But let the record show, if you do anything so stupid as to come into the field when you're about to pop, again, I will tie you down." Don growled teasingly.

Lizzie's glare morphed into a grimace as another contraction hit. "Let's get through this one before we start talking about next time, yea?" Lizzie groaned, her grip tightening around his hand.

Don didn't even bother hiding his enormous grin. She said next time.

Remembering what had led to their current predicament, Don's face became stern. "I'm serious Liz." He intoned as he took her hand and squeezed it in his. "I was so scared back there. You shouldn't have been out there and you know it." Don said, his eyes pleading with her.

Lizzie looked away, her face pinched. "I know. I'm sorry." She murmured.

Don nodded, satisfied. There was a moment of calm before Lizzie's eyes widened. "Shit! Where's my phone?" Lizzie panicked. "Don! Where's my phone? You have to get my phone!" Lizzie's eyes widened. "Wait!" She shouted at the paramedic just as they were about to close the door.

"Liz! I've got your stuff right here," Don held up her bag which Samar had grabbed out of the SUV and given to him. "Aren't you a bit busy to be making phone calls?"

Lizzie's attention was drawn to the doors which slammed shut behind the paramedic and Lizzie felt the ambulance quickly lurch into action. Turning back to Don, Lizzie glared at him once more as her other hand rubbed soothing circles over her belly. "I am in no mood for your sass right now, Don." She grumbled. "Nick's pizza. My Dad is under Nick's pizza in my contacts. Call him."

Don's eyes widened and he began to shake his head slowly. "Uh Liz, I don't think that's such a great idea... Here." Donrummaged through Lizzie's bag and pulled out the phone. "Why don't you call him?"

"Call my dad, you ass!" Lizzie shouted as another contraction hit.

I own nothing.
"Lizzie! How's the case-"

"It's not Lizzie uh… sir."

Red chewed the inside of his cheek. "Where is Lizzie, Agent Ressler?" The only answer was silence. "Donald! Where is Lizzie… are those sirens? Why do I hear sirens?" Red's voice deepened to a demanding growl.

"Uh, well um… Creel." Ressler coughed awkwardly.

"Donald, spit it out." Red snapped.

"He just… snatched her. And uh...he had a gun."

As Red stood from his seat, he punched the the interior wall of his plane and a crack reverberated through the cabin. Whether it was his fist or the thick plastic wall, he couldn't be bothered.


Distantly he was aware of Dembe heading towards the cockpit.

"She um…"

"Oh my God, Ressler! You're scaring the shit out of him!" As the sound of his Lizzie's voice carried through the phone, angry as it may be, Red collapsed back into his chair in relief, holding his head in his hands.

"Her water broke! We're heading to the hospital now."

Red sat back and crossed his legs. At the sound of a door closing, he looked up to see Dembe walking back from the cockpit. "I'm about to be a grandpa!" He stated excitedly and Dembe returned his enormous grin. Red looked out the small window and watched as the plane turned onto another runway, heading back towards the small airport hangar.

\\\\

Lizzie had quickly been given her own room and her legs were currently in the stirrups, a blanket draped over her lap as the doctor did an exam. Lizzie gently squeezed Don's hand, turning her head to look at him when she noticed where his attention was.

"Hey! Eyes up here, Captain America!" She shouted. "The first time you see down there is not going to be when I'm about to push a watermelon out, got it?"

Don snapped to attention, looking away as his cheeks flamed. "Yea uh… sorry." Don stuttered awkwardly. Catching the doctor's surreptitious glance between her and Don, Lizzie had to giggle.

"Sorry, it's just...weird isn't it?"

Don chuckled and brought her hand to his lips. "Yea, a bit. But it's a good weird, I think."
"Lizzie, Sweetheart!" Red cried, throwing his arms in the air as he walked into her hospital room, Dembe trailing behind him. Red walked over to her bedside and allowed Don to move out of his way before wrapping his arms around his daughter who enthusiastically returned the hug.

"I'm so glad you guys could be here." Lizzie enthused as Dembe took his turn hugging her. As he went to pull away, another contraction hit and Lizzie groaned loudly, her arms seizing around him like a vise as she tried to breathe through the pain, forcing her brother to brace himself with his arms on either side of her or risk crushing her.

Once the pain had subsided, Lizzie allowed him to pull away. "Sorry, Dembe." She murmured embarrassedly.

"Are you alright?"

"Are you okay, Sweetheart?"

Both Don and Red spoke at the same time. Lizzie and Dembe had mirroring amused grins as they glanced at the two men.

"I'm fine guys, just going through labor. No big deal." She teased.

"Alrighty folks!" The doctor cried as he walked into the room, fitting his hands into his rubber gloves. He was way too chipper for Lizzie's comfort right now. "It's time to rock 'n' roll! Who's staying in the room with Ms. Scott?"

"I am."

"I am."

Both Don and Red spoke at the same time again. Lizzie snorted, unamused. Don and Red turned twin glares on each other.

"She's my daughter!" Red argued.

"She's my girlfriend!" Don countered.

"Well, we can take care of that-"

"Both of you shut the hell up!" Lizzie growled, her stomach tightening as another contraction hit. "Get out! Now!"

Simultaneous dismayed cries of "Lizzie!" followed her order.

"No! Neither of you are staying." They both thought better of arguing at the sight of Lizzie's murderous glare. Their heads down, Red and Don began to walk towards the door, with Dembe following after.

"No. Dembe, you stay." Lizzie ordered, holding out her hand which he quickly grasped in his.

"Well that's not very fair…" Red grumbled.

"Get. Out." Lizzie growled.
"Ahh!" Lizzie cried as she bore down for the umpteenth time, her hand crushing her brother's as he murmured soft encouragement in her ear. "Is he dead? Is Tom dead? I don't want him to be dead. I want to kill him!"

Red stood with his back against the wall, staring at Don. His baby girl was in there giving birth and he wasn't there because of this little shit.

"What?" Don cried, standing up. "You've been staring at me for an hour! What do you want?"

Red frowned, disliking Ressler's tone. "We never did have that talk, did we?" He asked, his voice grave.

"What talk?" Don asked, rubbing his hands over his face.

"The one where I tell you that if you hurt her, I'll kill you." Red said darkly. "I've got rather a history of it, actually."

Don did a double take, his adam's apple bobbing as he gulped. "Are we really going to do this now?" He asked softly, hoping his voice didn't quake.

"Yes. We are." Red stated, his words clipped as he slowly stalked toward Don. "Because any time now, my daughter's going to give birth. And it won't just be about her. There will be a new life that I will kill for."

Don sighed, taking a step away from Red. "I would never hurt her." He murmured tiredly though Red could still hear the truth in his words.

"Why?"

The corners of Don's eyes pinched in confusion. "Why what? Why wouldn't I hurt her?" He asked incredulously.

"Why are you here?" Red clarified.

Don's mouth opened as his brow furrowed in shock. "Are you kidding me?"

"It's a perfectly legitimate question." Red stated calmly. "You've dated for a little over a month. Yet here you are, in a hospital waiting room, waiting for your girlfriend to give birth to a baby that isn't yours." Red paused. "Why?"

Don breathed out heavily through his nose, his eyes scorching holes into Red's face. "I don't need to explain myself to you."

Red smiled cheerily at Don. "Oh I think you'll quickly find that you do, Agent Ressler. Now, tell me." Red paused to allow Don to answer. "Now." He barked when no answer was forthcoming.

"Because I love her!" Don shouted, a hand on his hip as the other flew out to point towards the door through which Lizzie was. "Why am I here? What kind of question is that?" Don scoffed as he began to pace like a caged animal. "The same reason I started a relationship with my pregnant best friend. Because I love her, you trumped up piece of shit!"

At this, Red quirked an eyebrow, his lips turning up in amusement.
Don stepped towards Red, pointing his finger at the man's chest. "And before you say anything else, I'm gonna tell you what I told Liz." Don continued. "I'll love him because he is Liz's. As far as I'm concerned, that baby is Liz's. No one else's."

Red stared stoically at the finger Don had pointed to his chest until Don awkwardly furled into a fist and dropped his hand to his side. "That's not exactly true, is it?" He asked gravely.

"What?"

"The baby isn't just Lizzie's. He's yours too. Or rather, you see him as such." Red paused, his gaze bouncing across Don's face. Finding what he was looking for, Red nodded definitively and took a step away from Ressler. "You desperately want to be a part of that little family in there." Red pointed towards the door to the maternity ward. "And as long as that remains the case, Agent Ressler, I believe you and I will get along swimmingly."

"Family of Elizabeth Scott?" Red and Don's heads whipped towards the sound of the nurse's gentle inquiry. Both stood up quickly from their seats and grinned at the sight of the woman's amused face. No one would be amused if something bad happened, right?

"Ms. Scott is asking for you."

"And the baby?"

"The baby's okay?" Both men spoke at the same time causing the nurse to laugh.

"Yes, he's doing well. Follow me."

"Oh Lizzie…" Red murmured in wonder as he walked into the room followed closely by a hugely grinning Don. "He's absolutely gorgeous!" Red gushed, his eyes becoming watery as he gazed at the sight of his exhausted daughter holding her little boy - his tiny head covered with a blue hat - his grandson.

"Thanks Dad." Lizzie said, smiling brightly around her tears just as a yawn overtook her.

Dembe stood back so that Red and Don could stand closer and the men took the opportunity to stand on either side of the bed.

"He really is, Liz." Don murmured. "He's beautiful." Don leaned forward and kissed her lightly. Lizzie murmured a dazed thank you, carefully lifting one hand from where she cradled her son - her son - to run her fingers through her sweat soaked hair.

Clearing her throat, Lizzie winced as she tiredly tried to sit a bit higher up in the bed, smiling down at her son as he snuffled, the movement disturbing his sleep.

"Guys," Lizzie started, pulling the swaddling blanket down a little to show off a bit more of the baby's face. "I'd like you to meet Samuel Scott Reddington."

Lizzie looked over at her dad at his sharp inhalation. Tears began to fall anew at the sight of tear tracks on his cheeks. "Lizzie-" Red choked, in obvious turmoil. "Sweetheart, you can't…"

Lizzie smiled tremulously. "I can and I have." She stated. "Now, shut up and hold your grandson."
Lizzie leaned forward in preparation of handing little Sammy over.

Red laughed wetly and quickly jumped to take his grandson, his arms coming to wrap around the little being as if he were spun glass. "Oh hello, beautiful boy." He murmured, swaying on his feet to calm the baby as he began to fuss at all the movement.

Watching her dad with Sammy, Lizzie grinned, wiping the tears from her cheeks with one hand. The other hand reached out to grasp Don's, pulling him down beside her to sit on the bed. With a bit of jostling, Don wrapped one arm around her shoulders as the other held hers tightly, one of his legs on the floor to keep balance. Her head nestled in the crook of his neck, Lizzie squeezed his hand as he kissed the top of her head - unable to take her eyes off her son.

"He's amazing, Liz. You're amazing." Don murmured in her ear.

Red stood in front of the window of Lizzie's hospital room, his grandson nestled in his arms as his daughter slept peacefully in the bed behind him. Swaying on his feet, Red smiled down at the baby as he snuffled, his little fist grazing his own cheek as he fussed before finally settling down into slumber once more.

Red leaned down to kiss Sammy atop his head and sighed. "I have no idea what the world has in store for you, Sammy." He murmured, his voice deep with sleeplessness. "But I promise to do my best protecting you, just as I have your mother." Red shook his head. "Especially if she insists on giving you my last name." He stated woefully, his eyes wandering to look out at the darkened cityscape.

Red let out a large sigh before gazing back at his grandson. "But don't worry, I have every intention of spoiling you rotten as well. It's my duty as your grandpa." Red carefully cradled Sammy in the crook of one arm as he brought the other up to gently caress the baby's cheek with his index finger. That tiny little cheek that was dwarfed by his hand. "And as your grandpa, I promise to tell you how much I love you, every single day." Red whispered gruffly. "Because I do. So very much."

Lizzie had always been Red's light, his sun. But with the birth of his grandson, his sun had grown exponentially bigger.

He didn't know how long he'd been standing there when he heard the door to the room open slowly and turned from the window. Red smiled tiredly at the sight of Donald peeking his head around the door before walking into the room.

"Hey." Donald said lowly, not wishing to wake Lizzie. "It's my turn. You should rest." Both men had decided to take turns watching over Sammy while his mother got some much needed sleep. Lizzie had argued, said it wasn't necessary. But in the end, the two men had won the argument with the obvious compromise that they'd wake her when Sammy got hungry.

Red was secretly rather pleased that Donald's protective instinct seemed to be as strong as his own. Lizzie and now Sammy were to be protected at all cost – on that they would always agree on.

"As much as I don't want to let go of him, I believe you may be right." Red murmured gruffly as he carefully passed Sammy over to Donald. Red watched as Don walked over to one of the chairs and sat down, not taking his eyes off of the baby in his arms. Walking over to his daughter's bedside,
Red leaned down and kissed her brow before leaving without a word. He knew from experience that Don wouldn't hear anyway, too focused on the little life he held.

\[\text{ Red leaned down and kissed her brow before leaving without a word. He knew from experience that Don wouldn't hear anyway, too focused on the little life he held.} \]

Lizzie woke slowly, surprised to see it was still dark outside as she lay on her side, facing the window. Looking around the room, Lizzie smiled at the sight of Don sitting in the chair, completely unaware of the world around him as he gazed down at Sammy.

"Hey little man." She heard Don whisper gruffly. Coming to a quick decision, Lizzie closed her eyes, feigning sleep.

"You have the most amazing mom in the world, but I'm sure you already know that." Don continued. "She's brilliant, smart, beautiful, and she loves you so much." Don chuckled. "And you also have the scariest man on this planet for a grandpa. Good luck with that one – and don't tell him I said he was scary. I'd never live it down, okay kid?" Don chuckled at his own joke and Lizzie had to will the smile off of her face.

"And then you've got me." Don murmured. "I'm not your dad… but I hope that one day I will be. I love you and your mom so much, little man."

Lizzie couldn't will the sniffled away and she gave up on any pretense of sleeping as tears streamed down her cheeks. Opening her eyes, she found Don staring at her, startled.

"Don." She whispered hoarsely.

Don stood up carefully and made his way over, smiling awkwardly. "How much did you hear?"

Lizzie huffed out a laugh and scooted over on the bed to make room for him. "Enough to know you just told my son that you love me before you even told me." She teased gently. "I call foul."

Don chuckled as he carefully sat down, reclining on the bed next to Lizzie and moving Sammy so that he lay on Don's chest, his little head cradled in the crook of his neck. Don gazed intently at Liz, shuffling closer to her, he kissed her sweetly. Both moaned softly at the feel of their lips gliding against each other.

"Of course I love you, Liz. I've loved you for so long, you were – are my best friend. You, and now Sammy, are everything." Don whispered, his voice deepened with emotion.

A fresh stream of tears fell down Lizzie cheeks as she rested her arm across Don's chest, her hand resting on Sammy's back. "Oh Don." She murmured wetly. "I love you."

Shhh I've got you, honey. Be patient with your mama." Lizzie consoled as her son screeched. She sat with her legs folded and lay him down on the bed, making him cry even more passionately. Quickly shrugging one shoulder out of her hospital gown, Lizzie took her son into her arms and laid back. Sammy immediately began nuzzling and snuffling around before finding his target.

Lizzie smiled wetly as she gazed down at her son as he fed. God, it felt like she did nothing but cry lately but she couldn't help it. She would blame the hormones but she knew it was also the existence of this little person who had suddenly become the center of her world – the center of many people's worlds.

Early in her pregnancy, Lizzie had been so afraid. She was going to be a single mom and had never
felt so alone. She realized now how stupid she had been. She had three of the best men she'd ever known by her side. She was never alone – a fact which, she was sure was going to annoy the hell out of her sooner rather than later. The fact that Don and Red had begun coordinating their protective efforts filled her with dread.

And then there was Sammy. Gazing wistfully down at her son, Lizzie sighed. "Little boy, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me." She murmured, laughing lightly, in awe, as Sammy opened his bright blue eyes as he continued to nurse. "Oh you're so beautiful. I will give everything for you." She whispered wondrously. "But I think I must warn you – you're in for one hell of a ride. Our family is a bit… complicated." She joked. Her face soon turned serious, however, as a thought crossed her mind, her eyes turning woeful. "We're missing a member though – your namesake, my Pop. He would have loved you." Lizzie choked, letting out a slow breath. "But don't worry. The rest of us love you so much, you'll never feel lonely. And we'll tell you plenty of stories about him." Lizzie's lips quirked in a small smile. "Grandpa may also tell you stories that little boys shouldn't hear. You've got to let me know if he starts telling you about his lady friends, okay? He has terrible taste in women."

Lizzie had just finished burping Sammy as Red and Dembe walked into the room. Red gave her a big grin as he held up a to-go bag. "Oh thank god, I'm starving!" Lizzie exclaimed.

Red laughed as he walked over, giving both his daughter and grandson a kiss on their heads. "Yes well, I know how much you hate hospital food so I thought I'd bring you some food from that Thai place you love so much." He said jovially as he set the bag on the bed tray and rolled it over so Lizzie could eat.

Lizzie smiled at her dad. "Thank you." She murmured before looking over at her brother.

"Hey big bro, here, hold your nephew while I eat, please." She said and Dembe eagerly walked over, carefully taking Sammy into his arms. Both laughed as the baby began to squirm happily.

"It seems as though I'm the new favorite." Dembe's deep voice resonated through out the room.

Red harrumphed in mock jealousy before sitting down on the chair beside the bed as Lizzie laughed.

"Lizzie, Donald had to go in to work." Red reported. "I'm sure he is currently showing off the million and one photos of little Sammy he thinks none of us saw him take."

Lizzie laughed, nodding in understanding. Her heart warmed at the reminder of how much Don loved Sammy and the image of showing off pictures of Sammy to all their coworkers… just like a new dad.

Lizzie, Red, and Dembe spoke lowly as Sammy slept peacefully in his hospital cot.

"The sniper – the one that shot Creel. Was it one of my detail?" Lizzie questioned.

Red nodded. "Yes, it was Ezra." He whispered hoarsely, all too aware of how close he'd come to losing both Lizzie and Sammy. He'd placed a rather sizeable bonus in the man's bank account for his part in keeping his light alive.

Lizzie bit her lip in thought before opening her mouth to speak. "Good. When I'm discharged, I
want him to meet us at my place, okay?"

Red's brow raised in curiosity though he nodded.

"I'll let him know." Dembe murmured, pulling out his phone to send off a text.

Lizzie smiled at her brother in thanks.

"Now Lizzie, I hate to put a dampener on this wondrous occasion but we really must discuss…why would you…" Red cleared his throat and shifted in his seat. "The name Reddington, Lizzie, it's dangerous…he already has a target on his back. You must know this." He stated hoarsely.

Lizzie glared at her dad. She knew of the danger, but that didn't mean she wanted to be reminded of it. "I know that Dad." She whispered hotly. "But the largest threat to him – to us, is the Cabal. And they already know I'm your daughter."

"And what of the task force?" Red questioned.

Lizzie rolled her eyes at her dad. "Why do you think his middle name is Scott?" Lizzie asked, exasperated. "I'm not completely stupid, Dad. As far as the rest of the world will be concerned, his name will be Samuel Scott. If anyone wants to find out his full name, they'll have to get ahold of his birth certificate."

"Which is now a matter of public record." Red intoned.

"Yes. But the people who are going to care already know who he is to you and aren't going to care what his last name is." Lizzie argued. "And the rest of the criminals in the underworld who want to hurt you… they're going to find out about me before they find out about Sammy."

Red's face pinched and he began to chew the inside of his cheek, the twitch below his right eye going steady as he refused to speak for a moment. "And why do you?"

"Why do I what?" Lizzie questioned.

"Why do you care what his last name is?"

Lizzie shook her head, rolling her eyes again though this time in fond exasperation. "Because you're my dad and Reddington is our family name."

"It's not exactly one to be proud of." Red murmured gruffly, looking away with a wince as if he were physically pained.

"I think it is." Lizzie murmured softly. "And I think that once all of this is over, both you and Sammy will think it's a name to be proud of again."

Red's eye continued to twitch though his gaze softened before he gave a small jerky nod.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Lizzie reclined on the sofa with a groan. She'd just gotten home from the hospital and she was so incredibly happy to be home and out of that damnable place. Smiling down at her son, she laid him on his belly against her cheek and giggled as he clumsily shuffled his head into the crook of her neck.

Looking up as she heard her front door close with a quiet *snick*, Lizzie smiled as her dad turned the corner with the overnight bag she'd had at the hospital.
"Thanks for getting my stuff, Dad." She murmured softly, careful not to wake Sammy as he'd just fallen asleep after screaming his head off the whole ride home.

"No problem, Sweetheart." Red replied as he walked into the room to sit on the coffee table beside her.

As her dad's gaze became protracted, a small goofy smile on his face, Lizzie began to squirm under his scrutiny. Once he'd finally noticed her discomfiture, Red shook his head with a small bark of a laugh.

"I am just… so proud of you Lizzie." He murmured. "I am amazed – every day – of everything you've accomplished, everything you've done." Red paused with a sigh and Lizzie took the time to wipe her eyes. "And I am so proud that I get to call you my daughter." Red continued gruffly.

"Dad – " Lizzie choked. She took a breath to continue but Red shook his head, holding up a hand.

"No, I didn't say that to try and get you to reciprocate, I know that you do. And I certainly didn't say it to make you cry. I just… needed to say it."

Lizzie smiled tremulously and nodded her head. "Okay. But I have something that I need to say."

Red looked at her expectantly and Lizzie smiled. "I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, Sweetheart." Red replied hoarsely, looking down and away to hide his misty eyes. Clearing his throat, Red stood up. "Now, Ezra will be here any moment. Will Donald be joining us?"

Lizzie frowned sadly. "No, he had to be at work again." She said with a groan as she sat up carefully, one hand on Sammy's bum to keep him steady. "He couldn't exactly take any paternal leave." Lizzie tried to keep her bitterness out of her voice. She knew it was irrational, he truly had no legal claim to Sammy and so Cooper couldn't have justified giving him leave. She just… wished he were there.

Red smiled sadly at Lizzie but was kept from saying anything further when there was a knock at the door. With a sigh, Red quickly went to answer it, leaving Lizzie to quiet the now squirming baby.

He quickly murmured a greeting to Ezra and directed him into the living room. Red smiled at the sight of his daughter holding a now wide awake Sammy close to her face and giving him kisses, his little fingers blindly grasping at her cheeks and nose.

"Hello!" Lizzie greeted with a laugh, lowering her son so that she could greet her new guest properly, cradling him in the crook of her arm. "You must be Ezra." Lizzie stretched out her hand for a shake, not feeling it necessary to stand. She'd just had a baby, damn it.

Ezra – a rather attractive man with dark curly hair and tanned skin stepped forward, his combat boots heavy against the hardwood. "Yes, nice to uh… meet you ma'am." He murmured, shaking her hand.

Lizzie laughed, shaking her head at her surreal life. They'd never officially met – Lizzie had only met Baz and his second in command and yet he'd been watching over her and saved her life. "Yes, it is a bit… ridiculous isn't it? You know everything about me, all of my habits, yet we'd never actually met face to face." She joked, causing both men in the living room to chuckle. She swung her legs out and stood up next to the man, finally deigning that the future subject matter was worthy of standing.
"I just wanted to thank you, Ezra." Lizzie murmured, quickly growing serious. "You saved both me and my son the other day."

Ezra shifted on his feet, ducking his head. "I was just doing my job, ma'am." The man murmured, his rich southern drawl thickening in his discomfort.

"I know. And you did it brilliantly." Lizzie stepped forward. "Which is why I'm giving you a new one." She stated succinctly, carefully resituating Sammy in her arms and holding him out to the man so he had no choice but to take the baby.

"Lizzie—" Red murmured warningly.

"I don't…I don't understand, ma'am." Ezra stuttered as he awkwardly cradled little Sammy in his arms, staring down at the baby in a mixture of awe and fear.

Ignoring her dad's protests, Lizzie smiled at Ezra. "I know my dad signs your paychecks but I think as his mum, I get to make this decision." Lizzie stated, taking a step back.

"And what decision would that be, Lizzie?" Red growled. He really hated surprises.

Lizzie smiled sweetly at her dad before turning her gaze towards Ezra. "Ezra, meet your new charge." She said grandly, pointing to her son. "Just like you used to do with me, where ever he goes, you go. I want you to be his primary guard."

"Ma'am I couldn't—"

"You can and you will. I'm not asking you to be on duty 24/7. I imagine he and I will be sharing you guys for the most part, as I don't see myself parting from him anytime soon. But I want you, specifically, to be his and his alone. When I do have to start working again, I want you in the shadows, watching over him when I'm not there." Lizzie let out a shaky breath. "Things tend to get a bit… hairy for our family. And I want to know that there will be at least one person on our security detail whose sole goal is to keep my son safe and, if need be, to choose him over me. Do you understand?"

Ezra swallowed loudly and turned his head to gaze at Red. Despite a heavy, unhappy frown marring her dad's face, he gave a quick nod and Ezra turned back to Lizzie. "Yes ma'am." He stated stoically. After a moment, he bounced Sammy in his arms causing the baby to kick his legs. Ezra smiled down at Sammy and looked up, giving Lizzie a small shy smile as well. "I'd be honored."

When Don unlocked the door, he was immediately greeted by the shrill cries of a newborn baby. Wincing in sympathy, Don quickly set down his keys and hurried up the stairs to Sammy's nursery.

"Hey." He murmured as he stood in the doorway, watching Lizzie pace the room while bouncing Sammy in her arms. His girlfriend was clearly frazzled – her hair mussed and her cheeks were reddened and from the sound of the screeching, Sammy wasn't doing much better. "Not wanting to sleep?"

Lizzie looked over her shoulder and snorted in contempt. "I don't know what he wants!" She said desperately. "I've fed him, he doesn't need changed, he doesn't have a fever, I've rocked him, I've sung to him, he just won't—"

Don quickly crossed the room and wrapped both Lizzie and Sammy in his arms as she was on the verge of tears. "Hey, it's a learning curve for everyone, yea?" He murmured as he bent his head to
kiss her. "It's late, why don't you go lay down while I try to get him settled?"

Lizzie shook her head. "Don, you don't have to——"

"I want to." Don cut in firmly before quirking a smile. "I haven't gotten to see him all day. We need some man-to-man bonding time." He was very satisfied when his little joke brought a smile to Liz's face – a small one, but a smile nonetheless.

When he walked into the bedroom, Lizzie was laying on her side facing the window, her eyes wide open as she stared, clearly lost in thought. Don padded to the other side of the bed and quickly stripped down to his boxers before climbing into the bed and scooting up behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and pulling her against him as he played the big spoon.

"Hey, penny for them?" He whispered, kissing her ear.

Lizzie let out a huff of a laugh, shaking her head silently. Just as Don was beginning to think she wasn't going to tell him, Lizzie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Am I a terrible mother?"

She whispered brokenly.

"Liz!" Don uttered, shocked, raising himself up onto his elbow so that he could see her better. "Of course you——"

"I arranged a security detail for my son today, Don." Lizzie interrupted, bitterness causing her words to sharpen. "My world – our world…. how could I be so selfish to bring a baby into it?"

Lizzie's breath hitched and Don brought a hand up to wipe away a tear before it had the chance to leave a trace.

"Because you can't imagine a world without him in it." Don whispered fiercely. "It's that simple, Liz. There are so many people whose world got a bit brighter because your son exists." Don drew her closer to him, tightening his hold around her waist. "Sammy is so loved, Liz. By you, me, Reddington, Dembe… the whole task force even. Cooper is demanding we bring him to the Post Office so everyone can see him." At this, Lizzie gave a small choked laugh. Don leaned down to leave a trail of feather light kisses across Lizzie's jaw, slowly making his way to her lips. "You brought him into this world to show him it's worth fighting for – which is exactly what we're going to do." He whispered against her lips.

With a shuddering breath, Lizzie turned onto her back, gazing softly at Don. "Thank you." She murmured as she wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him closer.

Resting his weight on his elbows, Don brought his lips to hers, his tongue begging entry which was quickly, eagerly given. As their lips glided against each other and the kiss deepened, both reveled in the comfort of the other.
"Ew gross, Ress! You're all sweaty!" Lizzie laughed as she removed Sammy's car seat from the stroller, careful not to jar the happily smiling baby.

"You're no better!" Ressler teased though he stepped away, removing his hands from her waist.

Dembe and Ezra laughed as well as they all walked down the hallway towards Lizzie's kitchen. They'd all just come back from a run – part of Lizzie's get-back-into-shape-to-chase-down-bad-guys regime and all three men had kindly agreed to help her. Okay, so she'd bullied Don into it and she was pretty sure Dembe and Ezra went on these runs to protect her and Sammy. But it was fun, they all enjoyed it and Sammym loved watching the world around him wiz by as the four adults took turns pushing the stroller as they jogged through the park.

As the group walked into the kitchen, Lizzie smiled at her dad who sat at the little breakfast nook, reading the paper.

"Ah! The conquering heroes have returned!" He yelled jovially. "How was your run?"

Lizzie laughed as she walked over to where her dad sat and put Sammy's car seat atop the table. "We're good."

Lizzie rolled her eyes as she was promptly ignored by her dad in favor of cooing at Sammy. Taking the proffered water bottle from Ressler with a murmured thanks, she watched her dad interact with Sammy.

"Hello little man! I've missed you!" Red enthused gently as he carefully extracted a happily cooing Sammy, the three months old's face splitting into a wide grin in recognition. Red and Dembe had arrived back last night from a short business trip.

As Red brought him closer, Sammy greeted him with a pat on the cheek with his little fist. Red chuckled, "Oh that never gets old." He muttered, his heart constricting at the baby's happy greeting as he bounced the bubbly boy in his arms.

Lizzie smiled at the sight, leaning over to kiss her dad on the cheek before turning to face the other three men.

"Alright gentlemen, I call first dibs on the shower." She waited for them to nod obediently before continuing. "Dembe, will you make breakfast? I could really go for one of your spinach and tomato frittatas."

With a chuckle, Dembe nodded his compliance "Aye aye Captain," he teased before heading over to the kitchen sink to wash his hands.
"Dad, I've got a bottle prepared for Sam in the fridge. Will you feed him? He'll be hungry soon."

Lizzie asked, turning her head back towards her father.

"Of course Sweetheart."

Lizzie looked over towards her boyfriend. "And you, would you like to join me?" She asked with a

smirk.

Don coughed awkwardly, his eyes shifting towards Red as her dad groaned unhappily "Lizzie, please – " He pleaded.

Lizzie simply laughed and grabbed her boyfriend's hand before heading down the hall.

As she laughed, Ezra and Dembe laughed at Red's pained face.

"She really knows how to whip you guys into shape." Ezra teased.

Red raised a brow, unamused. "Remember who signs your paychecks, young man."

They were now all freshly showered, happily enjoying their delicious breakfast. Ressler had to eat one handed as he cradled a sleeping Sammy in one arm.

"Ok so, is everything set up at the daycare?" Lizzie questioned her dad. Today was going to be her first day back to work and she was insanely nervous about leaving Sam.

"Yes Lizzie, don't worry." Red placated.

A month back, Red had come to her and told her that he had recently started up a non-profit – a child care business for low-income families. It was a lovely front for building a daycare right across the street from the Post Office. He had told Cooper that any of the task force's agents with children were free to utilize the daycare for heavily reduced rates. Surprisingly, most of them had taken him up on the offer. Daycare was expensive. And between Red's associates and the task force's own security measures, the place was a Fort Knox for toddlers.

The overall safety of the facility and the knowledge that Sammy would have his own detail – including Ezra, didn't hamper her instinct to want to keep him close.

"He's right, Liz." Ressler murmured as he swallowed a mouthful of bacon. "Sammy will be fine."

Lizzie sighed, pushing her food around her plate with her fork. The last three months had been like living in the Twilight Zone sometimes. They were far from best friends – Captain America and banana peel quips still flowed freely – but she didn't think she'd ever get used to her dad and Don's alliance when it came to her and Sammy's wellbeing.

"Okay fine."

The men around her smiled encouragingly and she couldn't help but smile back.

"Well, now that that is out of the way, let's move on to our new blacklister, shall we?" Both Lizzie and Ressler sat up in their seats. "There was an incident this morning in DuPont Circle. A woman was struck by a taxi Carrie Ann Beck."

Lizzie frowned, knowing she knew that name from somewhere. "Maddox Beck's wife?"
Red nodded, his expression dimming as they moved onto business. "Yes. The leaders of The Front."

"Well, how is that possible?" Ressler questioned. "They died trying to bomb BP's London Office in response to the Gulf Oil Spill."

"So the world believes." Red agreed. "In truth, they took their work underground. Personally, I once admired Carrie Ann. However, since going underground, they've become too radical for my blood, advocates for a level of destruction that I find chilling."

"So who killed her?" Lizzie questioned as she helped herself to a second slice of the frittata.

"I believe her husband is responsible." Red stated gravely before taking a bite of his own food. Both Ezra and Dembe chose to stay quiet during the conversation, turning their attention to their own meals.

"I don't understand. Weren't they partners? Didn't they found the Front together?"

Red nodded his head. "Yes, but their partnership was a tenuous one. She was always the more moderate voice, only interested in operations that related directly to the environment." Red sighed, sitting back in his seat as he wiped his mouth before setting his napkin down. "Beck, on the other hand, views himself as a chosen one, a messianic figure who sees humanity as a virus that needs to be eradicated in order to save the planet. I fear he got rid of his wife because she was trying to stop him from implementing a plan to do just that."

---

"These are the last known photographs of Maddox Beck and his wife. They're the founders of the Front." Lizzie announced as Aram brought pictures of the couple onto the screen.

"2012 Firebomb strikes a Biotech park in Boston, conducting genomics research, causing sixty-four million dollars in damage. Four staff members were killed and 16 hospitalized. Ricin was mailed to the Fairbanks BLM Office, which manages Transatlantic Pipeline." Aram listed off a couple of the Front's transgressions.

Ressler hastily walked over to the rest of the group. "Just got off with the M.E. He'll have a tox work-up on Beck's wife within the hour."

Cooper frowned, his arms crossed. "We can't assume Beck killed her just because Reddington says so. Get to the morgue. I want a cause of death."

"Her body's not at the morgue." Ressler's eyes skittered over to Liz nervously. "She's at City Memorial. Labor and delivery."

"She was pregnant?" Lizzie questioned, horrified.

---

"Yeah, thirty weeks. From what they can tell, the baby's fine." The pathologist stated as he stood in the hallway of the hospital with Lizzie and Ressler.

"And the mother?" Lizzie questioned.

"The doctors declared her brain dead." The pathologist scratched his forehead. "They put her on life support until they can safely deliver the child. Most of the injuries were sustained, uh, during the
accident, but she suffered some injuries beforehand, as well lacerations to the head and the hands and, um, defensive bruises on the forearms."

Lizzie and Ressler shared a glance. "Think he beat her?"

The pathologist pursed his lips before shrugging. "I think she was in one hell of a fight."

Ressler flicked through the file in his hands. "You say in your notes – she had clay under her fingernails? –"

"Clay?" Lizzie interjected. "From where? That's odd, isn't it?"

"The really odd part is that the– The clay is 700 years old."

"The soil found under the nails of Carrie Ann Beck dates back to the 14th century. It's called Raw Sienna." Aram announced as he swiveled in his chair.

"Okay, so, what's it doing there?" Cooper asked.

"Raw Sienna was used by painters at the time, painters who belonged to what's known as the Sienese School. The Prado in Madrid has an exhibit going on right now featuring paintings from the Sienese School. Last week, one of those paintings was stolen."

Ressler stood with his hands on his hips. "That's what she and Beck were fighting over, this painting."

"Maybe they were trying to sell it on the black market, fund their operation." Samar suggested quietly.

"There were 22 paintings at the exhibit. The one that was stolen had been on loan from the Santa Caterina Church in Pisa, and it was, by far, the least valuable." Aram reasoned.

The corners of Lizzie's eyes crinkled in confusion as she leaned against one of the tables. "Then why did they steal it?"

Red sighed heavily. He had been sitting in this god forsaken plastic chair for eternity and was quickly losing patience. He was supposed to pick up Sammy from daycare while Lizzie chased down leads. Dear god. The Concierge of Crime was thinking of picking up his grandson from daycare. How wonderfully mundane.

Red looked over at the sound of banging to see a man angrily pounding on the vending machine.

"Number 76. Number 76!" A woman – one of the DMV employees shouted. Red looked down at his ticket. Number 114. Oh hell. Red leaned his head back against the wall behind him with a thump.

"I've been busting my ass!" The tiny little stump of a man yelled, angrily stomping around his desk and hopping into his chair. "And now you fire me because I'm not, what, fast enough?!"

"I'll need all your research." Red intoned, his voice all business.
"No!"

"And any leads as to her whereabouts."

"You want me to find the girl?" The man pointed his chunky finger at Red. "I'll find the girl. But these things take time!"

"You don't have any leads!" Red snapped. "You know what? I don't have time! And yet you've had me waiting out there for over 45 minutes! Do you know the vending machine is broken?" Red threw his arm out behind him, indicating the waiting room. "It's as if you enjoy making people miserable!"

The man spread his arms out. "I work at the DMV!" He yelled as if it explained everything, which, in all honesty… it did.

"If you can't do this, I need to find someone who can." Red stated angrily before shaking his head. "Everything rests on finding the girl." He said gravely.

"I understand, and I'm trying my best." The man placated. "But you didn't give me much to go on, and I've had some – " The man broke off with a wheeze and a sigh, looking down at his lap.

Red rolled his eyes and chewed on the inside of his cheek, taking deep breaths. "Is something wrong?" He tried to sound sympathetic. Truly.

"You know what?" The man stood up with a grunt. "Just forget it!"

Red sighed as he took his fedora off and sat in a chair. "Talk to me."

The man rocked on his heels and seemed to vacillate about whether to share. "It's mom." He finally said brokenly.

"Ohh, Glen." Red groaned, his face a mask of both annoyance and sympathy. You had to pity the poor little man.

"Three months ago, she was in the shower, noticed this Lump." Glen stated shakily.

"How bad?"

"Got into her bones. They bombarded her with chemo. We've tried everything. The pills and the diets, biofeedback, music therapy, the Flaxseed diet."

Red looked at Glen incredulously. "Flax seed?"

Glen nodded quickly. "Part of the Budwig Protocol."

Red shook his head, rolling his eyes as he stood up, palming his fedora once more. "I don't have time for this." He muttered as he stood up to leave.

"Oh, I'm sorry! Has mom's illness cramped your busy schedule?!"

"Every time you can't deliver, you do this." Red gestured wildly with his hands. "These cockamamie stories! – My mother is dying! Yes, and your brother-in-law had Legionnaires' disease, and your house was flooded, and I'm still no closer to finding the girl."

Glen pointed towards the door and stomped his feet. "Get out!"
Red huffed, his fists clenched into fists on his hips. "You're the most gifted tracker I know, Glen, but your mouth runs like a scalded dog." He bit out as he made his way to the door. "I don't know why you're mad at me!" He yelled, turning back towards the little man. "You're the one who came up short."

\\\\

Cooper, Lizzie and Ressler all stood around Aram's desk.

"Codes. What kind of codes?" Cooper questioned.

"You mean written on the back of the painting?" Ressler cut in.

Aram shook his head. "Not on the back. Under the paint."

"The museum sent us everything they had on the stolen painting." Lizzie added. "When it was acquired last year, they ran a series of tests to determine its authenticity."

"Yeah, they used thermal imaging to do microscopic and spectroscopic analysis and found this." Aram pressed a few keys and brought up an image of the painting – darkened as if under a black light with indistinguishable lines and squiggles marring the surface.

"What's it mean?" Cooper questioned.

Aram shrugged his shoulders. "Museum doesn't know. I spoke with the curator."

Cooper's lips thinned before he nodded his head. "Call the National Gallery. Get Lillian Sharp in here. If anyone can make heads or tails of this, she can."

\\\\

"It's a map." Lillian Sharp stated. She stood in Cooper's office, the door closed as she spoke to the group.

"A map to what?" Cooper questioned, leaning back in his chair.

Sharp shook her head and sighed. "A bedtime story. It's a legend about the Apophis Strain, an ancient plague weaponized in the 14th century by both the Byzantines and the Ottomans that was mistakenly released and believed to be the real origin of the black death."

"You're talking about the Bubonic Plague." Lizzie framed it as a statement, watching Ressler shift on his feet out of the corner of her eye.

"No Pneumonic Plague, which is airborne and far more fatal." Sharp paused. "Scientists now believe that was the plague that killed 200 million people, one of the largest pandemics in history. That's why, to prevent Armageddon, the sworn enemies agreed to task four priests to take the strain to the end of the world."

"And this map indicates in which end of the world it's hidden." Cooper murmured.

Sharp chuckled, shaking her head. "Agent Cooper, you're not taking this seriously, are you?"

Cooper sat up in his seat, folding his hands over top his desk. "Maddox Beck is. He killed his wife to get this map. These symbols …"

"Trust me. This map is worthless."
Lizzie sat at her desk, going through files, hoping to wrap up the day's paperwork so she could go home when her cell phone rang.

"Keen." She answered.

"Lizzie, I need to see you. There's been a development." Her dad's voice floated through the phone. Lizzie groaned at this. "Fine, but bring Sammy. I haven't seen him all day."

"Of course, Lizzie." Red stated with an indulgent chuckle.

Red had directed her to an office building which was currently closed for the night. Walking down the hallway, Lizzie came across her brother standing guard and quickly walked forward to give him a hug and he silently pointed to the office where her father was waiting. As she walked through the doorway of the offices, Lizzie stopped short and raised her brow. Her father was standing next to Lillian Sharp, chatting with her, one hand on Sammy's back as the baby rested comfortably in a baby carrier strapped to her father's chest. Well that's going to have to be a sight that gets repeated, preferably at a time when Lizzie had a camera and the lights were on.

Noticing her appearance, Red and Lillian looked over at her in greeting. Upon seeing her amused shock, Red looked down as if just now remembering that he had his grandson strapped to his chest. "What? It's handy." Red defended jokingly, lifting his hands to his side and flashing them in a sort of jazz hands motion.

Lizzie snorted, shaking her head before looking over at Ms. Sharp as she walked towards her dad. "I'm assuming that since you're here, you've something to tell me?" Lizzie questioned as she helped her dad remove some of the straps keeping Sammy safely contained and carefully lifted him out of the carrier, kissing his head as he cooed excitedly.

"The map is priceless." Sharp stated bluntly. "You need to move on this now. If the Apophis Strain is out there –"

Lizzie looked between Sharp and her father, incredulous. "You didn't tell this to the FBI?"

Red gave Lizzie his best 'I'm innocent' smile. "Lillian is paid to embargo certain key details from your colleagues if she believes they may be of interest to me."

"You sure she can be trusted?" Sharp questioned, looking Lizzie up and down.

Lizzie looked at the woman as if she were crazy. Even if she didn't know their exact relationship the man had just handed off a baby to her, a baby both adults were clearly attached to. That requires a bit more than a modicum of trust. Who the hell did this woman think she was? "I could say the same thing about you." She uttered sarcastically.

"Ladies, please." Red said tiredly. "I'm surprised the two of you haven't met at a conference or company retreat." Red looked over at Lizzie with a benign smile. "Does the FBI do a Christmas party?"

Lizzie gave her dad the stink eye as she bounced Sammy in her arms, unable to keep a smile off her face as the baby shoved his fingers in his mouth.
"One of the priests sent to guard the strain got sick." Sharp stated as if she'd already been half way through a story. "And to protect it, the dying man swallowed it whole, taking it to his grave. We know this because the others survived and created the map."

"And the markings? What do they mean?" Lizzie asked as Red unfurled a print out of the painting/map and placed it on the desk behind them. As she walked over to get a closer look, she had to quickly adjust her hold on Sammy as he tried to lean over to get a better look as well.

"They're archetypal alignments." Sharp explained, tracing one of the lines with her finger. "When you connect them, they create lay lines linking a network of historically significant sites."

"You said the priests were sent to the end of the world. Where?"

Sharp smiled mischievously. "Well, I said it was the end of the world. Not anymore. If I'm reading this correctly, the strain is buried here in America."

//////\ //

"Red's source says the map points to Burial Ridge in Staten Island. It's the largest native American burial ground in New York." Lizzie spoke into her phone, holding it between herself and Ressler so that both could hear and speak clearly as she and Ressler sped down the highway.

"We've contacted local authorities. We're on our way now." Ressler stated as he drove.

"I-I don't know how to break this to you, but, uh, Beck beat you there." Aram stuttered.

Lizzie and Ressler shared a worried glance. "What are you talking about?"

"New York Field Office got called in on a grave robbery. According to park police, our guy, Beck, he knew exactly where to look." Aram explained.

"The bones contain the DNA of the plague. Once he has it, he can replicate it." Lizzie stated with growing horror.

Ressler shook his head slowly. "That's why he took the bones."

"No, he wanted to take them, but according to park police, whoever was buried there was moved." Samar's voice floated around the inside of the car.

"Hundreds of years ago. I'm sending you an image of what was left in its place." The sound of keys being pressed accompanied Aram's voice and moments later, Lizzie's phone dinged with an incoming message.

"Got it." Lizzie announced, quickly opening the image file.

"We think it's a marker, some sort of addendum to the map." Aram explained.

"It's Cyrillic." Samar sounded hesitant.

Aram gasped softly. "It's ancient Cyrillic. It looks like some sort of equation. "P" equals 100. "O" that sort of looks like a ribbon equals 9. Those dash symbols in between denotes that the number to the right should be multiplied by 1,000." There was a pause. "It totals 109,120."

"Probably a measurement. Is there a standard form?" Samar questioned as Lizzie and Ressler patiently waited for the two to figure it out.
"Cubits. Uh, one cubit is half a yard. 109,120 cubits is 54,560 yards." There was a pause. "What? I was good at math." Judging by his defensive tone, Samar had given Aram the same amused and impressed look that Lizzie and Ressler had just shared.

Lizzie's attention was brought back to the image of the inscription. "There's another engraving here. Looks like, what, a moon?"

"Or a sun, which rises in the east." Samar reasoned.

"The strain's final resting place." Lizzie stated ominously.

"54,560 yards. Or exactly 31 miles." Aram announced.


"Mr. Reddington. Um. Hey, uh If you're looking for, uh, A-Agent Keen –" Aram stuttered.

"I'm not. I'm looking for you." Red's tone brooked no argument.

"Aram, are you there? What is it? What's 31 miles east of Burial Ridge? Is that Reddington? What's he doing there?" Lizzie fired off her questions. However, the only answer she received was a dial tone.

/////\\

"This is the oldest church in the city. The graves in the church, they're sacrosanct." The priest argued indignantly as he led Lizzie and Ressler down into the crypts.

Ressler paused, causing both Lizzie and the priest to look back at him. They turned to look at what he was staring at and found a gated entrance to another hallway with its locks broken.

"Is there another way in here?" Lizzie questioned softly.

"The southeast stairwell, behind the –"

"Show me." Lizzie ordered and Ressler subsequently split up with them, heading down another hall.

/////\\

Aram stared at Red as if he were a tad crazy. "You want me to find a girl. You can't tell me her name, and none of the other people who work for you were able to find her."

"Yes." Red stated simply, his voice deep with the gravity of the situation.

Aram shook his head slowly. "That's not much to go on."

"It's not."

"Out of curiosity, the other people who couldn't find her, this girl, um – W-what What did you do to them?" Aram stuttered, his eyes shifting around them as if searching for the nearest person who can come to his rescue.

Red stared at Aram for a moment, the tic under his eye twitching. "Aram, this woman is critical in my war with Berlin." He stated gravely.
Ahead of her, Lizzie could see a person in a hazmat suit. She quickly motioned for the priest to turn back to safety.

"FBI! Don't move!" She yelled, drawing her firearm.

The person in the suit slowly turned around, holding two bags which clinked as he moved. "You know what I have in here. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

Lizzie stared into the face of Maddox Beck, her hand steady as she aimed it at his chest. "Put it down."

"It's incredible, isn't it?" Beck murmured calmly. "Finding America a century before Columbus, surviving, protecting the secret. His life had one purpose. The plague."

Lizzie gulped. Sammy. "You're not walking out of here." She was rather proud of how steady her voice sounded.

Beck smirked at her. "Do you know how contagious this is? Shoot me, I drop it, and then we're both infected."

_Oh god. Sammy._ "I said put it down." This time her voice did waver, as did her hand. Her second day back. Her second day back from maternity leave and she had to deal with a damn plague. _Sammy._

"Either you let me go, or we both die." Maddox held the bags aloft, as if to drop them. "The choice is yours… You're just like everybody else. You're gonna save your life at the expense of millions of others."

"Is that why you killed your wife?" Lizzie questioned harshly, trying to deflect.

Beck's face pinched in anger. "Carrie Ann killed herself. She wasn't able to go through with it, but somebody needs to have the courage to do what's necessary."

Beck sprang into action, knocking Lizzie aside and causing her to hit her head against the stone wall. Falling to the ground, Lizzie groaned, clutching her head as it throbbed painfully as Beck ran away. She tried to get up but dizziness seized her, causing her to collapse again.

"Ressler!" She called out. Within moments, Ressler was running towards her and she quickly put up her hand to tell him to stop. "They have it. It's gone. The plague, it's gone." She said sorrowfully, breathing heavily in an attempt to not allow her breakfast to reappear.

_Call state and local police. Tell them we want lookouts and checkpoints at every highway leading out of the city. Find Maddox Beck!"_ Cooper ordered, pointing to those he wished to do his bidding.

Lizzie watched, her lips pursed, as Samar stomped up to her. "You had him." Samar accused.

"He was in possession of the strain." Lizzie snapped.

Samar rolled her eyes. "Did you hesitate or not?"

"He threatened to release it." Lizzie bit out.
"And now a mad man is out there with the ability to start a pandemic." Samar stated cattily.

"Enough." Cooper barked. "If it's the pneumonic plague, there are antibiotics, protocols.

Samar tsked, and shook her head, not taking her eyes off Liz. "For the strain that exists today, not the one that's 700 years old. We have to assume that there is no cure for whatever Beck got his hands on."

"I said that's enough." Cooper shouted shortly.

Samar shook her head. "This is unbelievable." She muttered before storming off.

Cooper watched her go, his lips thinned. "Alert the CDC." Cooper nodded sharply at Aram. "Tell them that a potential category 5 threat has just been identified with no cure and a high probability of exposure."

As the war room cleared out, everyone off to do their job, Lizzie began to make her way to her office when she heard someone calling her name.

"Agent Keen." Aram hurried over to her and gently took her arm, giving it a comforting squeeze. "Whatever decision you made, I'm sure it was the right one. I've seen you under pressure in the moment."

Liz smiled sadly at the gentle man. "Thank you." She murmured, though she didn't believe it.

"I mean it." Aram insisted. "The way you handle – take Mr. Reddington, for example. He asked me to do one thing, and I freeze up, – but you're always able to –"

"What?" Lizzie interrupted sharply. "What? What are you talking about?"

Realizing his error, Aram's mouth turned into an O and his eyes widened. "Oh, wait. Uh, no, just. Um. You're solid."

"Reddington asked you to do – ?" Lizzie tried to lead Aram into spilling.

Aram shook his head vigorously. "No, forget that. Bad example."

"What did Reddington ask you to do?" Lizzie questioned darkly.

"Um – "

/

"You made me promise not to go looking for her and then what do you do? You turn around and go looking for her!" Lizzie shouted, walking into the dining room of her father's current safe house.

"Oh, dear." Red sighed, standing up as he folded his newspaper. "Lizzie – "

"The FBI is not in the business of handling your personal affairs." Lizzie cut in.

Red laughed, tossing his head back. "The FBI is in the business of my business. Why else would I be in business with the FBI? Our family is the FBI's business!"

Lizzie bit the inside of her cheek and shook her head. "If she is in danger, we will protect her."

Red sighed. "Who told you it was Jennifer I am searching for?"
Lizzie stepped closer to him. "You should have told me if you were going to search for her. She's my sister!"

"You just upended your ex-wife's entire life. I'm not gonna let you do the same thing to her." Lizzie ignored the part of her that said the woman's life would be upended if either of them tried to find her. She had a tendency to hit below the belt when arguing.

Red merely raised a brow. "As a rule, I consider jealousy to be a base emotion. But in this case, it's quite endearing."

Lizzie sighed, throwing her head back to look at the ceiling in search of some strength. "Oh, God. I am not jealous."

"I assure you, Lizzie, my quest to find this young woman will in no way compromise our relationship." Red placated.

Lizzie rolled her eyes, looking back over at her dad. "Very funny." She murmured before stepping in front of him and wrapping her arms around her dad's waist and laying her head on his shoulder. "Sorry." She murmured.

Red hummed and kissed the top of her head. "You have nothing to be sorry for. However, I promise you, I am not looking for Jennifer."

Lizzie merely nodded and they both stepped away from each other.

"Where's Sam?" Lizzie questioned, knowing her dad had most likely taken her son out of daycare since he didn't seem to have any business to tend to. She was beginning to think enrolling him in daycare was pointless to start with.

Red chuckled and beckoned with a finger as he walked into the living room. Smiling, Lizzie followed after him and stopped short, a giggle immediately bursting from her lips.

"That has got to be the most adorable thing I've ever seen." Lizzie breathed.

Red chuckled, nodding his head in agreement as he stared at the sight of Dembe laying on the floor asleep with his head laying atop Sam's little rainforest play mat, a stuffed monkey hanging over his head. The tooth achingly cute part was Sammy cuddled up to Dembe's bald head, his chubby fingers resting on the man's forehead as the baby's chest rose and fell with the deep, steady breaths of sleep.

"Tell me you got pictures." She murmured.

Red snorted. "Between Dembe and I, we go through an entire SIM card every week. This little moment took up half of one."

Lizzie chortled though failed to mention that she and Don were guilty of the same.

//\//\//

"Unconfirmed reports indicate hundreds have been infected as a result of the outbreak. The Capitol and the Supreme Court have been evacuated. Metro police have quarantined a 15-block area, reaching from Constitution to Pennsylvania Avenue."

Lizzie muted the t.v., silencing the news report. Turning to everyone else in the war room, she took a deep breath. "Patient Zero has been I.D.'d as Sharon McManus. Prelim autopsy confirms we are
dealing with a genetically modified strain of pneumonic plague."

Cooper folded his arms over his chest. "Modified how?"

Lizzie shrugged her shoulders. "We have no idea, but it is working at an accelerated rate."

Ressler looked up at the screen where the news was showing images of the quarantine zone – people walking around inside of a fenced area with medical masks over their face. "People in the quarantine, none of them look sick yet."

"From what the CDC can tell, the contagion works in three phases, the first of which is incubation." Lizzie explained. "Right now, it is dormant in their immune systems. It is not airborne yet, but that is only going to last for the first few hours."

"Then what?" Cooper questioned.

"It turns the victim symptomatic, then infectious. Based on what we can tell from the time of death and the rapid depletion of Patient Zero's target cells, those healthy-looking people will be dead in nine hours." Lizzie stated

"How many people are we talking about?"

Ressler cleared his throat. "Roughly 2,300 in quarantine, sir."

Cooper pursed his lips. "Talk to me about the treatment protocols."

"There are none." Samar stated succinctly. "In order to understand how the disease was altered, to find a cure, we need a sample of the original strain."

"And Beck has the only one." Ressler stated, finishing Samar's thought.

"Hey. Full ERT report on Patient Zero's effects just came in." Aram walked over, waving a sheaf of paper above his head. "They found this on the victim's shirt hair from a rodent, a rat species specifically bred for scientific purposes. Rattus norvegicus. There are only two licensed suppliers for clinical trials. And in the last month, they've only had one shipment that didn't go to a university or research facility."

"You got Beck's shipping address." Ressler stated, a small smirk on his face.

Aram smiled at the clear appreciation in Ressler's voice. "Two story property in Thurmont."

"Send the Biohazard team at Quantico." Cooper ordered.

Minutes later, having sent off the team just as Cooper asked, Don and Lizzie walked into their office. Don followed Lizzie over to her desk and sat on the edge, next to her chair which she proceeded to flop into.

"Hey, what's up?" Don asked in a low murmur.

Lizzie blew out a harsh breath, causing the hair that had fallen into her face to flutter. "I screwed up, Don." She muttered, ashamed. "I should have taken the shot when I had the chance. Samar's right. Those people in quarantine are there because of me!" Lizzie bit her lip in an attempt to stem the flow of tears.
"Hey, the fact that you didn't means that Sammy still has his mom." Don consoled.

Lizzie snorted. "Funny, that's exactly what was going through my mind. I couldn't leave Sammy. I had to survive for my baby." Lizzie shook her head. "I can't think like that and do my job."

Don was silent for a moment before scooting closer to her and taking her hand. "Listen, I'm not gonna say that you made the best decision in the world." Lizzie winced at Don's tough love.

"But I will say that I am so damn grateful you're alive right now." Don squeezed her hand. "And I'm pretty sure that if spit bubbles weren't the epitome of Sam's vocabulary, he'd be telling you the same thing."

Lizzie laughed wetly before nodding her head.

\[\text{Red looked down at his phone and signed recognizing the number calling.}\]

"I need you to come in. I found your girl." Glen's voice came across the line.

\[\text{Red attempted to block out the sound of children yelling, men and women shouting on their phones and another joe schmo banging away at the broken vending machine.}\]

"Number 84."

"Thank god." He murmured as he stood and palmed his fedora.

\[\text{"The picture you gave me, the one of the girl I had it aged up in the system and marked as an FBI inquiry five weeks ago." Glen jumped straight into his diatribe as soon as Red closed the door.}\]

"The vending machine is still not working." Red intoned as he sat down with a sigh.

"Then Dolly goes in for hair plugs. She's the only one in the Southwest Service Center with access, so I'm frozen out."

"The woman grading the written tests needs to shower."

"But this morning, Dolly comes back, and guess what. Old Dolly got a hit a 97% match on your girl." Glen slaps a folder down on the desk victoriously and Red quickly reaches out and grabs it. Quickly flipping the file open, he read the small report. "Zoe Dantonio." He murmured.

"As I said, these things take time." At the sound of a loud bang, Glen looked out the window of his office that faced the DMV waiting room. "What the hell is that?"

Red stood up and smiled benignly. "It's a new vending machine. Yours is broken. Consider it a bonus." He stated as he walked out of the room.

\[\text{"Site's decontaminated. The equipment looks like it's been used recently." Ressler said as he and Liz walked into the lab located at the address Aram had found.}\]
Lizzie's eyes fell to a map that hung on the wall with red pins stuck on large cities all over the world. "My God. D.C. was just the beginning." She muttered in horror. Lizzie spun on her heel to face Ressler. "They're gonna be on planes." Lizzie fumbled with her phone and quickly dialed a number she now knew by heart. "Aram, get me the FAA."

CDC quarantined a vehicle found at Dulles." Samar reported to the gathered group back at the Post Office. "There was an inhaler mask discovered outside of the car. We won't have the official results for a few hours, but the toxins inside appear to match those found in Beck's lab."

"Vehicle's owner was one Ron Crocker, boarded a plane to Panama City two hours ago." Aram stated, not looking up from his computer screen as he typed furiously.

"Every passenger on that flight will be infected." Lizzie stated the obvious, her heart clenching in guilt.

"We have Crocker's travel profile?" Cooper questioned, looking to Aram.

"Yeah." More furious typing. "Okay. Uh, one-way ticket, traveling alone, no checked baggage. Ticket purchased within the last eight hours."

"Can you apply the same criteria to passengers on flights from Dulles to the other target cities?" Ressler suggested.

"Every matching profile is a potential follower infected with the plague." Lizzie added.

"Okay, 31 matches. Of those, seven are business travelers who made last-minute reservations using corporate cards." Aram stated, quickly bringing up pictures of all of the possible suspects.

"Are they already in flight?" Cooper asked.

"All but one, Chris Perez." Aram zoomed in on the man's photo. "Leaves Dulles for Toronto within one hour."

"Probably still in the incubation period." Ressler muttered, staring up at the screen.

"We can take him down, isolate him before he boards."

"You work with Aram. Notify the FAA of those infected flights." Cooper stated, pointing to Ressler. "You get to Dulles, make sure Perez does not get on that flight." Cooper ordered, looking between Lizzie and Samar.

"Coming through! Make way! Federal agents coming through!" Lizzie shouted as she and Samar, flanked by police officers and TSA Agents ran through the airport terminal.

"Stand aside, please! Coming through here! Federal agents!" Samar shouted.

When they reached the gate Perez was supposed to be boarding at, Lizzie and Samar looked around desperately. "He's not at the gate. Aram, you got eyes?" Lizzie spoke into her comm.

"Looking. Looking now."

Lizzie looked over at Samar. "I'm gonna double back."
"Okay." Samar agreed. "Come on." She ordered the officers who hadn't followed after Lizzie.

Ressler's voice came over the comm, clearly speaking to Aram. "Go back. There."

Aram made a small excited noise. "That's him. There he is. A black jacket with a gray hoodie, a green shoulder bag. Near gate C-13."

At this, Lizzie turns on her heel and begins running back towards Samar. As the officers with her quickly began to huff and fall back, she sent up silent thanks to her recent exercise regime.

As Lizzie approaches, she sees Samar on the ground, struggling with Perez. Lizzie swore under her breath. She was still too far to take the chance of taking down Perez. There were too many civilians in the way.

The man brought one hand up towards Samar's face and sprays something before punching her in the face. As she lay dazed for the moment, Perez reached for Samar's gun and shot her in the stomach. At that moment, Lizzie aimed her gun and fired, hitting Perez in the back of the head.

The gun shots had panicked the other travelers and Lizzie could hear pandemonium break out around her though she tried to ignore it in favor of getting to Samar. As he flopped over, Lizzie ran towards Samar. But before she could enter, Samar sat up, crying out as she hurried to slam the door shut. Grunting, Samar looked up at Lizzie desperately.

"Officer down! I need a medic!" Lizzie screamed into her comm and began pushing at the door.

Samar braced her feet on the floor, shoving her weight into the door to bar Liz from entering. "You can't come in here!"

"Samar, you're gonna bleed out!" Lizzie yelled through the glass. "You've got to open this door!"

"I'm infected. If you come in here, you will be, too."

Lizzie took a deep breath, her lips thinning in determination. Noticing this, Samar sighed, wincing as she moved out of the way and Lizzie quickly took advantage, opening the door just wide enough for her to get through before slamming it shut again.

Sliding down to sit next to Samar, Lizzie quickly shrugged off her jacket and pressed it to Samar's gunshot wound, causing the other woman to gasp at the pain.

"You'll be okay." She murmured.

Samar's only response was to groan.

"Shh, shh."

"Eighteen of the flights are now in quarantine and the suspects have been arrested." Ressler spouted off as he paced the width of the war room, trying not to think about Liz and failing miserably.

"The others." Cooper's question was framed as more of a demand.

"Diverted with military escorts." Ressler intoned, distracted.

"What about the infected?" Cooper paused, hesitant. "Liz and Samar. How much time do they
Ressler winced and gnawed his lip between his teeth. "Worst-case scenario, eight hours." He muttered darkly.

Aram looked up from his desk, having been absorbed in what he had been doing. "I was able to trace a credit card tied to the plane tickets Beck purchased, but he created a VPN. The computer he used accessed the Internet within a 50-mile radius of Abingdon."

Cooper nodded decisively. "Get our people in Virginia the coordinates have them start a canvas. And the radius. Narrow it down." He ordered before quickly walking off.

Looking down at his phone, Red sighed before quickly answering as he gazed out of his car window.

"… Mr. Reddington, I-I'm calling about Agent Keen." Aram's voice immediately drifted into his ear.

"Circumstances have changed, Aram. I found what I was looking for."

"You have? I mean, uh, you have. That's so – That's fantastic. But, uh, that's actually – That's not why I'm calling." Aram hesitated. "Uh, Agent Keen, she and Agent Navabi, they've been infected."

The tick under Red's left eye began rapid fire as he sat up in his seat, his heart dropping into his stomach. "When?" He demanded gruffly.

"Just over an hour ago."

Red bit the inside of his cheek, his eyes unable to focus on anything and darting about the car. "Where are you on Beck?"

"He's somewhere outside Abingdon, but I don't know where. I've searched the public record. Uh, tax bills, power, phone. It's like – It's like he lives off the grid."

"Well, there you have it." Red murmured before hanging up.

"You shouldn't have – " Samar winced as she shifted, jarring her wound. "– have come in here."

"I couldn't leave you to bleed out." Lizzie reasoned.

"You have a son."

Lizzie's face contorted with distress. "I know."

"So why did you?" Samar asked, gazing up at her from her slouched position.

Lizzie sighed, shaking her head tiredly as she leaned against the glass. "Because… sometimes there are things out of our control that are bigger than all of us." Lizzie paused. "And because you needed me to."

Samar nodded awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable with the way the conversation panned out.
"You know everyone talks about it, right? They don't want to bring it up with you. Why you? Who is he to you?"

Lizzie inhaled sharply. Only Don and Cooper knew about her relationship to Red. Only they knew she wasn't actually an agent anymore. "Reddington is... the bane of my existence." Lizzie muttered, thinking fast. "The man comes into my life, tramples over everything... and yet." Lizzie sighed again. "He does so in some terribly misguided attempt to protect me. But refuses to tell me why I'm so damn important." Lizzie hoped her ire appeared genuine. She just had to tap into all the idiotic things her dad had actually done in the past in the name of protecting her. There was plenty of material there.

A tired "Mm" was Samar's only reply.

"Pepper, what's –"

Red and Dembe came around the tree he'd been hiding behind and chuckled. "You two out here playing grab-ass in the woods just smacks of something biblical."

Beck stepped away from his girlfriend who was laying on the ground, hog tied and gagged. "Who the hell are you?"

Red smirked darkly. "I'm the snake in the grass. I was a big fan of yours at one time. I remember you in that little, inflatable boat in the North Sea, going up against that oil platform, huge waves tossing you up against the pilings, fire hoses and steel oil drums raining down from above." Red rocked back on his heels. "My God, it gives me goose bumps just thinking about it. Then I had the good fortune of sharing a cell in a prison outside Sochi with an associate of yours, Yevgeny Bushkin. Big bear of a man, 150 kilos on an empty belly. As I remember it, Yevgeny went on hunger strike to protest some oil pipeline that threatened a vital something-or-other. You probably remember better than I. But the point is the old boy didn't eat for 74 days. Imagine that. I wouldn't have the discipline."

Red shook his head then looked over at Pepper. "My weakness is sausage and peppers. But Yevgeny – He did it. Wasted away like Christ on the cross, dying for a cause. Your cause." Red pointed to Beck with his gun. "And I remember thinking that the only men I've known that have people who are willing to die for their cause are either saints or megalomaniacs. And you. Are no Saint. Which is why I'm not surprised to find you and Pepper waiting out Armageddon here in Eden. You and I both know you're not gonna die for your cause."

Dembe brought his hands out from behind his back and quickly opened the small case he'd been holding – a case full of vials with the antidote.

Beck's eyes widened and he started towards them. "Put that down!"

Red laughed, shaking his head at the man's idiocy as he trained his gun on him. "You dig up a plague, hatch a plan to spread it around the world, but before you do, you synthesize a cure. For yourself and your Eve." Red gestured vaguely towards Pepper. "Ironic, isn't it. If you were half as dedicated to your cause as Yevgeny was, there would be no vaccine, I wouldn't be here, and you and Pepper would be free to romp like bunnies until the convulsing and hemorrhaging started."

"You're wrong." Beck spat out, indignant. "My actions are about our crimes against the earth."

"I'll be frank, Mr. Beck, because I'm in a bit of a hurry. I'm not here for you." Red turned to Pepper
and looked down at her. "I think you know what I'm about to ask for."

Beck looked between Red and his girlfriend. "What's he talking about?"

Red looked at Pepper with mock shock. "You never told him?"

"Told me what?"

Red ignored Beck and gazed steadily at Pepper before stepping towards her. "Where is it?" His voice deepened threateningly as he non-too-gently ripped the gag out of her mouth.

"Please. don't." Pepper whimpered.

"Never told me what?" Beck's voice rose with frustration.

Red raised his brow impatiently. "We don't have much time."

Pepper hesitated a moment before looking up towards the colorful glass bottles which hung on the tree above them.

Red laughed and walked over towards where her line of sight lined up, squinting as he looked in the nearby glasses. "Ah. He murmured with a sigh before plucking one of the bottles down and upending it. With a small clink, a small key fell out which he quickly deposited into his pocket.

"My business is finished here. I'll leave the two of you. I'm sure you have plenty to discuss." He murmured, setting his gun down on a nearby bench.

As Red walked away, sirens sounded in the distance, only momentarily drowned out by two distinct pops of gunshots.

\/

Red stood outside his car, just around the corner but still within the line of sight of the food truck he'd been watching for the last few minutes. He watched as a beautiful young woman hopped out of the truck, a full garbage bag in her hands as she headed towards the dumpster.

"Raymond, we should go." Dembe's solemn voice interrupted Red's thoughts, causing the man to startle ever so slightly. Nodding, Red opened the door to the backseat of the car and climbed in.

\/

Red sat at Lizzie's hospital bed, his face pained. It was just he and Lizzie – Dembe was at Lizzie's, watching over Sammy.

She was going to be fine – she was sleeping at the moment – but she'd gotten the antidote and the doctors felt that as long as nothing unexpected occurs, she should be able to leave in the morning. She was fine. But dammit if guilt didn't gnaw at the very fiber of his being.

Reaching out, Red took his daughter's hand in his own and kissed her knuckles gently. "I'm so sorry Sweetheart." He murmured. The sudden bang of the hospital room door opening, caused Red to shoot up in his seat, drawing his weapon.

Letting out a breath as Donald came blustering in, he quickly holstered the weapon. "If you wouldn't mind, Lizzie –"

"You son of a bitch!" Donald raged, pointing his finger accusingly at Red. "She almost died today! The day she comes back from maternity leave, you give us a case that exposes her to the
pneumonic plague!" Donald shouted.

"If you would stop shouting, Agent Ressler –"

"No! Someone has to say it!" Donald stood with one hand on his hip as he combed the other through his hair in aggravation. "You're a shit father and a shit grandfather! Who the fuck does this to their own kid?"

Donald's accusations stung and hit rather close to home on his line of thinking before the man had stormed into the room. But Red wasn't going to tell him that, so he merely gazed at the other man placidly.

"And you!" Don started, pointing his finger at Lizzie whose eyes were fluttering open as all the racket wakened her. "What the hell were you thinking? You didn't have to go in there!"

"I was doing my job." Lizzie murmured before clearing her throat of any dryness.

"No you weren't! It's not your job anymore! You're not an agent! You're a fucking asset!" Don spat as if the term was offensive to him.

Red stood abruptly, his chair skidding across the floor loudly. Just as he was about to have at the little shit, Lizzie's cold voice cut in.

"Get out." Her voice whipped through the air and Donald started as if they had physically hit him, his eyes widening in growing horror.

"Liz, I didn't… I'm –"

"I said get out." Lizzie said forcefully, her face a mask of thunder.

When Don made no move to leave but rather just stood there, staring at Lizzie like a kicked puppy, Red cleared his throat, his own face rather murderous. "I believe my daughter told you to leave."

Donald swallowed heavily and looked to Lizzie, his eyes rounded, his hands out in supplication. "Liz, I didn't mean –"

"I won't repeat myself again, Agent Ressler." Lizzie stated coldly, her heart constricting for a moment with guilt as Don flinched as if in physical pain as she used his title.

After a tense moment, Don nodded dejectedly and turned around, quickly exiting the room with his head down.

Chapter End Notes

As always, I own nothing.
Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

Hey guys, sorry it's a day late. Had a busy Saturday and I didn't want to kill myself trying to get this written in one day. I knew I had today off (Memorial Day) so ...here it is. A little late but hopefully enjoyable. Reviews fuel me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lizzie smiled softly as she lay on her side on a blanket in her little back yard. Sam lay next to her, his little feet in the air where he lay with her on the blanket under the shade of a tree, gumming on his Sophie the giraffe toy. She had taken a few days off, citing recovering from the pneumonic plague. As excuses went, no one could really argue with that one. But the truth was, she just wasn't ready to go back. It'd been two days and she still couldn't bring herself to talk to Ressler. He'd called. She had had to shut her phone off, he was so relentless. But she just couldn't speak to him. The anger had dissipated after the first day. Now she was just sad.

\(\\\\\\\\\)

Red looked out the kitchen window at the sight of his daughter and grandson laying in the shade of a tree and smiled sadly. He knew his daughter was hurting, he'd been hanging around her house as much as possible the last couple days to watch over her. She put on a brave face for Sammy but he knew the tears fell at night.

Looking away from the window at the sound of a hesitant knock at the door, Red sighed. There was only one person that could be. Briskly walking down the hall, Red reached to the small of his back and drew his gun. Once he reached the door, he whipped it open, aiming his gun at Donald's chest. The other man stared at him in shock, his arm still raised, poised to knock once more.

"Agent Ressler." Red growled. "I don't believe you're welcome here."

"R…Reddington." Don stuttered, swaying on his feet slightly. "I just…wanna see her. Please. I miss… I miss her."

Red's brow furrowed as he looked Ressler over from head to toe. The man's hair was mussed and greasy, his shirt was wrinkled and half untucked and the man could barely stand on his own two feet. Red began to see well…red as realization dawned on him.

"Are you drunk?" He asked scathingly. "It's the middle of the day on a Tuesday! And you come here, drunk, trying to see my daughter?"

Don looked down lazily and his eyes widened slightly when he finally noticed the gun before he straightened up as much as his drunk ass could do so and looked back up at Red's face. "If you're gonna kill me, do it. After I talk to Liz." Don stated with drunken bravado.

Red laughed coldly, cocking his gun. "I don't think you want to tempt me Agent Ressler. I did warn you I've rather a habit of killing off any man who hurt her." Red took a step towards Ressler and the other man blinked owlishly. "And you did hurt her, Agent Ressler. You insulted me – her
father. Worse than that, you insulted her." Red spat. "You built her up, made her feel love again… and then you showed her how you truly feel."

Don's head dropped though not before Red saw the sheen of a tear track on his cheek. "I didn't mean…I don't feel that way, I swear." Don choked out.

Red stared at Ressler silently before heaving a great sigh, lowering his gun. He had never seen the man like this before. He couldn't tell if this was a drunk Ressler or the man was truly this desperate for forgiveness, either way, the man was broken. "You're not seeing my daughter, especially not as you are. Get out of here before I hold to my threat and kill you." He stated gruffly.

Don nodded, dejectedly and began to turn away, heading down the porch steps.

"Agent Ressler." Red waited for Don to turn around before he continued. "Get your ass sober. And when Lizzie comes back to work, you are her work partner, nothing more. You will do your job and give her space."

Don's face crumpled though he nodded before turning back around and left.

\\\\

Lizzie and Red were lazing about in the living room. Lizzie lay on the sofa, a sleeping Sammy on her chest as she gently ran her fingers along his spine soothingly. Red sat in the over stuffed chair she'd bought just for him.

"So Lizzie," Red started, speaking just loud enough to be heard over the TV. "How long are you going to let Donald stew in his filth?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. "I don't know, Dad." She said on a sigh.

"Sweetheart, I would be the last to defend our dear Donald, but – "

"Then don't." Lizzie interrupted waspishly.

Red frowned at her, his brow raised at her childish behavior. "I'm only saying, Lizzie, that he was absolutely petrified."

Lizzie groaned, closing her eyes. "That doesn't excuse it, Dad!" She said vehemently before biting her lip as Sammy squirmed in her arms. Once the baby settled once more, she looked over at her dad. "The things he said… he clearly has issues with who and what I am – what we are." Lizzie shook her head, forlorn. "I don't know if I can be with someone who doesn't accept the whole package." Lizzie sniffled as quietly as she could, looking away towards the TV.

Red's brow furrowed. He hated seeing his Lizzie so upset. But short of pummeling Agent Ressler into the ground, there wasn't much he could do. Besides, he was sure that that would only make him feel better, not Lizzie.

"Tigers in India have become less abundant in recent years due to excessive hunting. The remaining big cats are now concentrated in tiny, isolated groups, leading to inbreeding, which weakens their resistant to disease."

Red clicked the TV off, a sudden idea popping into his head. He knew just how to take Lizzie's mind off of her love life. She sure as hell wasn't going to like the distraction much better though.

"So nostalgic. The charming and yet tragic naïveté, as if these creatures will somehow flourish if
Harlan and Jack can – "Red shook his head, chuckling darkly. " – just manage to relocate a breeding female."

Lizzie raised her brow, incredulous as she knew her dad well enough to know where this was going. "Poachers?"

"Not poachers, Lizzie – traffickers. The poor devils who do the killing are the smallest of cogs in a very large machine. And the Mombasa Cartel is the worst of the lot. They operate behind an impenetrable veil of secrecy, enforced by brute terror and a rat's nest of corporate fronts. Subsidiaries of shells inside numbered accounts."

"This is going to take some convincing." Lizzie said hesitantly. "The FBI's job is to protect people."

"Granted. Let's forget about the animals for a moment." Red fluttered his hand in the air as if physically knocking the idea away. "The wholesale extinctions, the impact on the environment." He paused. "Let's just consider the human toll. The thorough corruption of local authorities, political assassinations, the massacres of entire villages and wildlife compounds. Eradicated for the most base of all possible motives: Profit. Hundreds of billions of dollars a year in blood money – human blood money."

Lizzie pursed her lips. "This is important to you."

Red sighed and sat back in what had come to be known as his chair. "Someday the creatures on that program will be akin to unicorns and griffins – A fairy-tale bestiary written in past tense, and no one is lifting a finger to stop it. Why not, Lizzie? Why not us?"

Lizzie stared at her dad, silently sizing him up. "No." She murmured. Before Red could accompany his wounded visage with words, she continued. "I don't believe you." Lizzie held a hand up to keep him from speaking. "I know you care about the animals, Dad. You've always been a proponent of conservation, but this is something else. Something more. What is it?"

Red sighed and looked out the darkened window. "Lizzie, the Mombasa Cartel – " Red shook his head as he bit the inside of his cheek.

"Dad?" Lizzie encouraged hesitantly.

"They're the ones, Lizzie." Red took a deep breath, closing his eyes as if to stave off a painful image.

Lizzie carefully sat up, cradling Sammy in her arms and deposited him onto the couch beside her, thankful when he barely squirmed at the movement. "Dad, what's wrong?" His visceral reaction had her worried.

"Lizzie, they're the ones who sold Dembe to the slavers."

Lizzie's eyes widened and she gasped in horror, tears immediately springing to her eyes. She could still remember the first time she'd seen her brother's branded skin when she'd been a pre-teen – her righteous indignation at the idea of someone doing that to her brother. Then, when Dembe had finally told her his story when she had been in school, writing a paper about Floriana Campo. The horrors her brother had gone through had left her sobbing, clinging to him. She'd had nightmares for weeks after, imagining the terrible things that had been done to Dembe. After that, she had called her brother as often as she could when they were apart and hung onto him like a limpet when they were together. She had wanted so bad to make sure he knew that there are people in this world
who love him.

And now she had the chance to take a chunk out of the people who had sold him into that life. Lizzie looked over at her dad, grim determination turning her face to stone. "Alright, where do we start?"

"Over the last few years, high-ranking poachers have disappeared without a trace from the Jalloh and Yeboah clans, the Bholas in India, and the Rocha Cartel in Bolivia." Lizzie explained as she paced in front of the main desk in the war room. "Now, no one's taken credit yet, but according to Reddington, the Mombasa Cartel is working to corner the illegal wildlife trade."

Before Liz could continue, Ressler walked hurriedly into the room, refusing to meet anyone's eyes as he mumbled a quick "Sorry," as he adjusted his suit jacket.

Lizzie stared at him a moment, her mouth open in a small 'o' of consternation before she rolled her eyes and continued. "Four days ago, a dead body washed up south of Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula. Flayed and skinned with surgical precision, according to the local medical examiner."

"Does the victim have a name?" Cooper questioned.

Lizzie nodded her head at Aram who brought up a picture onto the large screen. "Joseph Batouala – Kenyan, part of the Wanjiku Cartel, the alleged mastermind behind the 2013 elephant massacre at Hwange National Park in Zimbabwe. The park's watering holes were dosed with cyanide, killing 300 elephants and thousands of other animals."

Cooper raised a brow. "And this is the work of our victim?"

"Victims." Samar corrected. "High-ranking officials from half a dozen other cartels have also disappeared."

"According to Reddington, these gangs are just small fish in a very big pond. By far, the most destructive is the Mombasa Cartel." Lizzie continued on where Samar left off.

"They are ruthless, secretive, and highly organized." Samar added. "It's estimated that the Mombasa Cartel smuggles about a billion dollars in contraband per year, from ivory and hides to the illegal import of exotic pets to traditional folk remedies."

"Remedies." Cooper muttered, his brow furrowed. "For what?"

Samar shrugged. "Anything from blindness to erectile dysfunction. For instance, in Vietnam, the horn of a rhinoceros is believed to cure cancer, so it commands a price of about $9,000 per gram."

Ressler cleared his throat awkwardly. "Where was Batouala last seen alive?"

"Hotel d'Argent, Paris."

"Paris." Ressler stated, his eyebrows doing their best to meet his hairline. "And yet his body washes ashore on the Russian coast?"
off some delicious street tacos and were finally getting down to business. Red firmly believed in not mixing business with pleasure if it could be helped. And street tacos were certainly pleasurable. "I've arranged drinks for you with Geoff Perl."

Lizzie gave a double take and scoffed, incredulous. "Who will be joining us? Bill Gates, Warren Buffett?"

Red chuckled lightly and shook his head. "No, just you and Geoff. Despite being the 33rd richest man on the planet and the C.E.O of Deckard Capital, Geoff is a passionate advocate for wildlife protection. He's also an expert on the illegal-animal trade. If anyone knows anything about the Mombasa Cartel, it'll be Geoff."

Lizzie stared blankly at Red for a moment before shaking her head in an attempt to clear it. "I'm sorry. I'm still getting past the whole 'you're buddies with Geoff Perl' thing."

"We're not buddies." Red rolled his eyes good naturedly. "I don't have buddies. Geoff and I simply share a number of interests. Among them, the protection of endangered animals. I act as a bundler for his charities."

Lizzie raised a brow at her dad's 'I don't have buddies' comment but left it alone for now. "And what does he do in return?"

"Nothing nefarious, I assure you." Red stated, giving her his best I'm-completely-innocent-and-oh-so-adorable face. "Advice, information, the occasional stock tip. One hand washes the other."

They were walking through the outdoor chess area and Red sidled up to one of the tables where two old men were playing silently.

"There we go." He murmured. "Queen to B4. Check."

Lizzie shook her head, a small grin on her face. She was always impressed by her dad's tactician brain.

Red straightened back up and took Lizzie's hand, placing it in the crook of his elbow as he continued on with their walk. "Your name is Judy Trierweiler. You're an activist, investigative reporter, researching an exposé on the Mombasa Cartel. You post under the screen name 'Elsa.'"

Lizzie nodded, becoming serious as her adrenaline began to pump at just the mention of going undercover, even if it was in a completely harmless situation. She had loved spending her maternity leave with her son, but god she'd missed this. "And when is this happening?"

Red smiled softly, quietly proud of his daughter's tenacious work ethic and love for what she did. "Tonight at La Porte Rouge, Dress down."

Lizzie looked up at the sound of the front door opening and closing. She immediately smiled from where she sat on the couch, feeding Sammy as her brother turned the corner into the living room.

"Hey big bro." She said softly. "Oh you are a life saver, my fridge is barren and I was worried I was going to have to meet Perl on an empty stomach." Lizzie murmured excitedly at the sight of the bag of Chinese food Dembe placed on the coffee table.

Dembe chuckled quietly and leaned over Lizzie to kiss her forehead in greeting. He then walked out of the room and Lizzie could hear him rustling around in the kitchen. Looking down, she saw
Sammy smiling up at her, clearly done with his meal. Chuckling, she threw a muslin cloth over her shoulder and lifted him up to burp him just as Dembe walked into the room with plates and cutlery.

"How are you doing, Dembe?" Lizzie asked as he sat down beside her and began removing the various cartons from the paper bag, dishing her favorites onto a plate.

Dembe paused and looked over at her, a brow raised. "Ask your real question, Elizabeth." He murmured in dark good humor.

Lizzie flushed, biting her lip. It was spooky how well the man could read her sometimes. "Are…are you – " Lizzie hesitated, unsure of how to phrase this. "How are you handling this new case?" She finally murmured, standing up quickly to place Sammy in his swing before sitting back down.

Dembe let out a small sigh as he handed Lizzie her plate. "It is not pleasant." He murmured. "I have moved on with my life. You and Raymond have helped me do so." He paused, taking a fortifying breath. "I do not like the memories." Dembe looked down with a pained wince, moving the shrimp fried rice on his plate around with a fork.

Lizzie looked at her brother sadly. She hated to see her brother so distraught. Dembe didn't express his emotions very often; he was a very reserved man. So for him to show any visible signs of his inner turmoil, Lizzie knew it meant a great deal more pain was hidden underneath.

Setting her plate back down on the coffee table, Lizzie scooted closer to her brother and wrapped her arms around his shoulder, leaning into him and smiling sadly as he quickly returned the hug, wrapping his arms around her waist after carefully balancing his plate on the arm of the sofa.

Lizzie kissed the top of his bald head. "Dembe, we don't…we don't have to do this. We can tell Dad that we need to move onto another name on the list." Lizzie soothingly massaged the back of Dembe's neck. "I can explain it to him, I'm sure he'd be willing to come up with another name that we can convince the FBI is a bigger fish." She murmured.

Dembe shook his head from where it rested on her shoulder. "No Elizabeth. Raymond feels he needs to do this. He feels it is some long awaited closure."

Lizzie sighed, rolling her eyes in agitation. "For him or for you?"

Dembe's silence was her only answer.

\\Lizzie sat at the bar, pretending to take a sip of her beer as she listened to the band play. She couldn't help but laugh at the sight of the Geoff Perl playing drums in a hard rock band. The band quickly finished their set and Lizzie could see Perl looking around for her. She plastered on a happy smile as he noticed her and walked over to where she sat at the bar.

"You must be Elsa." Perl said with a roguish grin. "Seen your posts. Like your style. A friend tells me you want some inside dope on the Mombasa Cartel."

Lizzie nodded enthusiastic, falling into her blogger identity. "I've had a hard time getting a toehold."

Geoff scoffed under his breath. "Welcome to the party. My foundation's had the Mombasas in our sights since our inception. Public enemy number one, the worst of the worst and very smart. The crafty bastards at the top keep their hands clean by financing their wet work through a hundred shells and offshores. Never been able to crack that firewall. If you want to give it a try."
"Mm." Lizzie hummed as she brought her beer to her lips.

Geoff grinned as he watched her. "Got to warn you, though – It could be very dangerous."

Lizzie threw him a smirk. "I can handle myself."

"I'm sure you can." Perl concurred with a laugh. "I wager you can handle just about anything."

Red smiled over at Lizzie as they drove together to the Post Office, sitting in the backseat while a subdued Dembe drove. "I knew Geoff would adore you. You're a dead ringer for the last two of his three wives." Red teased.

Lizzie lifted a brow. "Oh? What did his first one look like?"

Red tilted his head back with a laugh. "More like me than you, I'm afraid. Geoff is a savant of sorts. Married into a small fortune, built it into Deckard. Sits on the boards of half a dozen tech companies, owns a big piece of all of them. Then plows millions into animal-related causes. What did he have on the Mombasas?"

Lizzie shook her head. "Just one access point Lee Chung, Emerson-Concorde Imports."

The moment the men hopped out of their small delivery truck, Liz and Ressler rolled up in their SUV, sirens blaring with several other agents pouring out of their own SUV's, blocking every exit.

One of the men, a well dressed Asian man with long raven hair, looked around him, startled. "Who are you? Why you do this?"

"FBI." Liz stated, flashing her badge. "We were wondering if you wouldn't mind assisting us in an investigation we're conducting." Liz kept her hands out in front of her to show she was unarmed.

"What kind of investigation?" Chung spat suspiciously.

Ressler walked directly up to the man, aiming his gun at the man's face. "The kind of investigation where, if you don't help us out, I just yell, 'gun!' And we beat your ass to the curb." Ressler stated through grit teeth.

"I'm unarmed." Chung stated simply, affronted by Ressler's aggression.

"You gonna cooperate? Please say 'no.'" Ressler ground out.

After a tense testosterone fueled staring contest, the man put his arms up and an agent quickly came up behind him to cuff him. Ressler turned towards Lizzie and immediately took a step back at the sight of her livid face.

"What?" He asked.

"What? You ask me 'what?'" Lizzie barely managed to keep the volume level of her screech to a minimum. "What the hell was that, Ressler? We're taking him in for questioning! We need him to cooperate! You being an asshole right out of the gate doesn't exactly ingratiate him to us!" She yelled.

"He's our only lead!" Ressler argued.
"Exactly! He's a lead, not a suspect!" When the only response she got was a clenched jaw and a stonewalled expression, Lizzie tossed her head back in angry exasperation. "You know what, fuck you." She muttered tiredly, heading off to the left.

"Where are you going?" Ressler yelled at her retreating back as she walked away from him and their SUV.

"I'm riding back in with O'Donnell!" Lizzie yelled without turning back around.

"Chung's business specializes in the importation of game meats and animal parts from endangered species." Lizzie announced as she hopped up onto one of the metal tables in the war room. "He's willing to roll over on everyone else but claims he doesn't know anything about the Mombasa Cartel."

"You show him the contraband customs had tagged in his warehouse?" Cooper questioned, raising a brow.

Lizzie nodded in affirmation. "Yeah. And the estimated fees Aram worked up."

"It's a lot." Aram murmured from his workstation.

"Plus 112 charges pending." Ressler barked. Both he and Lizzie carefully avoided eye contact.

Cooper looked between Ressler and Lizzie, his eyes narrowing. "And that didn't rattle him?"

Aram sat up straight in his chair as an alert on his computer began to beep. "Whoa, oh, flag up. Looks like we got another one." Aram quickly pressed a few keys, bringing a mirror image of what was on his screen onto the large overhead screen. "Pulled up this morning in a fisherman's net in Hokkaido, Japan. – Same M.O, skinned. A local M.E. I.D.'d him from the serial numbers found on an artificial hip. Alejandro Gomez, Bolivian."

"Rocha Cartel?" Lizzie asked.

Aram nodded. "According to Bolivian police and WCS, rumors are that Gomez worked for –"

"The Mombasa Cartel." Samar stated, causing everyone to look over as she walked into the room. "Chung broke. It turns out our original victim was not with the Wanjiku Cartel. He defected a year ago to the Mombasas."

Lizzie raised her brow in interest. "Somebody's poaching the poachers."

"Agent Keen!" Cooper barked as she was getting ready to head out.

Lizzie looked up to where he stood in the doorway of his office. "Sir?"

"May I speak to you a moment?"

Lizzie nodded and quickly made her way up to his office, walked in at his direction and stood awkwardly as he closed the door.

"Is everything alright, Sir?" She questioned as he rounded his desk. Though instead of sitting down, he remained standing, leaning with his fists braced against the desk.
"I think I should be asking you that, Miss Scott." Cooper intoned.

Lizzie looked around as if searching for answers within the office walls. "I don't understand –"

"I allowed the relationship between you and Agent Ressler – we're operating in uncharted territories now. Though you are technically an asset now and any relations between an agent and an asset are expressly forbidden..." Cooper sighed. "We're now a taskforce who is knowingly going rogue so government regulations don't exactly apply and I imagine allowing romantic relationships between two colleagues is rather small fish compared to what we're going to be doing in the future in the name of what is right." Cooper stated darkly.

"Sir, I –"

Cooper cut her off, slashing his hand through the air. "However, this is still my taskforce, rogue though it may be. It's obvious that something has happened between you and Agent Ressler – trouble in paradise I suppose." Cooper paused. "Fix it. I will not have your personal life interfering with our work. Understood?"

Lizzie sighed, biting her lip. "Yes sir."

\\\\

Red picked up his coffee from the small metal table and stood, surreptitiously dropping his hat onto the seat as he walked away from the little cluster of outdoor seating.

"Hey! Hey, mister! You forgot –"

Red turned around, acting startled as the young woman – the barista for the coffee truck that was parked a few feet away ran over. "My hat. Oh, my gosh." Red chuckled as she handed to her. "I can't believe I forgot it. It's my favorite. Thank you." Red gave a little bow of gratitude and smiled when she nodded her head, returning his smile. "I'm sorry. What's your name?"

"Zoe." The young woman replied.

"Zoe." Red murmured. "Thank you so much, Zoe." Red fished in his pocket for his money clip, and held out a few bills to her.

Zoe quickly put her hands up, shaking her head as she backed away. "Oh, no, really. I can't. No, no, no."

Red took a step forward. "Please. I insist."

"No, I'm good." Zoe refused.

Red smiled benignly, giving a short nod of acquiescence as he put the clip back in his pocket. "All right, then." Red startled slightly as if just remembering something and moved forward, his hand outstretched. "I'm Kenneth, by the way Kenneth Rathers."

Zoe smiled as she shook his hand. "Hello, Kenneth."

"Thank you again, Zoe." Red lifted his hat. "I am quite fond of this hat."

"Let me see." Zoe requested and Red chuckled, placing the hat on his head and giving a little pose. "Very snappy, Kenneth."

Red chuckled before giving a small wave of goodbye as he climbed into the car.
"Taking into account estimated time of death, I’ve programmed a simulation illustrating point of origin by running the tidal and ocean-current data for the dates our two floaters washed up in Japan and Russia. Check it out." Aram brought up an interactive map onto the overhead screen. He then began the simulation of the trajectory of the bodies found. "The orange one is Gomez. And as you can see, both bodies were dumped somewhere off the coast of Sitka, Alaska."

"Sitka was the location of the Animal Underground network, a militant animal-rights group." Samar stated.

Cooper looked over to Samar. "'Was?'"

"Yes. In 1971, their leader, Timothy Carlyle, along with six others, were tried and convicted on five counts of homicide for stalking and killing grizzly poachers up at Katmai National Park."

"I remember that case. Became a bit of a cause célèbre, as I recall." Cooper murmured.

Samar nodded. "Yes, the Sitka Seven."

"Seven why's it always seven?" Ressler muttered under his breath.

"After the bust, the whole thing imploded." Lizzie stated, trying to keep on topic. "By all accounts, the rest of the group were more or less hangers-on – Flakes, useful idiots."


"What about Chung?" Samar questioned.

"Cut him loose. Put a tail on him and see where he leads us." Cooper then pointed to Ressler. "Ressler, get packed. I want you in Sitka for face-time with anyone Samar turns up."

Lizzie greeted her brother with a smile as she walked into her home. Her smile became a full grin as her son took notice of her and screeched happily from where he lay on his back on the living room floor, kicking his little arms and legs in greeting.

"Hey baby boy!" She said excitedly, bending down to pick him up and steal him away from play time with Dembe. Walking into the kitchen from which a delicious smell was emanating.

"Hey Dad." Lizzie greeted, smiling at the sight of her dad in a yellow and white striped apron.

"Hello Sweetheart!" Red replied happily though he didn't look up from where he was stirring some sort of sauce.

"Smells delicious." Lizzie murmured around her son's little fingers as he squealed and laughed. He'd recently taken to sticking his fingers in things, including people's mouths. Lizzie liked to gum at them and pretend she was eating them. It only caused him to do it more frequently but she loved making him laugh.

"Mmm." Red hummed, clearly distracted.

"Dad? What's up?" Lizzie asked, noticing his mood.
Red sighed and put down his whisk, turning down the heat on the stove before he turned to look at her though he remained silent. He worked his mouth as if to speak but was unsure how to get the words to come out.

"Dad?" Lizzie encouraged hesitantly. "You're starting to worry me."

Red sighed again as he leaned against the counter. "There is something I…probably should have told – should have warned you of a while ago." Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion though she remained silent, bouncing Sammy on her hip as she waited for her dad to continue. "You see, after the incident with Garrick and what happened with…Audrey, Agent Ressler was well on his way to becoming addicted to pain pills."

Lizzie's eyes widened and her jaw dropped in shock. "Oh…okay." She muttered stupidly.

"I didn't think to mention it because he suddenly stopped. He stopped refilling his prescriptions and he didn't attempt to get any through nefarious means. Then he started to spend more and more time with you." Red coughed awkwardly, shifting on his feet.

"Okay… and what exactly does this have to do with anything?" Lizzie questioned hesitantly.

"Well… he seems to have taken up a new habit. Alcohol." Red scratched the crown of his head. "When he came to try and speak to you a few days ago he was… far from sober. And yesterday when he showed up late to work he'd… stopped at a bar."

Lizzie's eyes widened as she shook her head in refusal. "No. No he wouldn't do that, Dad. He wouldn't risk coming to work with any sort of impairment like that. You're wrong." Lizzie defended Don vehemently.

"I wish I were, Sweetheart. I really do." Red looked at her sadly, his lips thinned.

"Why?" She asked desperately.

Red stared at her a moment before sighing. "I think he needs help, Lizzie. He's far from being addicted, he's just…falling back on an old coping mechanism. But I know addiction, Lizzie. He needs help and soon."

Lizzie stood silently for a moment. "Falling back on an old coping mechanism'... you're saying it's my fault." Lizzie whispered heatedly, walking away to set Sammy in his playpen that sat in the corner of the kitchen. "That he's doing this because he and I are fighting."

Red opened his arms out in front of him in supplication. "No Lizzie. It is in no way your fault. Is this how he's coping with the situation? Yes. But that does not make it your fault in any way." Red ran a hand over his face as he chewed the inside of his lip. "Lizzie, is he aware that you only view this as a fight – as a mere bump in the road?" An indecisive silence was his only answer. "Donald probably thinks that he is incapable of keeping a family together. Trust me, I know all too well what that feels like." Red shook his head tiredly. "As far as he knows, he's lost you Lizzie. Not just you, but Sammy as well. You may not be dead, but you're lost to him nonetheless – just like he lost Audrey and subsequently their baby."

Lizzie choked on a sob, her hand flying up to cover her anguished cries. Red took a large step towards her and wrapped her in his arms tightly.

"Shh Sweetheart, it'll be alright. You'll get this sorted." Red murmured as he kissed the top of her head.
"How could I do that to him, Dad? I didn't even think – " Lizzie choked on another sob. "I was just so angry at him."

"And you had every right to be angry, you still do." Red argued quietly, petting her hair. "But there are two sides to every story, Lizzie. You know that. But sometimes, you're just so hotheaded that you can't see your hand in front of your face for all that righteous anger."

Lizzie laughed wetly, pinching him in the side at his gentle teasing. With a muttered "ow," Red hopped away from her and moved back to the stove to finish dinner.

Lizzie stood there indecisively, unsure of what to do. Wiping her tears away angrily, Lizzie wanted nothing more than to rush over to Ressler's apartment and talk to him. Apologize to him and yell at him and kiss him. But she couldn't because he was half way to Alaska by now.

/^\\/^\\

"Ressler."

Lizzie cleared her throat awkwardly at the sound of Don's voice on the other end of the phone. "Chung disappeared this morning. Somebody shot the agent surveilling him with a tranquilizer dart."

There was a pause. "Do you think he might have been abducted?"

"Possibly." Lizzie shrugged though she knew he couldn't see. "We're not sure. He might have fled. We flagged his passport. We're tracking all international flights. We'll keep you posted. At this point, the closest former Animal Underground members that we could find are in Anchorage."

"Any prospects?"

"Outside of one arrest for possession 15 years ago, they look clean."

"The Ranch." Samar murmured, having been listening in on the conversation.

"Oh, yeah. And make a run out to Igaluk Ranch. It's the former location of their commune. Property was picked up at auction after the big bust by Wendigo, LLC."

"I'll check it out."

"Ress!" Lizzie called out when she could tell he was moments away from hanging up, moving away from Samar, to a more secluded part of the war room.

"Yea?" Ressler questioned gruffly.

"Uh… I just… I think we should talk." Lizzie coughed. "I want to talk."

The silence extended for so long, Lizzie was beginning to wonder if he'd hung up on her. Just as she was pulling her phone away from her ear, she heard his voice come over the line. "Yea?" He uttered again though it sounded both weak and hopeful at the same time. A far cry from his earlier abrupt gruffness.

"Yea." She murmured. "But uh…but I need you to be sober. Can you do that? No more drinking. Promise me."

Another long silence greeted her but this time she waited patiently. "How did you know?" He asked softly.
Lizzie snorted out a laugh. "Are you forgetting about my personal spy network?" She asked teasingly.


Lizzie laughed at his apparent woe-be-gone attitude before nodding her head at his promise. "Good. Then uh… I'll talk to you when you get back."

\\\\

"The two vics were skinned antemortem." Samar explained. "Presuming Sitka is the dumping site –"

"They were transported alive." Lizzie finished Samar's thought.

Samar nodded. "You think sedated?"

"No doubt, but, still, customs, security – Someone would have –" Lizzie paused, the corners of her eyes crinkling in confusion. "But, plus, how did they get onto a commercial flight without proper documentation?"

Samar's eyes widened with sudden realization. "Unless you don't fly commercial. Homeland Security is loathe to inconvenience the rich and powerful."

Lizzie spun around to face Aram. "Pull information on private jets departing the same days our victims were abducted. Crosscheck tail numbers. See if you can find a pattern."

\\\\

"Paris, two hours after Batouala disappears, a chartered Citation, CJ3S, leaves a private airstrip outside the city. Sao Paulo another Citation departs 45 minutes – after Alejandro Gomez is abducted." Aram explained, bringing the flight logs up onto the large screen.

"Same pilots?" Lizzie questioned.

"Well, I got two different names here, but both check out as bogus, so I'd say yes."

"He's comfortable behind the stick of a Citation." Samar murmured, thinking aloud. "Why change horses?"

Aram nodded, pointing his finger at her as if he were a game show host and she'd just answered correctly. "Right. So I checked local airports and got a third hit. Aram hit a key and another flight log popped onto the screen. "Another citation, which departed yesterday from Westchester at 5:12 p.m."

"Chung. Did they file a flight plan?" Samar asked quickly.

Aram shrugged. "Bogus. Uh, all over the map – Uh, Tokyo, Dubai, Paris."

"Who chartered the planes?" Lizzie asked, leaning against the desk beside Aram.

"Three separate jets, three separate companies. One domiciled in Oslo, uh, the second in Belgium, uh, the third in South Africa. But they all share a common corporate parent." Aram paused thoughtfully. "Or should I say a common corporate second-uncle-cousin-sister once removed?"
"What do you know about a company called Wendigo, LLC?" Lizzie swung her chair back and forth as she spoke into her phone.

"Wendigo. What have you found that connects him to the cartel?" Red questioned, catching Dembe's eye in the rear view mirror of their Mercedes.

Lizzie shrugged. "Not sure. All we know is Wendigo controls chartered jets used in the abductions and they own a piece of property in the same area where the bodies were dumped in the ocean Sitka, Alaska. Used to be a commune for a group called Animal Underground. Ressler went up there to ask some questions. He's fallen out of contact." Lizzie paused, taking a shaky breath. If something had happened to Ressler… "Anchorage division's scrambling HRT, and Samar and I are set to rendezvous with them in Juneau. In the meantime, if you can dig up any names behind Wendigo…"

"Lizzie, be careful up there." Red murmured before hanging up. He once again caught Dembe's gaze in the rearview mirror. "There's been a change of plans."

'I don't care if Matthew likes it. I should have tipped off the police when he began his little hobby." A pause. "I know that. Tell Peter to call me when it's done."

Red smiled, having listened to the man's side of his phone conversation, as Perl turned the corner into the living room. "Namaste, Geoff." He greeted.

Lizzie and Samar stood huddled with a few Alaska State Troopers as well as a Hostage Rescue Team. They had a map laid out atop the hood. "Any intelligence on who's up there?" Lizzie asked the Chief.

"Two confirmed – Rosemary, aka 'Skye,' Kincaid and her son, Peter." He answered.

"The woman checks out as an associate of Animal Underground." A Lieutenant continued.

"Yeah, a local girl got knocked up by one of their members, a fella they called 'Ace.'" One of the search and rescue guys chimed in. "Her son Pete is an expert guide and tracker."

"Anybody else?" Lizzie asked.

The men all shared conspiratorial glances before the Chief spoke up. "There could be. Word is, Rosie was pregnant again 40 years ago and insisted on giving birth up at the Ranch – refused to come in town. Social services paid her a visit about eight months in, tried to convince her to change her mind and reported that she was no longer with child. People have talked hunters and whatnot. And there's been sightings of somebody or 'something' else."

"'Something?'" Lizzie asked, incredulous. It seemed a bit too far fetched to her – like an urban legend or something.

"The rumor is, it's Rosie's younger son."

Red squinted as he looked over an old photo before letting out a small "Ah!" and leaned forward in his seat, showing the picture to Geoff, tapping his finger as he pointed to where he wanted the other
man to look. "There you are – Sean Salter. You went by the name 'Ace' back then. You left Animal Underground two years before the Sitka Seven killings and subsequent trials. Lucky, that. But, then, you've always had a talent for well-timed exits. Well, it seems, Ace, there's still some freaks up there living in the woods, skinning people and dumping them in the Bay."

Geoff's eyes narrowed at the use of the term 'freaks.' "Poachers, not people, responsible for the decimation of hundreds of wild and endangered species."

Red nodded, smiling benevolently. "Yes. Horrific. And if that was your endgame, I'd be writing you another sizable contribution to keep up the good work. But that isn't the endgame, is it, Geoff?" Red's smiled was wiped from his face and his gaze hardened as he placed his elbows on his knees. "You see, before I got involved with your Foundation, I ran a comprehensive background check. All your business interests, corporations. Among them, a rather innocuous shell called 'Wendigo, LLC.' Everything looked fine. Shame on me." Red uttered darkly, "Turns out Wendigo holds controlling stock in a small but lucrative concern called Emerson-Concorde Imports that you recently identified to a lovely young friend of mine as a front for the Mombasa Cartel."

Geoff smirked, shaking his head slowly. "Why would I kill my own people?"

Red shrugged. "You're a businessman. As long as you were killing off the competition, you took the opportunity to clear out deadwood in your own operation. The evidence of your guilt is convoluted but irrefutable." Red began to bite the inside of his cheek as the small tic under his eye began to twinge. "I simply cannot fathom the journey, the moral detours necessary to change a man who cherished all creatures great and small into one who profits from their slaughter."

Geoff's lips thinned as he looked at Red compassionately. "My motives have never been about profits. I have more money than I'll ever need. And there's been no journey, no detours. I'm the same guy I've always been – I'm a conservationist. And as you pointed out, I'm a businessman. I understand the law of supply and demand. As long as the market exists – and it will always exist – there will be people willing to meet the demand. It can't be stopped. It can be controlled."

Red shook his head. "A natural monopoly."

Geoff nodded, smiling as if he was happy that Red was beginning to understand, completely ignoring or simply unaware of Red's apparent disgust. "Exactly. These cartels are completely out of control. But through a natural monopoly, the supply curve can be managed. The short-term demand can be met without threatening the long-term survival of the species."

Red barked out a dark laugh. "Geoff, that was breathtaking – an operatic perversion of righteous intent. But your strategy, no matter how noble the rhetoric, is betrayed and, inevitably, defined by your actions." Red paused and lifted one hand behind him, drawing his gun from its holster. "This isn't about conservation. It's about consolidation. We are what we do, Ace." Red

Geoff eyed Red's gun warily. "What do you want?"

"A list identifying every member and operative in the Mombasa Cartel, their business entities, and distribution networks."

"Or?"

Red smiled benignly. "Or I shoot you here, now." He stated simply, pointing his weapon at Geoff.
"Status?" A man's voice chattered over Lizzie's earpiece.

"Male subject downstairs. Female upstairs bathroom."

Lizzie watched as the HRT squad surrounded the house. A few of the men walked up the porch quietly before one of them shouted "FBI!" And knocked down the door. Within moments, gunfire was exchanged and quickly silenced. Samar and Lizzie quickly made their way into the cabin and followed along as the men cleared the lower level. Sharing a glance, Lizzie and Samar made their way upstairs. Pushing open the bathroom door, Lizzie and Samar crowded the doorway, stopping short at the sight of an old woman sat in a tub stained red with blood, a 40 something year old man sat in the opposite side of the tub from her. When the woman raised her hand out of the soapy water, Lizzie raised her gun. "Freeze!" She shouted.

But the woman ignored her, looking over at her son. "Don't cry, buttercup. Everything's gonna be all right." The woman murmured just before tipping the phonograph which until that moment had been playing a haunting tune – into the tub. Lizzie watched, her eyes widening in horror as their bodies twitched and spasmed until they finally went limp.

\/

"There it is. That's everything – the whole cartel." Geoff stated, turning around from where he stood at his desk and handed Red a USB.

Red grasped the USB before putting it in his pocket and aiming his gun at Perl's chest. "You know, 29 years ago in Sierra Leone, there was a farmer named Samwel Zuma who had the audacity to identify several low-level Mombasa operatives to local authorities. The cartel massacred the entire family." Red uttered, his voice deep and grave. "All but the youngest son. He was sold to a local ring of flesh peddlers. The majority of children in those circumstances don't last more than nine months. He survived eight years. He was 14 when I found him. Too old, too tall, too angry and dangerous to be of any further value. He was left to die, chained to a standpipe in the basement of a squalid brothel in Nairobi. Branded, burned, barely alive. So I took him." Red paused with a small sigh. "Made him well, saw to his education. He graduated university with a bachelor's degree in English Literature. He speaks four languages fluently and can get by in a half a dozen more. He is splendid." Red uttered with obvious awe. "His name is Dembe – Dembe Zuma."

"Raymond, don't. That was then. It serves no purpose to kill him now." Dembe's voice came from the shadows of the hallway behind Red.

Red let out a little breath of a laugh, shaking his head. "You see that, Geoff? That is what a good man does. That is what separates men like him from men like you" Red paused thoughtfully." – and me." He finished before pulling the trigger, shooting Geoff Perl in the chest.

\/

Lizzie walked down the porch steps in a daze. As she looked around her, her steps faltered, her eyes skittering back towards what she saw. Don. Sitting in the back of an ambulance. Without hesitation, Lizzie sprinted towards him, making a beeline around all of the officers moseying around the yard and completely uncaring of the spectacle she made as she slammed into Ressler's chest, hugging him tightly.

Despite a pained groan, Don hugged her back, refusing to let her back away no matter how much it hurt his bruised ribs. Don nuzzled his head into her neck and Lizzie sniffled, knowing that her tears were dripping down Don's neck but couldn't bring herself to care, just basking in the sheer relief and joy at knowing he was safe.
"So does this mean that you forgive me?" Don whispered gruffly, his voice muffled as he refused to move away.

Lizzie laughed wetly before sniffling. "No, it just means I'm so damn happy you're alive so that I can."

Chapter End Notes

As always, I own nothing.
Lizzie and Don sat awkwardly on opposite ends of her couch. They'd been sitting there in silence since they had arrived 10 minutes ago. Lizzie didn't know where to start with this conversation and didn't think she was the one who should have to start it anyway.

Lizzie looked up from her lap at the sound of Don's awkward cough. "So uh… where's Sammy?" He asked gruffly.

"He's upstairs playing with Dad and Dembe in his room." Lizzie replied softly.

Don nodded slowly, his eyes cutting over to her before darting around the room. "Can I see him?" He asked hesitantly.

"No." Lizzie replied shortly, her lips pursing in almost sympathy at the pained look marring Don's face at her refusal.

"Liz – "

"No, Don. I'm not letting you see him until we clear the air." Lizzie said sharply before turning her body to face him. "How could you say such things, Don?" Lizzie questioned heatedly.

Don looked away, his cheeks reddening with shame. "Liz I – "

"If that's how you truly feel, then you're never going to see Sammy." Lizzie interrupted him, then sighed as Don closed his eyes against the hurt, running her fingers through her hair. "I'm sorry Don, but I am not going to have a relationship with a man who only views my family as a bunch of criminals and assets." Lizzie explained, her voice strong with conviction though it tore her up inside.

Don scruffed his hair with his fingers, shaking his head furiously. "No! I don't, I swear." He stated passionately. "Liz, I love you. I love Sammy. I was just… I was so afraid of losing you and I lashed out – "

"Why the hell would you lash out at the exact person you were afraid of losing?" Lizzie asked, incredulous.

"Because I was scared!" Don shouted. Lizzie stiffened in her seat but remained silent as Don seemed to struggle with what he needed to say.

Don sighed, his eyes closing as his head dropped down until his chin met his chest. "I was so afraid of losing you and all I could think was 'not again. Please not again.' I can't…I couldn't bear to lose the woman I love. Not again." Don sniffed and it sounded suspiciously more like a sniffle. "And I guess… a part of me thought it'd be easier to cut ties. Maybe if I hurt you, you wouldn't want to be with me and… and it'd be easier if next time – " Don choked, his face crumbling and he was unable to continue.

Lizzie looked away, her eyes misting over with hurt. "Well it seems like you succeeded." She murmured. She could almost understand him lashing out in fear, but to consciously try to hurt her? It felt like a knife was flaying her chest wide open.
Don's head whipped up to look at her in horror. "Don't say that, Liz. Please don't say that." He begged. "I regretted it the moment the words came out. I don't… I don't know what I'd do without you and Sammy. I love you. I'm so sorry for what I said. Please. I'm sorry!" Don pleaded, inching closer to her on the couch, desperate to touch her but afraid of being rebuffed.

"Don, you hurt me. You hurt me and disrespected my family. On purpose. How can I forgive that?" Lizzie's voice warbled as she spoke.

"Because I love you. I love Sammy. And you love me." Don swallowed. "I know you do."

Lizzie stared at Don for a moment before shaking her head slowly, tears leaving tracks down her cheeks. "That's not enough." She whispered brokenly.

Devastation slammed across Don's face as the tears he'd been holding at bay finally fell. "Liz, don't say that." He whispered brokenly. "Please, I'll do anything."

Lizzie wiped at the tears on her cheeks angrily. "Will you really? When the day comes, will you go on the run with me and my family? Will you become a fugitive and do what it takes to protect our family, no matter what?"

Don grasped onto the way she'd said our family. "Yes. Of course I will." He promised earnestly. "Liz, the moment I agreed to continue with the task force, go rogue, I knew what I was getting into." Don shook his head. "And then when we got together…I was already so in love with you. You were my best friend but I wanted more and I knew what that meant." He stated hotly. Unable to stand it any longer, he reached forward and grasped her hand in his. She didn't pull away.

"Liz, it was a defense mechanism." Don quickly held up his hand when Lizzie opened her mouth to speak. "I'm not saying that excuses what I said. It doesn't and you don't know how sorry I am for hurting you. If I could take it back, I would. But I can't." Don took a deep breath and held Lizzie's gaze. "But I swear I will do everything I can to make it up to you, please just give me a chance."

Lizzie's lips pursed as she stared at Don, her eyes darting across his face as she tried to read his sincerity.

"I know what it's like to live without you, Liz. And I never want to do that again. Please."

Lizzie continued to gaze at Don, biting her bottom lip as Don squirmed anxiously in his seat. Finally, her head began to move slowly in a hesitant nod.

Don immediately perked up, his eyes alight as a smile spread across his face. "Yea?" He asked, hope brightening his tone.

"Yea." She murmured, giving him a small smile.

Don lunged forward, pressing his lips to hers. In his excitement, the kiss lacked finesse but he made up for it with passion and Lizzie hesitantly parted her lips, allowing him entry. At the first hesitant swipe of tongues, there was a small moan and neither could tell who it originated from, neither cared.

God I've missed this. Lizzie thought to herself as she wrapped her arms around Don's neck, pulling him closer until he was draped over her, bearing his weight on his arms.

A gruff cough from the hallway had them jumping apart like two guilty teenagers. They both turned their heads, their cheeks aflame at the sight of Red bouncing a giggling Sammy on his hip.
"Well I assume from that display that all is well." Red stated as he walked closer. "I believe I am going to go back to my safe house and wash my eyes out with soap." He muttered, carefully handing Sammy over to Don before turning around quickly and hastily grabbing his things before exiting the house.

Lizzie's amusement at her dad's discomfiture was cut short when she looked to Don. He sat on the couch, reverently holding Sammy close to his chest, his hand gently petting the hair on the back of the baby's head as he brought their foreheads together, his eyes closed. Sammy uncharacteristically seemed to sense the gravity of the moment and stayed still, bringing a little chubby hand to Don's cheek and patted it gently, babbling softly.

Lizzie's heart clenched guiltily at the sight of Don's obvious relief and love for Sammy.

"I'm never letting you go." Don whispered, kissing Sammy's forehead before turning to look at Liz, reaching out a hand to grasp hers once more. "Either of you."

Lizzie walked up the sidewalk to the place her dad told her to meet him and saw Samar leaning against a car. As she drew even with her, Samar pushed herself off the car and walked in step with Liz.

"So, what exactly did Reddington say?"

"Uh, it was Dembe." Lizzie corrected. "He said Red had another case but he specifically asked that you come along."

"Does that bother you?" Samar questioned hesitantly.

Lizzie's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why would it?"

"I thought he only spoke to you." Samar shrugged. "Don't want to step on your toes."

Lizzie smiled reassuringly over at Samar. "I'm fine. My toes are fine." She stated light heartedly as she opened the door to the record shop.

Lizzie immediately spotted Red where he stood at the back of the store, perusing the records. The man's head popped up at the sound of the bell as they entered and his face broke into a wide grin. "Ah, ladies, thank God you showed up. I took a left turn in the Rostropovich. I've ended up completely lost in the Chico Hamilton." Red shook his head and gave a self-depreciating smile. "This is an addiction."

Red walked over towards Samar and leaned towards her. "I just can't decide between – Please pour some cold water on me, will you?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes at her dad's antics. She really hated when he flirted with Samar. The woman was around the same age as her, for Christ's sake. "Why did you want both of us here?"

Red glanced between both Lizzie and Samar, his eyes wide as if he just realized that there were two of them. "Both, you're right. Thank you. Great idea." Red turned to set down the records in his hands before turning back to face the two women. "Anyway, funny story – stop me if you've heard it. Persian man walks into a bar, meets a beautiful woman, has a few drinks. Next thing you know, he's falling from a 12-story balcony."

Lizzie looked at her dad, confused, then over at Samar whose back had gone ramrod straight as she
stared at her dad unblinkingly. "I don't get it." Lizzie said hesitantly, glancing back at her dad.

"I imagine Agent Navabi does." Red stated solemnly.

"You're referring to Kian Nouri, the Iranian businessman who committed suicide in Dubai." Samar stated stoically.

Red smiled pleasantly at the woman. "I am, except he wasn't a mere businessman. He was one of Iran's top nuclear scientists in Dubai to supervise purchase of several borehole gamma something-or-others. And he didn't commit suicide. He was assassinated in a joint C.I.A./Mossad venture to undermine Iran's nuclear program, but, then, you know this already." Red turned his unflinching gaze away from Samar and over to Lizzie. "My understanding is, she took a little detour to Dubai for a rendezvous with Mr. Nouri so she could toss him off a building."

Lizzie's eyes widened in shock as she listened to her dad speak. Once he'd finished, she turned towards Samar. "You killed him?"

"If you're asking me to comment on a Mossad operation, you know I can't do that."

Red chuckled breathily. "I wasn't asking. But I'm hardly one to judge. George Orwell wrote, 'Those who abjure violence can do so only because others are committing violence on their behalf.' What a visionary, but, Good Lord, his books are a downer." Red stood for a moment, shaking his head with a far off look in his eye before shaking his head as if to clear it. "In any case, the bad news is, I was sharing a bowl of shisha with a Misiri minister, and they plan to retaliate. You kill their top scientist, they intend to kill yours, and they've dispatched a man known as 'The Scimitar' to do it."

Lizzie perked up as it finally seemed as this conversation was winding around to another name on the list. "The Scimitar?"

Red's head bobbed in acknowledgement. "This is not your average killer, Agent Keen. He's one part hit man, two parts con man."

"I'm familiar with his work." Samar said softly.

"In 2009, his target was a Sunni tribal leader named Majeed Abd Bawi. The Scimitar gained access by joining his militia." Red let out a bark of a laugh that echoed through the quiet store. "Oh, that's right! Fought for the man for seven months until the day he got close enough to aerate Bawi's carotid with a fork. He's dedicated, resilient, cunning, responsible for the murder of dozens of high-value targets, and, according to my sources, he's already on U.S. soil."

Lizzie was heading over to Cooper's office to drop off some files when she was suddenly grabbed by the waist and pulled into an alcove. She only had time to let out a small squeak before lips descended upon hers. Lizzie smiled against said lips as she realized they were very familiar lips. Remembering where they were, however, Lizzie pulled away with a chuckle before the kiss could deepen. "What was that for?" Lizzie asked lightly.

Don shrugged, a small grin on his face as he ducked his head, scuffing his shoe against the floor. "I don't know." He coughed awkwardly. "Just cause I can, I guess."

Lizzie's eyes softened and she leaned forward to give him a quick peck on the lips. "You're adorably romantic sometimes." She murmured against his lips before she pulled away. "Now, as much as I enjoyed this prelude to our evening – " Lizzie paused with a salacious grin. "I've got to
go hand these to Cooper before someone finds us in a compromising position." Lizzie joked, waving the files in front of her.

Don chuckled and they both moved out into the main hallway. Turning to leave, Lizzie walked a few feet before spinning back around. "Hey!" She said just loud enough to get his attention as he walked away, causing him to turn on his heel to look back at her. "Could you pick Sammy up after work? Red said he needs me to do something for him."

A giant grin crossed Don's face. "Yea, that's fine. Could do with some bonding time with the little man."

/

Lizzie slid into the back seat of her dad's car of the week. "So what's up?" She greeted.

"Hi Dad, how are you? Did you have a nice day?" Red muttered in mock exasperation. "I did, Sweetheart, thanks for asking."

Lizzie laughed but leaned over to give her dad a quick hug which was quickly returned. "Sorry Dad…" She said unrepentantly. "Hi, how are you? Did you have a nice day?" She asked teasingly.

Red looked over at her flatly, his lips pursed. "The moment's gone now." He sniffed.

Lizzie laughed as Red cracked a smile. After a moment, Red seemed to start, his face turning solemn. "I need you to run a little errand for me. I got news of a source – someone who may know where Berlin is."

/

Lizzie got out of the Mercedes she'd borrowed from her Dad, leaving it running as she walked down the alley where she was meeting the possible informant.

"Sevan Volkov!" She greeted as she came closer. "Thank you for meeting with me."

Volkov leaned against the trunk of his car and rolled his eyes. "And what choice did I have?"

Lizzie ignored him and got straight to business as she took a step closer to get directly in front of him. "Berlin. I know you supply him with arms shipments."

Volkov's eyes narrowed. "And how do you know this?"

"Tell me where to find him." Lizzie demanded.

Volkov scoffed, shaking his head. "If you know anything about Berlin, you know I can't do that."

"Thought you might say that, which is why I nominated you for our 'Most Wanted' list. C.I.D. has approved it. We're just waiting for the Director's signature." Lizzie smirked at the slight widening of his eyes before Volkov's tough guy image steeled across his face once more.

"Eh, if you're gonna arrest me, arrest me." He stated, putting his arms out in front of him, his wrists touching as if preparing to be cuffed.

Lizzie chuckled darkly. "So you can sit silent in a cell with an expensive attorney? Mm, I'd rather leave you out there, let the world know we're looking for you. Once news of this hits the streets, Berlin will know the U.S. government is spending limitless resources and time looking for you a man who has intimate details about him and his business affairs." Lizzie smirked at the man. "You
have two options either you lead me to Berlin or I lead Berlin to you.

\\\\

Lizzie and Samar both walked over to Aram's desk the next day. "What's going on?" Samar questioned.

Aram smiled up at them before looking back down at his desk and began fiddling with what looked like a camera with its plastic casing taken off. "D.O.D. discovered a hidden surveillance camera at their Annapolis field office during a routine sweep."

Lizzie raised a brow. "How is that relevant to us?"

"Technology was Iranian." Aram answered simply.

Lizzie and Samar traded an interested look. "What were they recording?" Samar asked.

"Okay, uh, the camera was placed outside the building with eyes to the front entrance. It was relaying a live stream to some off-site location. If I reactivate it, I should be able to triangulate the location where the feed's being transmitted." Aram placed his hands on his keyboard before pausing. "Um. Oh, man. I almost forgot." Aram reached out and hastily grabbed a post-it note and placed it over the camera's aperture. "In case someone's watching on the other end." Aram turned back to his keyboard and his fingers began their techy dance as he whistled happily. "Okay. Camera is live. Okay, RDF is up. Signal strength looks good. Oh, accounting for time lag." Aram paused as the computer let out a small beeping alert. "And we have a lock. It's a property just outside New Carrollton, and it looks like it's a construction site."

\\\\

Lizzie and Ressler waited as a few agents stormed the construction site's temporary office. Once they gave the all clear, Liz and Ressler walked in.

"Lock it down." Ressler ordered. "I want eyes on all access points." Ressler looked around them at the empty space. "So, where the hell is everyone?"

"No idea." Lizzie murmured as she walked over towards the lone desk and picked up a small folder, grasping the photo which was clipped to the front of it and turned to face Don, showing him what she'd found. "But could this be the man they were surveilling? Jonathan Reese."

Ressler walked over and read over her shoulder as Lizzie opened the folder. "Agent Jonathan Everett Reese, Defense Security Services."

"They've got everything on this guy – addresses, phone numbers, employment history. DSS is the division tasked with protecting our nuclear scientists. They're logging his movements. Probably trying to find the most vulnerable point of attack."

Ressler set his index finger on a page so that she couldn't thumb past it. When Lizzie paused, she noticed that it was a crudely drawn map. "It's the DSS shuttle stop. He takes the train back from Annapolis every afternoon. He'll be at the park-n-ride off Route 50. We got to get there before they do."

\\\\

Lizzie and Ressler swerved into the parking lot, the SUV's sirens blaring. At the sight of Jonathan Reese walking to his car, they pulled up and Ress slammed on the breaks.
"Jonathan Reese FBI!" Lizzie yelled as she and Ressler quickly jumped out of the SUV. She flashed her badge as they walked closer.

Reese looked between the two, appearing flummoxed. "What's this about?"

"We need to move quickly." Ressler's tone brooked no argument. "I'll explain in the car." Ressler stated, placing his hand on the other man's back, guiding him towards the SUV. As they drew closer, the sudden sound of rapid gunfire had everyone ducking. Lizzie ducked around the hood of the SUV as Ressler and Reese ducked to the other side of Reese's car. Lizzie and Ressler began returning fire in the general direction of where the shots were coming from.

"Shooter's on the ridge! I don't have eyes!" Ressler yelled over the mayhem and pushed Reese forward, directing him back towards the SUV while still keeping low. Once they'd all piled into the SUV, Ressler peeled out with a screech of tires. They sped out of the parking lot, gunshots following after them.

"I got threat assessments this morning of a possible Iranian Misiri action." Reese stated, looking around them in panic. "They want the names and locations of cloud top personnel. You need to notify your people, activate all security protocols."

Liz took out her phone to do just that but was distracted by the sound of a motorcycle engine revving. Craning her neck towards the right back side of their vehicle, she glimpsed two men in all black atop a motorcycle right beside them just before they opened. Everyone in the car ducked under the barrage of bullets and broken glass.

Swerving to avoid the gunshots but unable to see where he was going clearly as he ducked, Ressler ran over a middle median, losing control of the SUV.

\///\\

Lizzie woke up with a groan, turning to her side, she quickly hissed in pain and looked down to where the pain had originated from. Her eyes widened at the sight of her arm in a cast. Looking around, Lizzie quickly realized she was in a hospital. Sitting up gingerly, wincing in pain, Lizzie frantically looked around the room, her shoulders slumped in relief the moment she sighted Don. However, at the sight of his bandaged head, she bit her lip in worry and tossed her legs over the side of the bed.

"Take it easy, Agent Keen." A voice murmured from behind her and a doctor quickly came into view and placed his hand on her shoulder to keep her from standing. "You're at Bethesda. I'm Dr. Rivera. You and your partner were in an accident."

"Is he okay?" Lizzie asked worriedly, trying to shake the fugue in her head away with no success.

"Agent Ressler suffered significant head trauma in the crash. He's had a C.T. scan. Radiology will take him for an M.R.I. shortly."

Lizzie's brow furrowed in concern as she nodded in understanding. She then looked down at her arm and then back at the doctor in clear question.

"Fractured in three places. We set it for now, but to be honest, you may need surgery to restore full mobility."

Lizzie pursed her lips but stamped down on any annoyance or worry. It wouldn't do her any good now. "John Reese. The man who was in the car with us." She muttered, annoyed and frustrated that her brain seemed so slow for some reason.
The doctor looked at her, his brow furrowed in confusion. "I'm sorry? Nobody else was transported from the scene."

Lizzie shook her head, everything coming quickly into focus as her adrenaline began to surge. "No, no, no, no, but he was in the car."

The doctor shook his head. "I'm the attending on duty. No one else was brought in."

Lizzie sighed heavily. "I need a phone." With a groan, Lizzie leaned over, swinging her legs out once more. "Listen –"

"Easy." The doctor placated as he gently guided her to lay back down.

"– That crash was no accident." Lizzie uttered as she allowed the doctor to push her back into a laying position.

The doctor stared at Lizzie in contemplation for a moment before nodding his head. "Understood. I'll have one brought in right away."

Lizzie opened her eyes at the sound of footsteps. She'd been dozing lightly, keeping an ear out for any noise from Don, but so far he'd shown no signs of waking. Turning her head, Lizzie caught sight of the doctor.

"Here you go." The man murmured as he handed her a phone, leaning over the table by her bedside to plug it into the jack for her.

"Thank you." Lizzie murmured, grasping onto the man's hand and squeezing gently to express her gratitude. The doctor smiled awkwardly and nodded his head in acceptance before making a hasty retreat out of the room.

Lizzie took deep breaths, trying to clear the continuous fog once more before dialing her boss's number.

"Assistant Director Cooper." He answered.

"It's me." Lizzie murmured.

"Agent Keen." Lizzie smiled softly at the clear relief in his voice. "You have no idea how good it is to hear your voice. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine, but, uh Ressler he's hurt." Lizzie's brain skirted over this fact clinically, not able to deal with it at the moment. "The Iranians have John Reese. I heard some men's voices before I passed out. They were speaking Farsi. Someone needs to find Professor Collins. The D.O.D. needs to cancel that speech and put her in protective custody now." Her dark tone conveyed the obvious seriousness of the matter.

"I've already alerted the D.O.D. I'm heading to the event site myself to make sure she's on lockdown. Agent Keen, the Neurology team at Bethesda's one of the best. They'll take good care of Ressler. Agent Navabi's on her way to you. Get some rest."

Lizzie hung up and put the old corded phone back on the receiver. Lizzie's brow furrowed as she felt something oily on her fingers. Bringing her hand up closer to her face, her confusion growing as she looked at the substance. She could swear it was… make up.
"How's everything in here?"

Lizzie turned over onto her back at the sound of the nurse's voice. "Okay." She said despondently.

Noticing her mood, the nurse raised a brow. "You're doing okay, hon?"

"Yeah." Lizzie said on a sigh. "What happened to Radiology? They were gonna take him for another scan."

The nurse gave her a placating smile. "Oh, well, I'm sure someone will be down soon. He's your partner, isn't he?" At Lizzie's nod, the nurse patted her on the knee. "I understand. I'll call them right now."

The moment the nurse left the room, Lizzie sprang up out of her bed and headed over towards Ressler's bed. Something was wrong. There was something not quite right with this hospital. For one, it was too damn quiet. Lizzie quickly grabbed Ressler chart and flipped through it, her eyes widening as, other than the first couple pages, it was filled with blank pages.

Lizzie's head snapped up at the sound of foot steps. She quickly put Ressler's fake chart back on the table and walked over to Ress, tapping him on the cheek as she hung over him, feigning as if she could barely stand.

"Ma'am, A-Agent Keen, you can't be up." The nurse said from behind her and Lizzie clumsily turned around to face her.

"No we need to get the radiologist now!" She argued groggily.

"Oh, o-okay." The nurse hesitated before walking over. "Okay, you're fine. You're all right. Oh, I'm sorry," Once Lizzie cottoned on to what the woman was attempting, she allowed her to put her arm around her waist and Lizzie placed her own around the other woman, allowing all of her weight to lean against the nurse as she stumbled back to her bed. "We need to get Radiology in. Let's get you back in bed. You're fine."

"Okay." Lizzie muttered before turning around, as if attempting to go back to Ressler and ended up bumping into the nurse. "Oh, my gosh, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry." Lizzie apologized profusely as she held onto the woman, her hand slipping into the woman's pocket.

"It's all right." The nurse uttered as she got Lizzie to her bed. "You just relax."

Lizzie poured into the hospital bed, covering her body with the blankets. "We need to get Radiology." She mumbled.

"Okay, take it easy. Take it easy." The nurse soothed.

"Thank you." Lizzie murmured, closing her eyes tiredly.

\\\\

Red sat on the back of the coffee truck, a small platter laid out between he and Zoë.

Looking down at the platter as he spread a bit of paste onto a cracker and handed it to her, Zoë let out a large sigh. "I never eat anchovies unless I don't know I'm eating them." Red chuckled along with her. "But I have to say, this is pretty delicious."
Red shook his head with a small smile. "Anchovies get a bad rap." He murmured as he poured a bit of wine into a plastic cup. "Try the wine." He offered as he handed her the cup.

Zoë took a sip, allowing it to settle on her tongue a moment before swallowing. "It would be better with beer." She declared.

Red laughed heartily. "It might very well be better with beer."

"Mm. Do you have kids, Kenneth?"

Red's eye began to twitch and he looked away, into the middle distance. "I do, two daughters."

Zoë nodded quietly. Red could feel her gauging stare on his face as she tried to figure out how far she could take this line of questioning. "Are you close?"

Red chuckled darkly as he wiped his hands with a napkin. "It's complicated."

Zoë raised a brow. "They don't like anchovies?" She teased drily.

Red let out a breath of a laugh and looked down at his lap. "You know, I don't know about that." He stated with a small sniff. "I wish it were that simple."

Zoë nodded and this time it was her turn to look away. "My father – he and I – My father did things I hated him for. Things that were unforgivable." Zoë bit her lip, sniffling.

"Have you told him?" Red asked quietly.

"I haven't seen my father in a long...long time."

Zoë took a deep breath and blinked heavily, swaying in her seat. She looked to Red, her eyes growing in horror as she realized something wasn't quite right. "What have you done?"

Red moved towards her and was easily able to pull her towards him to have her lean against him. "It's okay." She attempted to shove away from him but was clearly too weak. "It's okay."

Zoë breathed deeply, whimpering.

"I'm not gonna hurt you." Red murmured with a wince, his face twisting with guilt.

Zoë continued to gasp and whimper as she fought the drowsiness. A black BMW quickly pulled up along side the coffee truck and Red stood, leaning Zoë against his side and fumbling with her towards the car until Dembe came around the vehicle to assist.

\n
Lizzie sat up in her hospital bed, the heavy duty scissors she'd stolen from the nurse's pocket in her hand. Lifting the arm which was in a cast up to inspect it, Lizzie's brow furrowed in concentration. She began to wiggle her fingers and, realizing that it didn't hurt to do so, she paused before quickly beginning to cut through the poorly done cast with the scissors. With plenty of tugging and a few grunts of effort, the cast was finally off her arm. Lizzie wiggled her hand a bit and began to twist her arm to check to see if anything hurt and her eyes widened as they fell upon the sight of two pins in her arm. Grasping the head of one of the pins, she watched with morbid fascination as she pulled it out of the crook of her arm before quickly doing the same to the other. Twisting her arm once more, Lizzie realized that those pins had been the source of her previous pain.

At the sound of foot steps approaching once more, Lizzie quickly got back under the covers,
stuffing the severed cast under the blankets and grasping the knife in her hand. She settled just as the door to the room opened once more.

"Good news." The nurse announced herself as she walked towards Lizzie.

"Hmm?" Lizzie hummed with fake grogginess.

"Radiology called. They'll be down for your partner in the next 20 minutes."

"Oh, that's great. Thank you. What's that?" Lizzie questioned, pointing to the syringe in the nurse's hands.

The nurse's lips turned upward in a smile as she flicked the syringe, removing any bubbles. "It's just a little something so that arm of yours doesn't get infected."

Lizzie sprang up, crouching on her knees and quickly overpowered the older woman. Wresting the syringe out of her hand, Lizzie turned the woman so that her back was to her chest and held the syringe to the woman's neck. "You tell me what's in the syringe – " Lizzie grunted and brought the needle closer to the nurse's neck as the woman elbowed her in the stomach. "– or I will stick it in you and find out for myself."

"It's a sedative." The nurse gasped, her hands coming up to grapple at the arm that Lizzie had wrapped around her throat. "Please don't."

"What's in his I.V.?" Lizzie grunted as she held the squirming nurse in place, nodding towards Ressler to indicate what she was referring to.

"Same thing."

"Okay, who are you? Where is this hospital?"

"Doctor!" The nurse suddenly called out and quickly let out a gasp as Lizzie stuck the needle into her neck.

Once the woman was completely out, Lizzie carelessly let her flump backward onto her bed and sprang up, running over to Ressler's bed. She quickly removed the IV from his arm and then bent over him, patting his cheek. "Ressler?" She whispered urgently, trying to get him to stir. "Don? Don! Can you hear me? Come on babe, we got to get the hell out of here!"

////

"It is Agent Navabi." Dembe said softly as he passed the cell phone behind him, to Red in the back seat.

"Yes Agent Navabi?" Red greeted jovially.

"We need to meet."

////

Lizzie drew her jeans up her legs and with a hop and shimmy, pulled them up her thighs to button them, wincing in sympathy as Don grunted in pain as he dressed. She may have gotten off easily but he'd clearly been roughed up in the accident.

Both Lizzie and Don froze as foot steps and the sound of radio chatter drew closer and closer then passed their room and quickly receded.
"Come on." Lizzie said urgently. "We've got to go. Now."

\\n\n"It was a trap. John Reese never existed. They wanted Liz to call Cooper and give away Professor Collin's location. It's been over two hours. I don't need to tell you his reputation. Once he has the intelligence he needs –"

"Yes, I know, Agent Navabi." Red interrupted her shortly, not needing nor having any wish to hear exactly what the Scimitar would do to his daughter. "And we're sure that The Scimitar is after this astrophysicist – Professor Collins?" Red questioned.

"Yes. The D.O.D. had three lead scientists working on the new nuclear project. The other two were easily hidden Professor Collins, unfortunately, has made quite a name for herself as an astrophysicist." Samar sighed. "She has a lecture scheduled. They couldn't make her cancel without raising any flags."

"Tell me about this lead of yours."

Samar pursed her lips. "He's not my lead. His name is Ali Hassan. He's the target of a major Mossad initiative."

Red's brow raised in intrigue. "I have a slight but memorable acquaintance with Mr. Hassan."

"Mossad has been tracking his movements for months. My superiors believe he's the key to unraveling a dozen covert Iranian ops."

"But you think he knows where to find The Scimitar."

"Perhaps." Samar replied stoically.

"Mossad has no tolerance for any agenda except Mossad's. You'll be sanctioned for this indiscretion." Red murmured softly.

Samar took a deep breath before nodding sharply. "So be it. I can't work with this task force unless my partners are my highest priority. So this has become quite personal."

"I understand." Red said, a small sympathetic smile on his face. "But you may have an even more personal stake in this case – than perhaps you realize."

Samar looked to Red, her brow crinkled. "And why is that?"

"Because one of The Scimitar's little-known aliases is Walid Abu Sitta."

Samar stiffened in her seat. "Walid Abu Sitta is the man who ordered the bombing that killed my brother."

"Yes. That's why I brought this case to you."

\\n\n"Fareed, what's going on?!" A very portly Middle Eastern man with an excessive amount of body hair came running out into the back yard of the rather ostentatious mansion in nothing but a towel. He ducked as another golf ball wizzed past him, breaking another window. "Hey! What are you doing?" He shouted, running up to Red just as he teed off another ball.
"Hassan! I love this club!" Red said jovially, bringing the club up to his face as if to inspect it before quickly lowering it once more and wacking another ball towards the man.

"Son of a bitch!" Hassan hissed, ducking for cover.

"Carbon fiber?"

"Reddington, stop! – Ooh! – Stop!" Hassan put his hands out in front of him in supplication, his gun hanging loosely in his right hand as Red took another swing. Another golf ball through his dining room window. "Damn it! What have you done with my guard?!"

"Fareed is taking a rest." Red answered happily before sighing as the man stepped closer. "Keep your plum covered. We're not alone." Red indicated towards Hassan's towel which was slipping down his waist. Hassan quickly scrabbled to get a hold of his towel but his head snapped upward at the sound of a gun cocking directly next to his head.

"I'll take your weapon." Samar's tone clearly indicated an order and she put one hand out. Hassan sighed before placing his gun in her outstretched hand.

"I've always regretted sparing your life that night in the Strait Of Hormuz." Red stated as he sat in one of the Adirondack chairs. "But I see pity has its rewards. Live and learn. You've been very careless, Ali."

"My unit has been surveilling you for months, and the intelligence we've gathered has been very helpful – so helpful that I fully expect to be disciplined for coming here without authorization." Samar placed the muzzle of her gun directly against Hassan's temple. "Just by being here, I have everything and, therefore, nothing to lose."

"What do you want?" Hassan demanded.

"The Scimitar. My friend here thinks you may know where to find him. He would've needed support when he got to the States. I'm guessing that support came from you. I know what you must be thinking, Ali. Imagine your future, the rest of your life spent in a dismal Israeli prison, some dark hole they put you in, bending your fingers and pulling your toes until they forget you ever existed. Think carefully, Ali, because, as you are my witness, that future will seem very bright, indeed, if you don't tell us what we want to know." Red's voice became gruffer the more he spoke until it was a menacing growl.

Hassan sighed. "He did make contact. Asked to use one of my warehouses. Said he needed building supplies. For what, I don't know."

"Tell me about this warehouse."

Lizzie and Don quickly made their way down the hall and turned a corner. The moment they opened the door, they froze. They had just stepped out of a hospital and directly into a warehouse. Stepping forward hesitantly, they looked around themselves. The hospital hallway was apparently nothing more than large sheets of dry wall set up in the middle of a warehouse. Their hospital was basically a movie set.

Once they shook themselves out of their shocked stupor, they began trying to find a way out. Leaving the main room of the warehouse, they quickly made their way through the hallways, hiding behind pillars at the sight of any guards. It was one such time when they heard gun fire right behind them. They'd been hiding behind a pillar as a guard passed by when, with a single gun shot
and a light thump, the man's arm came into view to their left.

Lizzie dared to peak around the corner of the pillar and smiled in relief at the sight that greeted her. Samar stood there, agents swarming around behind her as she pulled out her cell phone with a smirk.

"Reddington, I have them."

\///\\\\\ 

Lizzie hung up her phone. She stood with Ressler outside the hotel where Collins was supposed to give her presentation. "Collins is missing. Cooper thinks she's still on site."

Ressler frowned before turning to the crowd of people who'd been evacuated when the alarm had been raised about the possible threat. "Okay, listen up, folks! We have a situation here! We need everyone to move inside!"

"Now! Let's go! Please." Lizzie shouted as people continued to mill about.

"Move into the lobby!" Ressler shouted gruffly and that finally got people moving.

Lizzie lazily scanned the surrounding area for any stragglers. Her eyes skittered over the sight of a tanned man pushing a luggage carrier away, a single red suitcase placed onto it. "Sir?! Sir?" Lizzie paused when she got a look at one of the hands that was pushing the carrier. It had a tattoo of multiple Scimitars. "Sir, don't move!" Lizzie shouted, raising her gun. "Hands where I can see them! Slowly!"

The man did as she said, raising his hands and turning slowly. As he turned, Lizzie could see a wide grin on his face. "Hello, Agent Keen. I see you've made a spectacular recovery."

At that moment, with the screech of tires and pop of rapid gunfire, an SUV pulled up beside them and the Scimitar quickly hopped into the SUV. Lizzie immediately began shooting at the vehicle, popping a single tire and blowing out the rear window, but the SUV continued to drive away as the panicked crowd continued to scream.

\\\\

"We've suffered a setback. No, no, no, no, no. I'll need the full package – new credentials, a safe house, and $50,000 No. I'll need it within the hour."

The man who was speaking hastily into his phone stopped abruptly at the sight that greeted him when he walked into Ali Hassan's living room.

"All this running around." Red said cheerfully. "Really? I'm so relieved when the people I'm chasing come to me." Red smiled benignly from where he sat in an over stuffed chair, his gun pointed at the Scimitar with Dembe stood behind him, also aiming his weapon at the man.

\\\\

A door slammed in the distance and Red smiled as Samar walked into the living room.

"Agent Navabi, you got my message. We were just admiring the view."

Samar took a sharp breath at the sight that greeted her. The Scimitar was tied to a chair with duct tape over his mouth. "How did you know?"
"Mr. Hassan provided for our friend before, and most criminals return to the same trough time and time again. Indolence, I suppose. Personally, I make it a habit to avoid habits."

Samar hesitantly reached for her phone. "I can call it in."

"Yes, I suppose you can. The question is, do you want to?" Red questioned, his voice grave. "I offer him to you as a gift."

Samar's brow furrowed. "What am I supposed to do with him?"

Red shrugged his shoulders. "Whatever you like. Nobody else knows he's here."

Dembe walked into the room, clutching a cell phone. "Agent Keen just called. Her source provided Berlin's location." He murmured.

Red smiled innocently over at Samar. "Forgive me. I have an appointment that can't be rescheduled. – Don't do anything I wouldn't do." He said as he heaved himself out of the chair and quickly left the building.

Lizzie walked into their office, closing the door behind her and leaned against Don's desk, beside his chair where he sat. "I thought for a second we might lose you back there." She said softly, revealing her fear.

Don smiled up at her. "Prospect of having to live without me must've been terrifying." He teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"It was." Lizzie said shortly.

Don froze for a moment before his shoulders slumped. He took her hand in his and drew her to him until she had no choice but to sit on his lap or fall over. "Hey, I'm fine. We're both fine."

Lizzie wrapped her arms around Don's shoulders and rested her cheek on Don's temple, nodding her head as she sniffled.

"Tonight, we're going to go home and cuddle with Sammy. And then when we put him to bed for the night, we're not going to sleep for at least two hours. Got me?" She murmured, a hint of a tease in her tone.

Don chuckled and kissed her neck. "Yea, I got you." He murmured gruffly.

Cooper walked into their office without knocking. Thankfully, Liz and Don were at their own respective desks, filling out paper work. "I just got a call from MPD Harbor Patrol. They fished a man's body out of the Anacostia." Cooper stated. "Matches your description of The Scimitar. Get there." He ordered Lizzie.

"Yes, sir."

"That's him. Shot point-blank to the head." Lizzie said softly as she stood on the small beach with Samar. "This was an execution. Who would have done this?"
Samar remained silent.

//\//\//

Red climbed out of the back seat of his car as Dembe got out of the driver's side. He met Berlin's eyes as his men frisked him. Once they were finished, Red walked up to Berlin, knowing that Dembe would stay near the car.

"I know you were expecting Volkov, but as luck would have it, he sold you out to Agent Keen. It's surprising she came to me instead of the Bureau with the hope that I would kill you. I have other plans." Red stopped once he got within a couple feet of the man. "First, understand I didn't have to come here alone. In fact, I didn't have to come here at all. I could've sent" – " Red looked around at the number of men Berlin had. There were at least fifteen. " – seven men and put an end to this war."

Berlin scoffed. "Why didn't you?"

"Because this entire affair, every ounce of pain and suffering that all of us have endured has been the result of a tragic and, frankly, mysterious misunderstanding – one I intend to correct." Red shook his head woefully. "There's not much left I truly cherish in this world, but I swear on those few things I still hold dear, I did not kill your daughter." Red's voice grew impassioned as he spoke until he was almost shouting.

"Words, words." Berlin's gravelly voice mocked and Red wanted nothing more than to knock the psychotic bastard six ways from Sunday. "The greater the words, the larger the lie. My daughter is dead. But yours – my men tell me you've been spending a lot of time together. Maybe, when I've done to your daughter what you did to mine, we can finally be even."

Red's eye twitched as he took a step back, lifting his hand towards Dembe in an obvious signal. "I'm sorry." He stated as he heard the car door open and close. He waited a moment for the sound of foot steps to come closer before speaking once more. "Is this the daughter you're referring to? Because she's not my daughter. She's yours."

//\//\//

Don walked into Lizzie's – well, unofficially their – bedroom, bare naked and cradling a crying Sammy against his chest. It was the middle of the night and Sammy was needing fed. He shushed and cooed at the baby as he climbed into bed, quickly and carefully handing the baby over to Liz. He watched, mesmerized as the mother cradled her son and helped him latch on. It seemed as though they had just fallen asleep after a fantastic round of god-we-could-have-died-today sex – a category which occurred rather frequently for them, to be honest. Don was dead tired but he refused to fall asleep. Not when he had perfection right in front of him.

"God you're beautiful." He murmured before his brain could catch up to what he was saying. When it did, he felt his cheeks heat up and he quickly covered his discomfiture by crawling under the covers and settling back into the bed.

Lizzie merely let out a gorgeous tinkle of a laugh and smiled down at Don, watching his embarrassment recede quickly. She could see the clear love and adoration on his face as his eyes danced over the sight of her and Sammy in this intimate moment. And she just knew.

"I think you should adopt Sammy."
Chapter End Notes

I own nothing. Reviews fuel me.
Chapter 43

Don stared back at Lizzie, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open in wonder. “Are you serious?” He whispered, as if afraid that if he spoke too loud, this moment would disappear in smoke.

Lizzie smiled sweetly. “Yea.” She said just as softly. “You’re amazing with him, Don. You love him, and he loves you.” Lizzie shuffled her son in her arms so that he was better supported with just one hand before bringing the other up to run her fingers through Don’s sleep addled hair lingeringly. “I love you. And I could not imagine a better father for Sammy.” She murmured.

Don’s cheeks felt like they were going to fall off as he sat up quickly and leaned over Lizzie. Caressing her cheek, his thumb soothing over her cheek bone, Don leaned forward ever so slightly and brought his lips to hers sweetly. Aware of a still nursing Sammy between them, Don didn’t allow the kiss to become heated though he wanted nothing more. Pulling away, he smiled at Lizzie, wiping a few stray tears off her cheeks. It wasn’t until he noticed hers, that he became aware that his own cheeks weren’t dry.

“You two are the best thing to ever happen to me.” He murmured gruffly.

Lizzie laughed softly. “Does that mean ‘yes?’”

Don scoffed good naturedly. “That means hand me our son, I want to hold him.”

Lizzie carefully stepped through the doorway of the rusted old tin can of a ship her dad had asked her to meet him on.

“Red?” She called out hesitantly, unsure of who all was there. Looking down at Sammy whose little head was swinging about, his eyes wide in curiosity, Lizzie pursed her lips. Okay, maybe bringing him hadn’t been such a good idea. Hefting him in her arms to draw her son higher up onto her hip, Lizzie stepped further in, calling out her dad’s name once more as she hesitantly walked down the stairs.

A door on the other side of the room slowly creaked open and Lizzie tilted her body so that Sammy faced away from any coming danger. However, she immediately relaxed as Dembe’s head stuck out around the opened door.

Her brother took one look at her, then down at Sammy and said nothing. His face a mask, Dembe opened the door wider. Lizzie quickly walked over, smiling at her brother though it wasn’t returned.

As she came around the door, Lizzie froze at the sight before her, her eyes widening in horror as she gasped.
Red spun around quickly at the sound of her entrance. “Lizzie! Why the hell would you bring him here? Dembe! Get him out of here! Now!” Red barked angrily, marching forward and removing Sammy from her numb grasp as her eyes refused to move from the far side of the room.

The door opened and closed behind her once more, presumably with Dembe removing Sam from the room.

“I cannot believe you brought him here, Lizzie.” Red hissed angrily. “What could have possibly possessed you?”

Lizzie’s gaze finally snapped from where she’d been staring and she met her dad’s steely gaze with one of her own. “You said to meet you on a boat. He loves the seagulls. And it’s been a couple days since you’ve seen him.” She said waspishly. “You could have warned me that this was the scene I was walking into.” Her voice raised as she brought up a hand to point to the far side of the room.

There, in front of her, was Gina Zanetakos, her foot attached to a long heavy chain as she stared silently back at Lizzie from where she sat upon a dirty, threadbare mattress. She’d clearly seen better days. The dirt on the woman could not hide the various bruises and cuts on her body.

“What the hell is this?” Lizzie hissed. “I can’t believe you! You’re torturing now? Is that a thing you do?”

“You know what I am, Lizzie! Of course it’s what I do!” Red shouted bitterly. “And we’ve gotten valuable information about Berlin from her – his weapons supplier and his location being a couple of them.”

“I can’t believe you.” Lizzie scoffed disgustedly. “And you have the audacity to yell at me for bringing Sammy here while you’re torturing a woman in the belly of a rusted old tin can!”

“Not that I don’t love the soap op – “

“Shut up!” Both Red and Lizzie’s heads snapped towards Gina as they yelled for her to be quiet at the same time. The woman merely rolled her eyes and rested her back against the wall of the ship.

“Why the hell did you ask me to come here? I thought she was in prison.” Lizzie asked her dad bitingly. “And for that matter, how the hell does she supposedly know so much about Berlin and his operation? I thought that was Tom’s deal.”

“Because I need a favor.” Red paused, shifting on his feet awkwardly. “And well, mostly because who – what she is. She’s a spy, Lizzie.” He muttered gruffly, looking away in discomfort.

Picking up on her dad’s mood, Lizzie shifted on her feet. “You said ‘mostly.’ How else did she get the information?”

The tic under Red’s left eye began to twitch and he brought his gaze back to his daughter’s face, staring at her steadily, but refusing to speak.

“Pillow talk.” The snide voice came from the far side of the room.

Lizzie froze, her eyes widening as realization set in. “You have got to be fucking kidding me.” Lizzie uttered disbelievingly. So her dead spy of a husband had been cheating on her. If that whole situation weren’t messed up enough, let’s add a god damn cherry on top.

Lizzie looked over at Gina coldly. “Now I wish we could kill him again.” She muttered as Gina
stared back at her stoically through her one good eye.

Red cleared his throat, forcing Lizzie’s attention back to him.

“Now about that favor…”

Red and Berlin sat at a small table in an old storm cellar. Zoe sat beside Red, away from the table – away from her father. Berlin shifted in the rickety wooden chair as Red stared steadily at him, his own eyes shifting back and forth between Zoë and Red. Each time his eyes fell upon his daughter, he looked as if he were seeing a ghost, as if any moment now she may blow away with the wind.

“Your daughter told me your name is Milosz Kirchhoff.” Red paused, pursing his lips before he continued. “All these years, Mr. Kirchhoff, you’ve believed with the blackest of hearts that I murdered your daughter. And yet here she is. The story was wrong, Milosz. Please enlighten me. What were you told and who did the telling?”

Berlin sat quietly for a moment before clearing his throat. “It was in ’91. The Soviet Union was falling apart. A small group of us. Members of the Politburo, the military, KGB, Stasi. Had a plan to push back the progressives, to stem the tide. We were meeting and discussing strategy when a bomb.”


Berlin nodded his head. “Fifteen died. And with them, our resistance. Rumors began that the Americans were involved. One name emerged. Yours. You came after my daughter. You exposed her as a dissident. She went to jail. After that, my loyalty was questioned. I was exiled to the Gulag, where, one by one, her bones were sent to me.” As he said this, Berlin’s broken gaze fell upon Zoë once more.

Red looked over at Zoë. “You fled. You must have had help. Who?”

Zoë paused and licked her lips. “There was a man. He said he could protect me from.” She looked over at her father, her eyes hard. “From you.”

“What was his name?” Red asked softly.

Zoë shrugged her shoulders. “I never met him. I don’t know. His people. They called him ‘The Decembrist.’ Please. That’s all I know.” Zoë shifted in her seat, lifting her legs hesitantly as if wishing to stand but afraid of the reaction this would illicit. She appeared to want to say something but was battling an inner war to gain courage.

Zoë’s back stiffened and she sat up straight. It seemed as though she’d won. She met her father’s gaze. “You killed my friends. You destroyed my life once. Isn’t that enough?”

Red almost pitied the man as he visibly winced at his daughter’s verbal lashing. “At some point, I may call, ask for your assistance.”

Berlin seemed to gather himself before turning towards Red. “About what?” He asked gruffly.

Red stood up, palming his fedora. “The Decembrist.”
Lizzie lay with her head resting on Don’s bare chest, her arm slung over his torso as his hand was in her hair, sweeping the sweaty strands from her forehead.

“So are we still taking Sammy to feed the ducks?” Don asked, his voice gruff with the after affects of lazy morning sex.

“Mmm yep.” Lizzie murmured, nuzzling into his chest further as she shifted to get comfy.

Don chuckled at this, tightening his arm around her. “We can’t do that from bed, you know.” He teased with a small smile.

“Mmm shhh.” Lizzie snuffled. “Sleep first.”

Don laughed, shaking his head. Before he could tease her further, however, her phone rang. Both of them groaned, knowing immediately who it was.

Grumpily turning over to grab her phone off the bedside table, Lizzie grumbled under her breath. “He promised. The asshole promised. One day. We asked for one day off.”

Pressing the call button, Lizzie put the phone to her ear. “Yea?” She barked.

Lizzie and Red stood in the hallway of a dilapidated office building.

“You’re working with Berlin?” Lizzie yelled angrily. Though she wasn’t yelling so much because she was angry, but rather to be heard over the blaring sound of heavy metal music coming from behind the door they stood in front of.

“I need to talk to you about a bombing in the Soviet Union Kursk, 1991.” Red shouted just as loudly. Before he could continue though, the sound grew exponentially as an old man opened the door and closed it quickly behind him, though not without offering Lizzie a glimpse of a man slumped over, the only thing keeping him upright were the ropes that bound him to the chair.

Lizzie looked the old man up and down. She raised a brow at the white curly hair, oxygen mask, and portly belly. She never would have put him down as a masterful torturer but then again, her dad had a tendency to draw quirky people to his side like he had some sort of lopsided gravitational pull.

“Fella won’t talk!” Brimley shouted, louder than necessary with the door closed but that could be put to the large noise canceling headphones that were still placed over his ears.

“Keep pushing him.” Red yelled, enunciating clearly.

“I’m telling you! He’s more scared of talking than he is of dying!” Brimley argued.

Red huffed and walked towards the man. Lifting one of the ear pieces away from the man’s ear, he yelled. “Keep pushing!”

Brimley rolled his eyes. “I’m gonna need lunch! Tuna on Rye! Coleslaw if they have it!” He said in a huff before turning back to the room and going inside, the wheels of his oxygen tank squeaking behind him.

Liz looked over at her dad, her eyes wide in incredulity and disgust. “What the hell is going on?” This was the second time in as many days that she’s seen her dad be party to torture.
Red shrugged his shoulder, slamming his mask in into place to hide the pain of seeing his daughter’s reaction caused. He’d killed in front of her – for her. But he had always tried to shield her from the worst of who he was as much as possible. But the situation was dire and needs must. She needed to understand the gravity of the situation. She needed to see the lengths at which they needed to go.

“We’re shaking a few trees. There’s been a development. It seems Berlin is merely a pawn who’s been tragically manipulated.”

Lizzie’s brow furrowed and her righteous anger came to a grinding halt. “Manipulated by who?”

Red nodded his head towards the door where the music had stopped abruptly. The new silence was only disrupted by pained groans. “That’s what Brimley’s trying to ascertain.”

Lizzie shook her head, shaking off her natural curiosity. “Berlin killed Meera, he put Tom in my life, and every time you have a chance to stop him, you let him go.”

Red put his hands in his pants pockets. “Berlin will be held accountable for his actions after I acquire the name of the man who set him against me, a man they call The Decembrist.” Red promised with a sigh. “If you want to find the one ultimately responsible for gutting Harold Cooper and killing Meera Malik, I suggest you help me find him.”

\\\\

“The man we’re looking for is known as The Decembrist. His acts are said to have contributed to the end of communism in Eastern Europe.” Lizzie stated as she hopped up onto one of the tables in the war room.

“How is he connected to Berlin?” Samar questioned from where she stood next to Aram.

“He tried to assassinate him during a meeting in Kursk and faked his daughter’s death.”

“Berlin’s been hunting Reddington, hunting us, and now Reddington wants to help Berlin get revenge?” Ressler asked with a scoff.

“Kursk – that bombing. The men who were killed that day were leaders of the Soviet Old Guard.” Cooper intoned, looking off into the middle distance as he jogged his memory.

Ressler looked over at Cooper, his brow furrowed in consternation. “You really think we should be helping these two settle scores?”

Cooper shrugged his shoulders. “Our goal is to take down Berlin. If that means solving a terrorism case along the way, I’m fine with that.” He stated dismissively.

“I’ll contact the FSB.” Aram said softly, his fingers already clicking on his keys.

Cooper shook his head. “They won’t help.” Aram’s fingers froze. “The bombing was considered an act of patriotism. That’s why they never pursued it. Pull the Russian reports, the crime-lab data. I want our own analysis.”

\\\\

“They have the bomber’s DNA?” Cooper asked suspiciously.

Aram nodded. “Yes.” He answered quickly, bringing the digital files up onto the big screen. “The
Russian crime lab reported finding epithelial cells on the lip of a coffee tin found in the debris.”

Samar leaned against of the the tables. “How do you know it was the bomber’s DNA? Didn’t anyone else like coffee?”

“Uh, the reports I.D.’d the explosive device as Semtex. Same explosives a bomber used to down Pan Am 103 by hiding the explosives.”

“In a coffee tin.” Liz recalled. “Our guy copied that?”

Aram merely nodded.

“They have a name?” Cooper asked gruffly.

Aram shook his head with a wince. “Only a DNA profile, which was useless 20 years ago before they had a database to run it against. But today…” With the press of a button, a man’s picture filled the screen above them.

“You found The Decembrist.” Lizzie said with a small smirk.

“Kiryl Morozov. He was a low-level KGB operative.” Cooper murmured, folding his arms over his chest.

“And today?” Samar asked.

Cooper smiled grimly. “One of the most powerful men in Russia.”

/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\/ \\
/
\n
Red lay on his side on Lizzie’s living room floor, swinging Sophie the Giraffe out in front of him enticingly as his grandson watched with rapt attention, rocking back and forth on his hands and knees. The babe was days away from crawling, Red knew it.

“ba bi paa mm pa bit.” Sammy stated with all the seriousness of an 8 month old, his sentence structure a conglomeration of vowels, consonants, and slobber.

“Ah yes, of course. How remise of me. I apologize.” Red stated with equal gravity.

“Ba.” Sammy agreed.

Both of their heads swung to the left at the sound of Lizzie’s laugh, the speed at which little Sammy’s did so, knocking him off balance and causing him to fall to the side with a giggly gurgle.

Red sat up with a groan and smirked up at Lizzie and Don where they sat on the couch, Don’s arm around Lizzie’s shoulders. “Excuse us, Samuel and I were just discussing the virtue of sharing.” Red stated grandly as he sat the toy next to the baby who was currently joyously clutching his toes and rocking side to side on his back as he babbled.

“Do international criminals even know how to share?” Don asked with no real bite to his words.

Lizzie snorted and elbowed him in the ribs while Red smirked. “Why of course, Donald.” He answered jovially. “Intel with a dash of fear can go places that not even money can.”

Don’s only reply was a raised brow.

“So…” Lizzie said, deciding a quick subject change was in order. “I guess you’re going to Russia
“No.” Red stated stonily.

“You’re not going?” Don asked.

“Yes, I’m going.” Red said to Don. “No, you’re not going Lizzie.”

“Dad – “

“One – I’m going with Berlin. No way in hell are you getting near that man. Two – you know damn well you’re not stepping foot in Russia so get the idea out of your pretty little head.”

Don looked between Red and Lizzie in disbelief. He’d never heard Red speak so harshly to Lizzie before. “I feel like I’m missing something.” He murmured.

Lizzie leaning against Don’s side. “Russia is a touchy subject. I know it has something to do with my past, but Dad absolutely refuses to say what or how.” She stated huffily.

“It’s for your safety, Lizzie. You know that. So drop it.”

Quite used to this, Lizzie rolled her eyes but nodded reluctantly.

“Kiryl Morozov is one of Putin’s most trusted advisers.” Reven Wright stated brazenly. “The man runs the finance ministry.” The Deputy Attorney shook her head as she gazed at Cooper.

Cooper leaned against his desk. “And we have reason to believe he’s responsible for the 1991 bombing in Kursk that left –“

“Twelve people dead.” Wright cut in. “The FBI investigates crimes that happen in America or against Americans.”

“Reddington won’t give us Berlin until we give him Morozov. At the very least, we should go there and question the man.” Lizzie stated from where she was situated in the corner of Cooper’s office.

Wright raised a brow at the audacious agent. “I’m not sending you to Moscow to interrogate a high-ranking Russian official about an act of terror he may or may not have committed.”

“If Reddington gets to Morozov first. God knows –“

“Harold, that’s an order.” Wright spoke over Cooper once again before exiting the office, slamming the door behind her.

Lizzie turned from the door, swinging her arm out behind her towards the door. “That's it? You're just gonna stand down on this?”

Cooper shrugged his shoulders, his eyebrows reaching towards his hair line. “You heard her. My hands are tied. But Reddington has anonymous sources. I'm sure he'll get that name somehow. Won't he, Agent Keen?”

Lizzie resisted the urge to smirk. Instead, she simply nodded her head. “Yes, sir. I'm sure he will.”
Red picked up his phone, not even deigning to look down at the caller ID as he already knew who it would be. “Tell me you have a name.”

Lizzie jumped down the last few steps, making her way down to her office from Cooper’s. “I do, but this can’t come back on the task force. Are we clear?”

Red rolled his eyes though the effect was lost on Lizzie as she couldn’t see him. “Yes, yes. Of course.”

Lizzie smiled, able to imagine his put-upon expression just from the tone of his voice. “The Decembrist’s real name is Kiryl Morozov.”

“Ah thank you, Sweetheart.” Red murmured gratefully. “It seems as though I’ll be making a trip. Give Sammy a kiss, please? Oh and tell him he’s not allowed to start crawling until I get back.”

“I got a name.” Red stated once the other line was picked up.

“So it’s done?” Berlin questioned gruffly.

“No.”

There was a pause. “What are you proposing?”

“A trip to Moscow.”

Red crossed his legs, sitting back in the plush leather seats of his jet. “Kiryl Morozov is paranoid and well-protected. He has no clear weakness for women or drink. However, like any politician, he does have an unending need to hide his ill-gotten gains. The diamonds. Which he buys and sells through your broker at Mercury City Tower in Moscow. There was a friendly and rather convenient diamond heist this morning. When Morozov learns the broker has been hit, he’ll insist on a meeting to assess his exposure. When he does, we’ll be there waiting.” Red stared coldly at the other man who didn’t seem to be listening as he stared out the window, watching the clouds.

“Milosz, focus.” Red barked.

Berlin’s head swung towards Red. “I’ve made Morozov millions, and he’s the one who set all this in motion?”

Red pursed his lips. He didn’t have the time for Berlin’s introspection. They had an assassination to plan. “Milosz, the meeting at Mercury Tower. When it happens, it’ll happen fast before the M.U.R. arrives.”

Berlin nodded. “My people will be ready.”

Red and Berlin stood outside where they knew the elevator would stop. The sound of rapid gunfire overtook the hallway and both men leisurely looked left and right, ensuring there was no unwanted attention. The elevator dinged.

The man with salt and pepper hair and a fine coat which was now soaked in the blood of his guards, looked at them, wild-eyed as the door opened to show both Berlin and Red with guns
aimed at him.

“Who are you?” The man asked in Russian.

Berlin sprang forward, jumping over the bodies of Morozov’s guards and grabbing the man by the lapels of his coat, digging the muzzle of his gun into the man’s cheek. “I am retribution!” He growled.

Behind him, Red rolled his eyes at Berlin’s theatrics. Honestly, the man had no flair.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Morozov stuttered.

“Kursk.” Berlin spat.

Morozov’s brow furrowed as he looked harder at Berlin. “Milosz?”

Berlin tightened his grip on the man’s lapel, shook Morozov and banged his head against the wall of the elevator. “The bombing, my daughter – all of it brings us here.”

“I did what I was told!” Morozov yelled. Berlin apparently didn’t like this answer as he dug the muzzle of his gun further into the man’s cheek. “Aah!”

“You’re not The Decembrist.” Red stated solemnly, finally deigning to speak.

Morozov shook his head. “It was the American. It was him.” Berlin dug the muzzle painfully into the side of the man’s head. “Aah! They gave the order!”

“What people?” Red barked.

“I can’t say. Aah!”

Red stepped closer. “Who is The Decembrist?”

“Fitch. His name is Alan Fitch.

With a pop, Red closed his eyes as blood splattered across his face.

/////\

Finished wiping off his face, Red carefully placed his kerchief into his pocket as the strode down the hallway of the Mercury City Tower. “Milos, this you cannot do.” Red said gravely.

“Give me one reason.” Berlin hissed.

“Because he’s mine.”

Berlin scoffed. “Yours? He gave the orders, discredited you, and you want to protect him?”

Red shook his head, his lips pursed and his eyes dark. “This is not for you to do.”

Berlin stopped abruptly and turned toward Red, drawing his face uncomfortably closer to Red’s. “But I will. Alan Fitch is dead.” Berlin stated before walking off.

Red sighed as he stood there, watching Berlin leave. Once the man was no longer in sight, Red turned towards Dembe. “Call The Florist.”

/////\
Fitch placed one of the white tulips Red had sent to him on the small table beside Red’s wingback before sitting down across from him. This was Fitch’s favorite club. Red personally hated these sorts of places. It was just a bunch of rich old men, sitting around drinking Scotch in silence. Rather dull in his opinion. Not the scotch, of course. The silence. Scotch and a good jazz record. Now that was a good way to unwind.

“A little early in the day, don’t you think, Ray?” Fitch questioned as Red placed his tumbler on the side table.

Red shrugged his shoulders. “I’m still on Moscow time. Just got back from calling on an old friend of yours, Kiryl Morozov.”

Fitch paused before sighing. “You met with the Russian finance minister? To what end?”

“To his end, as it turned out.” Red stated benignly, reaching forward to grasp the decanter. “Drink?”

\////////

“The finance minister of Russia is dead. If a single word.” Reven Wright fumed. “A whisper of this gets out, if anyone even suspects we sanctioned it – “

“I didn’t sanction anything.” Cooper cut in.

Wright slapped her hand against Cooper’s desk. “Damn it, Harold! Your team discovers Morozov was behind the Kursk bombing, and 18 hours later, he’s dead? Reddington is behind this!”

Lizzie stepped forward. “Reddington called an hour ago. He believes Alan Fitch’s life is in danger.”

Wright looked at Lizzie, her lips thinned. “Did Reddington bother to tell you why Berlin is suddenly interested in killing Alan Fitch?”

Lizzie shifted on her feet under the other woman’s gaze. “He believes he’s the one who orchestrated the Kursk bombing.”

Wright looked over at Cooper, her eyes wide in incredulous shock. “Are you accusing the Assistant Director of National Intelligence of being a terrorist?”

“We need to bring him in.”

Wright shook her head tiredly. “Alan Fitch is not your concern. I’ll contact the Secretary of Homeland Security and have the situation handled.”

\////////

Lizzie bit her lip, hesitating. Wright had just left Cooper office and Lizzie knew she should leave as well but she couldn’t.

“Agent Scott?”

Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair. “Sir, I feel you should know – “ Lizzie cleared her throat awkwardly. “Fitch isn’t just the National Intelligence AD.” She murmured.

“Oh?”
“He’s also a part of the group that… we discussed.”

Cooper leaned back in his chair, his brow raised. “Understood. Thank you, Agent Scott.”

With a sharp nod, Lizzie turned on her heel and left.

Ray, will you listen?”

“We had an agreement.” Red stated darkly.

Fitch nodded tiredly. “Yes.”

“I don’t go after you, you don’t come after me.”

“I’m — “

“You ordered the bombing in Kursk.” Red cut over Fitch, his words slicing through the air. “Then you pinned it on me. You blamed me for killing his daughter. Some years ago, a copy of this photo was left on the corpse of an associate of mine.” Red whipped the small polaroid out of his suit jacket pocket. “Taking it as a warning, I traced the girl to a man they call ‘The Stewmaker.’ He told me a story about the girl. She was sent to him by a man she’d never met. She was in trouble, needed to disappear, so he took her photo, put it in a locket, and sent it to her father. All those years spent searching for the man who supposedly murdered his daughter, and it was you. You sat here in this very room and pretended you had no idea who Berlin was or why he was coming for me.” Red paused, his gaze flashing dangerously. “He was coming, Alan, because you sent him.”

Fitch shrugged, nonchalant. “I sent a lot of guys. You and I were not on the best of terms at the time. And since you’re playing the innocent victim in all this, let me remind you. You stole some very damaging information about us when you disappeared.”

“You violated our agreement.” Red’s voice was like gravel.

Fitch shook his head in denial. “No. I honored it. I got the others to hold off, but Milosz Kirchhoff, Berlin, whatever the hell name he’s using. He chewed through the leash. I couldn’t stop him.”

Red let out a bark of a laugh. “Well, now your dog is tracking a new scent. You. And there’s nothing I can do about that, Alan. I have my people looking for him, but Berlin has gone into the wind. And he’s coming for you.”

Fitch pursed his lips. “You have no allies in my group. Without me to protect you, they’ll take you down and they’ll let the chips fall where they may. So this is as much your problem as it is mine.”

The team stood around in the war room. Cooper had just gotten word that Fitch was already gone by the time his Homeland Security motorcade came to pick him up to take him to safety. “Contact the D.C. field office. Get me an update on any eyewitnesses, satellite footage.” Cooper ordered, looking directly at Aram. Turning on his heel, he turned to Samar. “Alan Fitch’s abduction must be on Mossad’s radar. Reach out to your people in Tel Aviv. And you talk to him.”

Turning towards Lizzie and Ressler, Cooper stood with his hands on his hips. “Get his ass in here. Now.”
Neither needed him to clarify whose ass he wanted. And both knew that he wasn’t going to come in.

\[
/\/\/\/
\]

Red sidled up to Lizzie as she walked down the street. “Elizabeth, we need to talk. Now.”

Lizzie squinted against the sun as she looked over at her dad. “What?”

“That favor, I need you to do it.”

Lizzie groaned. She’d been hoping he wouldn’t ask this of her. “Why can’t you do this again?”

“Because for a woman like her, prison is a much more vicious motivator than death. And that’s all I’ve got left to threaten her with. Prison, however, offers up a lot of people with connections. Connections which would want her and would go to much further depths than I to get what they want.”

Lizzie sighed, nodding her head. “Don’s gonna kill me.” She groaned.

“All that matters is finding Alan Fitch.”

\[
/\/\/\/
\]

Ressler looked in the side mirror of their SUV at the sight of Gina Zanetakos standing at a pay phone. “Liz, why would you do this? I mean, you’re risking everything.”

Lizzie glared at Don. “To find Berlin.”

“You’re supposedly a Federal agent and you’re harboring a fugitive, worse than that, you’re keeping her captive.” He hissed.

“First of all, my dad is holding her captive. I didn’t know about this until two days ago. Secondly, we’re looking for Fitch right now, and we’re gonna find him because of this.”

“Whether he leads us to Fitch or not, I got to take her in.” Lizzie shook her head at Ressler. “Are you hearing me? You had to know when you told me that this is where it was gonna go.”

Lizzie’s gaze flared hotly. “You don’t get it. Fitch is a part of the Cabal. He’s the only one holding back the rest of them from breaking the agreement with my dad. If he dies…” Lizzie cut herself off, clearing her throat as her eyes burned suspiciously.

Thankfully she was saved by a knock on her window. She quickly slid the glass down and looked out at Gina who was bent over, leaning against the side of the car.

“I got an address.” The stated lazily.

“What?”

“What difference does it make where? What? You’re gonna follow her lead to someplace he says Berlin is hiding?” Ressler shook his head. “No. There could be 50 guys waiting. That’s stupid.”

“Hey, shut up.” Gina spat.

Ressler glared at the fugitive. “I wasn’t asking you.”
Gina raised a brow. “You want Berlin or not?”

“There’s no way I’m gonna let you go in there. This is a setup, an ambush.” Ressler tried to reason with Liz.

Gina scoffed. “What are you, her boyfriend?”

Lizzie saw Ressler’s grip tighten on the steering wheel. “What address?” She questioned before Ressler could come up with a come back.

Gina handed her a scrap of paper before shoving off from the SUV, turning to walk away.

“Hey, pal. I’m coming for you.” Ressler yelled out. Gina lifted up a hand and flicked him off, not bothering to turn around as she walked off.

Ressler and Liz allowed the SWAT guys to clear out the warehouse before going in themselves.

“Clear it out. Let’s go. Clear out. Clear out.” A voice came over the radio. Lizzie and Ressler shared a terse look. That was never good.

The Captain of the bob squad came over to Ressler and Lizzie, his face grim. He was followed closely by a lieutenant in full IED gear, holding a tablet. “Looks like we’re dealing with a plastic explosive C4, approximately 2 kilos.” The Captain nodded at his officer to continue.

“Sir, the blasting cap’s wired to a receiver.” The Lieutenant lowered the tablet which showed x-ray images of the explosive device that was wrapped around Alan Fitch’s neck. “We found our detonator. This thing can be detonated remotely. We need to jam the frequencies in case this nut job tries to set it off and blow us to hell.”

“Then you’re gonna disarm it?” Ressler questioned.

The Captain pursed his lips. “We have a vehicle for controlled detonation. It should be big enough to accommodate Mr. Fitch and one of my men. Once he’s contained, then we can attempt to disassemble and disarm the device.”

“Well, how long is that thing gonna take to get here?”

The Captain shrugged his shoulders. “Half-hour minimum, unless you’ve got another R.F.-resistant armored box that fits two.”

Lizzie shared a look with Ressler. “Actually, I think it fits four.” She stated.

The team looked to the screens, watching Alan Fitch be carefully escorted into the Box by the bomb squad techs from the safety of the war room.

Once the blaring alarms had shut off, signaling that the Box was closed, the Captain spoke up. “We managed to gain access to the internals, trying to circumvent the keypad. Here’s what we got so far.” The Captain pulled out another tablet. “The Semtex runs along the circumference of the collar, as you can see. Encased within that, approximately 14 inches of solid core wire connected to a microprocessor which, among other things, creates a closed circuit.”

“So if you cut the collar off, you interrupt the circuit and bang?” Aram questioned hesitantly and
the Captain quickly nodded in agreement.

“Then how do we disable it?” Cooper asked.

The Captain swallowed. “Cautiously. We need to chip through the Semtex to see exactly what’s underneath, make sure there aren’t any redundant circuits or backups.”

“And you can do that without triggering that thing?”

The Captain shrugged helplessly. “We’ll find out, won’t we?”

Lizzie groaned, rubbing the back of her neck tiredly as she and Ressler walked down the hall to their office. “Once this is all over, I’m sleeping for a month.” She groaned.

When she didn’t hear a reply, Lizzie opened her eyes and stopped abruptly, her cheeks flaming at the sight of Reven Wright blocking their path.

“I understand you’re responsible for finding Fitch.” Wright paused. “About the source –“

“Yes.” Lizzie cut in.

“Does he have information about Berlin?”

Lizzie nodded slowly. “Yes, we believe he does.” She said, deciding to stick with the pronoun Wright had decided upon.

Wright must have noticed her hesitation as her eyes raised slightly in indignation. “I don’t care if your source is confidential or what promises you’ve made him. I want him here, I want him interrogated, and I want his name.”

Lizzie’s mouth works for a moment but no sound came out. Beside her, Ressler scoffed.

“You must be kidding.”

Wright looked to Ressler, a single brow raised as she stood with her hip jutted out sassily. “Do I sound like I’m kidding?”

Ressler barked out a laugh. “It’s Reddington. Her source is Reddington.” He states before walking away, continuing his journey towards their office. With a polite nod of her head in Wright’s direction, Lizzie scurried after him.

Closing the door behind her, Lizzie grasped Don’s arm and turned him to face her.

“You are my favorite person right now.” She murmured, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Thank you.” She said softly just before her lips touched his.

She knew how hard it was for Don to do that, to lie to a Deputy Attorney of the United States for her. She understood now that he was willing to do it for her. That didn’t mean it was easy.

“Mmm you gonna show me how grateful you are tonight?” Don murmured and Lizzie could feel his smirk against her lips as he pressed another light kiss, his hands tightening around her waist.

“I might.”
Red quickly opened the door to the passenger side of the car and sat down, ignoring Zoë’s startled intake of breath.

“Please excuse my intrusion. I’m curious. Your father I assume he’s been trying to reach you…” Zoë’s only answer was a hesitant nod of the head. “Has he called?” Zoë’s lips tightened and her eyes shifted. That was all the answer he needed. “…I thought as much.”

Red entered the small restaurant and grabbed a chair, sidling up to the table where Berlin was awkwardly trying to coax his estranged daughter into eating something. As he sat down in the chair, smiling benignly at the two, Berlin reared back, surprised at his sudden appearance.

“Hello, Milosz.” Red greeted. Turning to Zoë, Red smiled softly. “Thank you, my dear.” He set a manila envelope on the table in front of her. “Passports, tickets, – and my eternal gratitude.” Red saw Berlin’s devastated face as understanding dawned on him. His daughter had sold him out. However, as Zoë quickly exited, Berlin quickly made his expression neutral once more.

“The bomb. I need to know how to stop the bomb.”

“I don’t know.” Berlin answered quietly.

Red unholstered his gun and aimed at Berlin’s chest. “That’s the wrong answer.”

Berlin chuckled, shaking his head. “I’m telling you I don’t –“

Red raised the gun to Berlin’s cheek. “Think harder.” He ordered gruffly.

Lizzie, Ressler, and Cooper watched the bomb tech work in the Box with Fitch sitting absolutely still.

“What’s your name, son?” They heard Fitch’s voice over the speaker.

“What?”

“Your name. What– what is it?”

The tech seemed to pause. “Sir, I need you to be as still as possible. Any movement, the vibrations of your voice…”

“Do you have a wife, kids? That’s what makes it the hardest. A wife and kids. I’ve been in the intelligence field a long time now. On my orders, 763 men and women have died in service to their country. And there wasn’t a grieving wife or mother or husband I didn’t either call or visit personally. Thank them for their sacrifice. That’s what makes it the hardest. The families… You can’t disarm it, can you?”

The tech swallowed so loudly, the microphones could faintly pick it up. “Sir, I asked you to be as still as possible.”

Fitch sighed. “That’s more than enough. I’m not gonna make it 764. What’s your name?”

“Mike. My name’s Mike.”
“Go home, Mike. You’ve done everything you can.”

Once the alarms had stopped blaring and Fitch was once more sealed in the Box – alone, he looked up at one of the security cameras.

“Harold, I know you’re listening. Tell Ray I need to see him.”

“What a long, strange trip it’s been, Alan.” Red said gravely as he walked up towards the Box, the lights behind him turning off and the room around them plunging into darkness except for the single overhead light in the box. All security feeds within their vicinity had been shut down. No one was to be privy to this conversation but the two men.

Fitch licked his lips. “Listen to me, Ray. I don’t know how much time we have, so you need to pay attention. I’ve been able to hold everyone off, convince them that it’s in their best interests to let you live. But people aren’t as scared as they once were. Some aren’t so sure you even have it.”

Fitch paused. “Do you have it, Ray? Do you have the Fulcrum? They’re gonna demand proof.”

Lizzie came out of the darkness, shocking both her dad and Fitch. “He has it.” She stated solemnly.

Red looked pained as he stared at his daughter. He slowly turned back towards Fitch. “I can’t stop this thing, Alan. I tried. I can’t.”

Fitch nodded sharply as if he’d expected that, been preparing for it. “My death will trigger a series of events. The moderates are already outnumbered. The closer we get to 2017, the more radicalized they’ll become. Talk to Mitchum and Hobbs. They might be persuaded. Jasper sides with the Chinese.”

Red sighed and Lizzie shifted on her feet, trying to piece what little she knew with the new information. It wasn’t even enough to form a shadow let alone a full picture.

“All right.” Red said hoarsely.

“Listen to me, Ray. This is critical. I have a safe. Get to it. The combination 8-30-44. Remember that. Say it back.”

“8-30-44” Red repeated softly.

Fitch smiled sadly. “Margaret’s birthday.”

“You’ve had a wonderful life together, Alan… The safe…” Red encouraged softly.

Fitch shook his head, his expression clearing as he shook himself out of his day dreams. “The safe. It’s in St. Petersburg in the wall on the second floor of – “

Both Lizzie and Red jumped as an explosion rocked the room. Lizzie clenched her eyes shut against the horrific scene – the blood, sinew, bones, and brain matter splashed across the glass door of the Box like a macabre canvas.

“We’re going to need to begin preparations.” Red said gravely.

Lizzie merely nodded, refusing to open her eyes as her nightmare became reality.
Lizzie leaned her head against the cool glass as the street lamps flashed by as Don drove them home.

“Hey,” Don squeezed her hand with his where they rested on the center console. “You alright?” He asked worriedly.

Lizzie let out a small wet laugh. “No Don. No I’m not alright.”

“What’s going on?” He questioned hesitantly.

Lizzie turned her head to look at him. “The only person stopping an all out war between my family and the Cabal just died, Don.” She whispered gravely.

Don brought her hand up to his lips and kissed her fingers softly. “Our family.” He corrected gently.

Lizzie met his gaze and smiled sadly, her eyes deadened. “I am absolutely petrified about what’s going to happen to our family.”

\///\\

“Untie him.” Red ordered his men as he walked towards where Berlin was currently tied to a chair. He sat in the chair across from the man, a small table between them. He waited until Berlin was rubbing the ache out of his wrists before grasping the large bottle of vodka from the table and filling two glasses.

“Ah. Thank you.” Berlin murmured, taking the proffered glass.

Red nodded his head solemnly and raised his glass towards the other man. “Na zdorov’e.”

“Na zdorov’e.” They both tilted their heads back and downed the shot.

Red kept the shots coming. Pretending to drink his own as Berlin downed each shot, one after the other.

“… I remember the parades from when I was a young boy, standing by my father, seeing those trucks that went by with the rockets and cannons. Beautiful.” Berlin murmured drunkenly and chuckled softly. “And all those men marching as one, saluting at me as one.” Berlin grinned as he pantomimed a salute. “Our soldiers, our nation. Yuri Gargarin was the first man in space.”

Both men chuckled at this.

Berlin sighed, shaking his head in wonder as he gazed off into his memories. “We were so proud.”

Red poured the final draft of vodka into Berlin’s glass. The man hesitated before downing the shot, then setting the glass down onto the table loudly. Both men stared at each other – Red’s gaze hard as he drew his pistol and Berlin’s gaze was tired, resigned.

Red fired four bullets into Berlin’s chest.

\///\\

Lizzie leaned into her father and he was quick to lean back just enough to allow him to wrap his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer. They sat quietly on her couch while Don gave Sammy a bath, giving them some privacy.
“Lizzie – “ Red started softly as if unwilling to break the silence. “What you said to Fitch – “

“Don’t worry about it, Dad. I was bluffing.”

Red slowly shook his head. “No. Lizzie, there’s no reason to bluff to a dead man. Sweetheart – “


Red froze, his body seeming to stiffen. He remained rigid for several moments before he slowly seemed to thaw muscle by muscle, his body relaxed. “Okay.” He murmured, kissing the top of her head. “I trust you.”
Hey guys! So sorry I didn't post last weekend. I was moving into my new apartment so life got a bit out of control.

P.S. I had to put a bit of Ressler's and even a bit of Cooper POV in here for pacing and plotting purposes.

We are just now getting word of a story developing out of Hong Kong. Sources say authorities there have apprehended legendary criminal Raymond Reddington. He’s been on the FBI's Most Wanted list longer than any other fugitive, but tonight, sources are confirming Reddington was arrested in Hong Kong just hours ago. Reddington was once a rising star at the Pentagon. Sources say he was being groomed for admiral when, on Christmas Eve, 1990, while on his way home to visit his wife and daughter, Reddington vanished.

Four years later, Reddington resurfaced and was charged with treason in absentia for selling top-secret American intelligence to foreign states.

The guard took Red's elbow roughly and led him out of the helicopter and onto the landing pad. "From this point forward, you don't exist." He stated meancingly.

Red chuckled as he looked around him, out at the open sea. "Oh, that's a load off."

The guard quirked an eyebrow sardonically before the world went black as the man cast a hood over Red's head.

Just hours ago, the US State Department confirmed Reddington has been remanded into US custody, but officials will not comment on his current location.

"Reddington's off the radar." Cooper's gruff voice stated solemnly, his gaze almost pitying as he looked at Lizzie.

Lizzie stood frozen as her heart raced. "What do you mean?"

Cooper shrugged helplessly. "We don't know where Reddington is. CIA's not saying."

Lizzie scowled as she brought her hands together, rubbing the scar on her right wrist with her thumb. "Why not? Reddington's our asset."

"Only 41 people in the US government know that. I've talked to all of them. Nobody knows where he is."

Lizzie felt his presence as Ressler slowly drew closer to her, wanting to be near her.
"He's been on the run for 25 years. His arrest was bound to happen." Samar stated flippantly.

Ressler shook his head. "No, Reddington moves too fluidly to get caught up in something as obvious as a public assassination in Hong Kong. No, he wanted this to happen."

Lizzie bit her lip. "What if he didn't?" She questioned hesitantly. Ressler looked over at her, the corners of his eyes softening.

"Why would Mr. Reddington want to get captured?" Aram chimed in.

There was a pause as everyone raced through scenarios in his head. "His arrest happened overseas." Samar thought aloud. "We have to assume he wanted proximity to something."

"Well, if he's grabbed, it's either by the CIA ground branch or JSOC." Ressler reasoned.

Lizzie's brow furrowed. "You think it's an intelligence apparatus that's holding him?"

That was never good. She knew how intel was gathered. The idea of her dad being tortured made her sick to her stomach. Lizzie knew in some distant part of her head that he must have been at some point, with the life he led. That didn't mean she wanted to think about it. And it sure as hell didn't mean she wanted to sit around and do nothing while she knew it was happening.

"Scrub our sources at Langley, and do it fast." Cooper ordered. "Once they drop him in whatever hole he's headed for he's not coming back."

\\\\

Red blinked heavily against the sudden light as his hood was removed. His eyes shifted, attempting to look behind him as a heavy metal door clanged shut on its rusty hinges. The chains holding his arms out to either side of him, spread eagle clanged as he turned to look at the man in front of him – another guard.

"202 555 0151" His voice was a low timber.

"You speak when you're spoken to."

"202 555 0151. Call the number. Ask for a houseman." Red raised a brow as the man walked away, heading back towards the door. "Call the number. $50,000 will be transferred into the account of your choice. $50,000." He saw the man hesitate, his hand stuttering near the door handle. "All I want is two minutes with your warden."

The guard looked back at him out of the corner of his eye before finally exiting the cell, the clang of the door closing, echoing ominously around the dank room.

\\\\

Ressler hustled across the war room. "Hey. Hey." He called, getting everyone's attention. "We got him." He announced as Cooper, Liz, and the rest of the team gathered around. "CIA analyst at Langley confirmed they're holding Reddington at an off-book lockdown called 'The Factory.'"


Aram's eyes shifted from Cooper, to Samar, then to Ressler. "That place is real?"

Lizzie looked around at everyone's shocked and solemn faces and her pulse began to rise. "The Factory? Wait, what's The Factory?"
Cooper sighed. "It's a level-10 detention facility specifically designed to process detainees who've been trained to withstand interrogation and torture. Assets are brought in, information is squeezed out – data, intel, anything that may be of value."

"This place is a slaughterhouse for spies." Aram said softly.

Cooper stared at Lizzie, his eyes conveying both his pity and worry – or her or for her dad, she wasn't sure. "They reduce them to ones and zeroes. What's left is a husk that either rots away behind bars or is executed outright."

Lizzie's eyes grew in horror as she shook her head disbelievingly. "We've got to get him out of there."

"You think the CIA's gonna let us talk to him, just walk right in there?" Ressler asked gently, sidling up next to her and he surreptitiously wrapped his pinky finger around hers under the table. "No."

"He's our asset." Lizzie reasoned, desperately hoping her voice didn't sound as shaky to everyone else as it did to her own ears.

"No, they're gonna keep him all to themselves." Samar stated baldly.

Cooper sighed as he shifted his cane from one hand to the other and scratched his head with the free hand. "If he went to this factory on purpose, I suspect it was to make contact with somebody he couldn't get to on the outside. Reddington gave up 25 years of freedom to see this guy. I want to know who he is and what intel he's got that's so damned important." He muttered before walking away, leaning heavily on his cane.

//\\

Red shifted on his feet as best he could with them shackled to the walls. He smiled benignly as the Warden was buzzed into his cell, another officer standing guard at the door. "Master Sergeant Desmond says you offered him a bribe. Care to explain?"

Red gazed at the Warden as if he were bored. "Within 12 hours, inmate Luther Todd Braxton will break out of his cell. When he does, he will steal a classified intelligence packet that contains secrets vital to your National Security. The means for his escape and his team are already in place."

Red listed off the facts.

The Warden snorted in disbelief. "This story feels like a desperate last gasp from a dying man."

Red smirked, shrugging his shoulders as best he could. "Could be. Regardless, if you don't move quickly, the prison will be overrun and the dozens of innocent men and women who operate this facility will be subdued and executed, beginning with you."

The Warden, noting the gravity of Red's tone, shifted on his feet. "Luther Braxton is in solitary."

Red raised a brow and shook his head. "Not for long."

//\\

Lizzie paced the interior of her and Ressler's shared office, her arms folded tightly around her chest as she counted her steps, only looking up from the floor for a moment when she heard the door open and close. When she saw it was just Don, she began pacing once more.
"Hey, hey, c'mon." Don murmured. Hurrying over to her, Don stepped in front of her and wrapped his arms around her tightly, drawing her to his chest. "It's gonna be alright, babe. I promise."

Lizzie let out a quaking sob that was too long in the making. "I can't lose him Don, I can't!" She cried, unfolding her arms between them and wrapping them around Don's lower torso.

Don kissed her forehead gently as he ran his fingers soothingly through her hair. "You're not going to. We're going to do everything we can – you know that."

Lizzie nodded weakly before laying her head on his shoulder, allowing him to comfort her. Her silence was meant to comfort him. She didn't have the strength to be so optimistic at the moment. So she stayed silent and allowed him to be optimistic for the both of them.

Everyone paused what they were doing as, one by one, they all noticed the female stranger walking out of the elevator. The thin blond woman in a well fitted pant suit was an unknown and the team immediately had their hackles raised.

"Agent Cooper, Kat Goodson." The woman introduced herself as she walked up to him. Cooper, the only one who seemed to recognize her, reluctantly shook the hand she had thrust in front of him. "As you know, the Director has brought me here to liaison with your task force."

"Of course. We've met – the correspondents' dinner."

Goodson smiled warmly. "Ah. You were the scotch – neat?" Cooper smiled wanly, impressed but too stressed to do much else. "Please, tell us what you know."

"I'm not at liberty to say." Cooper intoned.

Goodson raised a brow as if unused to people saying such a thing to her. She probably wasn't. "The clandestine service is aware of the arrangement your task force has with Reddington. It's why we're running point through your office."

"Well, then perhaps the Director should've notified me before sending Reddington to The Factory." Cooper rebuked.

"The section chief sent a cable from the warden." Everyone startled slightly at the sudden appearance of a tanned, middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair and wire rimmed glasses. This man was quite recognizable. He was the famous ghost who no one was supposed to know anything and therefore everyone in the intelligence world knew his face. This was the Director of the CIA. "Said that Raymond Reddington claims that a detainee, one Luther Braxton, poses a National Security threat, and we're hoping that you can tell us something about their connection."

Cooper raised both eyebrows, intrigued. "I don't know. Who's Luther Braxton?"

Lizzie taped a picture onto the evidence board of a man with buzzed white hair and a jaw that looked like he could use it to demolish a wall. "Braxton is a thief. Interpol's been hunting him for years. He plans his heists to occur in the midst of chaos. He is organized, meticulous, and he is bloody."

Aram cleared his throat. "He stole $282 million from Baghdad in the middle of Operation Shock and Awe, abducted a CIA asset out of Iran during the '09 election protests. Later, he sold his
secrets to Beijing."

"The CIA announced his death two months ago." Ressler stated, voicing his confusion.

Goodson shrugged her shoulders from where she stood against one of the work stations. "We say that about a lot of the inmates at The Factory. Truth is Braxton's being interrogated for secrets he stole from the Chinese, from the Iranians, us."

Ressler shook his head, his face pinched. "Well, my money's on the fact that these two have a history together. Reddington, Braxton – they're planning something."

Lizzie schooled her face into neutrality even though she wanted to beat Don upside the head and throw him on the couch for the night.

"Whatever it is, you're going to find out." Cooper stated.

Liz did a double take. "Oh, we don't have authorization." She said dumbly.

Goodson smiled thinly at her. "You do now. Get to Reddington. Find out what he's up to."

Ressler and Liz hustled down the hall from their office. Whipping her phone out of her pocket, Lizzie hit #2 on her speed dial.

"Hey, Dembe, I'm gonna need you and Ezra to do me a favor."

"You need us to watch Sam while you go in search of Raymond?"

Lizzie chuckled, unsure why she would be shocked that he knew, but she was. "Yes, jerk."

They both went silent and there was a pregnant pause.

"He will be fine, Elizabeth. You must trust him to know what he's doing." Dembe's deep timbre crackled over the line.

"I do. I know he knows what he's doing. But he can't predict what the people around him are gonna do all the time, Dembe." Liz sighed. "Eventually his luck's gonna run out."

Red raised his head, awoken from his sorry attempt for some rest by the sound of blaring sirens. He could no longer feel his arms, the constricted circulation created by his awkward position had caused even the tingly, pins-and-needles sensation to have dissipated what seems like hours ago.

Red watched as the Warden rushed into his cell and smiled darkly.

"Tell me what you know." The Warden demanded.

Red sighed, shaking his head pityingly. "I tried. It's too late. You've lost your facility."

The Warden advanced on Red menacingly, punching his index finger into Red's chest. "No, you tell me I'm gonna have an escape before it happens. Now you're getting evac'd out?"

Red's brow furrowed in confusion. "Why the hell am I getting evac'd out?"
The Warden snorted. "Orders from up top. Bureau's been cleared to send a team, incoming now."

Red's stomach dropped. No, She wouldn't. "Radio that chopper. Tell them to turn around." He was unable to keep some of the desperation from his voice and it caused the Warden pause.

"Why? What's happening here?"

One of the guards who'd been stationed in the hall came into Red's cell and walked over to the Warden. "We got a problem. ERF failed."

The tick under Red's eye began to twitch as he rolled his tongue. "Radio the chopper." He ordered.

"They're sending in the riot squad." The guard continued.

The Warden gave a frustrated huff before spinning on his heel and heading out of the cell. "Get him to the evac team!" He ordered.

"Radio the chopper!" Red shouted.

Ressler held his mic close to his mouth, gazing at an iPad in his lap as he tried to be heard over the sounds of the helicopter. "Inmate number 2532, Xavier Chavez. I know this name. He was a court-martialed special operator out of Fort Carson." Ressler shook his head as he went down the list of inmates. "We got Kun Phan, AKA 'Cambodian Carl.' Did 10 years in USP Florence for hacking US Missile Defense Agency."

"What are you thinking?" Lizzie questioned, recognizing when Ressler had something on his mind.

Ressler looked over at her where she sat next to him, his lips pursed. "I'm counting three, five, maybe more guys who've all been processed into this facility within the last three months. Got a munitions expert, special forces." Ressler scrolled through the list. "I'm counting eight guys here – Khalid Sankar, Yemeni medic; Jonah Rodriguez, ex-Marine; and Cyrus Choy– he's a Red Pole enforcer out of Taiwan."

Lizzie groaned in agitation as she caught onto where Ressler was heading with this. "He's got an entire team in place."

They hop out of the chopper the moment it landed on the oil rig-turned-prison and began running towards an entrance until they were barred by a guard.

"Got to turn you back! We're in a full-facility lockdown! We've had a breach! Detainee has taken –" The man went down the same moment they heard the shot. As more shots rained down, everyone took cover. Lizzie hid behind an air duct, losing sight of Ressler and Navabi.

"Aah! Aah!" Lizzie looked around desperately at the sound of Samar's cries.

"Easy!" Lizzie heard Ressler try to calm Navabi. She stood to a crouch, planning to go to them when she was stopped by unintelligible yelling. Ducking for cover once more, Lizzie listened to the clear sounds of Don and Samar being put into cuffs, Samar's cries of pain.

"Desmond to Deck Command, prisoner for transport, come back." The guard yelled into his radio.
as he escorted Red through the corridors.

"That $50,000 is still on the table, Desmond." Red stated as he awkwardly walked with his feet and hands shackled. "It's yours for the taking. All you got to do is help me to help you stay alive."

\\\\\\

Ressler turned his head to gaze at his fellow agent at the sound of her grunting. "Samar?" He questioned worriedly, ignoring the silently bleeding man between them for the time being. He was fairly certain he had been a guard at the prison, judging by his bloodied uniform.

"Ressler, I can't put any weight on my foot."

Sure enough, when Ressler looked down as best he could with a noose around his neck, he saw Samar's toes grazing the cement block – the only thing keeping her from having her neck snapped and her airways constricted. She was able to just barely keep her footing with her right foot, but she clearly couldn't keep any weight on the foot that had been shot. And the blood was making the block slippery. He could hear her gasp for breath each time she tried to regain her footing.

"Horrible, isn't it– this room– this is where all the prisoners come to die. After you break their minds. They're led here like cattle for you to slaughter."

Ressler looked over at the criminal who had spoken – a middle aged middle eastern man with a small pot belly and combat boots. "When they put down your little rebellion, pal, you're gonna take my place up here, I swear." Ressler spat.

The man smirked at Ressler before kicking the man beside him in the legs, knocking his feet out from underneath him. The man immediately began choking, gasping as he wretched and twitched, his legs trying to find purchase but unable to feel the block as he swung. The criminal and his buddies began laughing at the man's plight.

"Hey! Get on your feet!" Ressler shouted, balancing on one foot and swinging his other out at the man, attempting to guide his legs. "Get your feet! Get on your feet!" He ordered. It was a safe bet that a guard at this prison was military. "Get on your feet! Stay! Get on your feet!"

The laughter continued even after the man finally got to his feet – coughing and wheezing.

\\\\\\

Lizzie stretched her head around the corner, attempting to see around it before proceeding when she felt arms come around her shoulders from behind. Lizzie gasped as the person spun her to face them.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Lizzie immediately recognized Red's harsh whisper.

"I came to help get you out." She hissed indignantly, her heart still racing.

"You really should not have come here, Lizzie." Red stated, his eyes almost sad.

"What? Why?"

"Luther Braxton is after the Fulcrum, Lizzie." Red said quietly, solemnly.

Lizzie froze, her eyes widening as the scope of the problem finally began to unfold. "So… what? Is he trying to break out to try and go find it?"
Red huffed out a dark laugh. "He doesn't need to."

Lizzie rolled her eyes, annoyed when it was clear he wasn't going to continue. "I'm gonna need a bit more than that, Dad." She whispered.

Red sighed. "This place isn't just a prison. It's an intelligence hub – a direct link to real-time intelligence servers and satellites. The information they obtain from their 'interrogations' can have a huge effect on the outcome of current missions at any given time."

Lizzie looked at her dad in growing horror. "They put a bunch of the world's worst criminals and terrorists inside of an intelligence hub?!"

Red shrugged his shoulders, a dispassionate frown on his face. "No one can ever say there's much intelligence in the intelligence business."

Lizzie sighed as she scratched her forehead. "Okay so… what does that mean for us?"

Red began to roll his tongue and looked away from her. "It means that if he gets his hands on that information, he will know about that night, Lizzie. He'll know that I may or may not have it. But more importantly – especially in light of recent things you've done everything but divulged to me – he'll know about you. And if he knows, then the Cabal will too."

Red tried to stare Lizzie into realizing the magnitude of the situation. Lizzie just stared right back, her countenance hardening with determination. "I can help you." She whispered passionately.

Red shook his head tiredly. "No, you need to leave."

"Don and Samar have been taken hostage."

Red closed his eyes heavily. "They shouldn't even be here. You never should've come here." He sounded so weary, Lizzie wanted to give him a big hug. But she knew now really wasn't the time.

"Why didn't you come to us?" Lizzie argued. "What aren't you telling me? Why don't you want me here?"

Red groaned. It was times like these when Red really hated his daughter's stubborn nature. "I'll get to Ressler and Samar as soon as I can, but you need to get back on that chopper." He took her by the elbow and tried to lead her in the direction she had just come.

Lizzie dug in her heels. "Not without Ressler and Samar or you." Red heaved a great sigh but released her arm. "Now, how are we gonna stop Braxton? He has an entire team."

Red smiled sardonically. "Well, sadly, there isn't a prison on Earth where I don't know a few guys."

"If Braxton wants to access the secrets they beat out of us, he's gonna need to get into the server, which is only accessible from the Nest." The man with the British accent explained as he bent over a blueprint of the facility.

"How about during a lockdown?" Red questioned.

Red's British associate shook his head. "This facility's like a submarine. It's compartmentalized. It can only be shut down by sections. The security protocols render the entire server room completely
"How the hell do you know that? I didn't know that." The guard, Desmond questioned harshly.

Red smiled benignly over at the guard. "Khan has broken out of seven prisons. This will be eight."

"This server room – where is it?" Lizzie spoke up, trying to prevent the conversation from getting derailed.

Khan pointed to a section of the blueprint. "Northwest quadrant, basement. We can't get you inside, but the German – he has an idea." He stated, looking over at an older man with a weathered face and white whiskers.

The German man merely scowled at them and nodded his head towards Lizzie. "Who is she? Who is this girl?" He asked brusquely, his thick accent coloring his words.

"She's with me." Red stated simply. "Your idea?"

The German frowned before poking his finger at another section of the blueprint. "The boiler room. It's located next to the server room. If you could get there, you could reprogram it to overload. The pressure would cause an explosion."

Lizzie looked down at where he pointed. "That would blow up the server room?"

The German shrugged, nonchalant. "If you're lucky, you'll take out the server room. If you're unlucky, the whole prison craters."

"You said, 'If you could get there.'" Red pointed out.

Khan nodded in answer rather than the German. "Yes, the only way into the boiler room undetected is through a single air duct that's less than 24 inches square."

"Looks like I'm the tunnel rat." Liz said on a sigh.

Red frowned. He didn't like this. He didn't like it at all. "All right. Khan will guide you to the boiler room. Gernert and I will be waiting for you to let us in, then you'll reprogram the system."

"Good." Gernert nodded.

"What about me? What's my job?" The man who'd been quietly sitting on the couch behind him, his tattooed face expressionless finally spoke up.

"You don't have a job. You're here because of what your cartel did to Felix Moralez and my people in Reynosa." Red spoke without turning to face the man. Once he'd finished talking however, he stole the guard's gun from his holster on a spin and shot the man on the couch. Turning back to the rest of the group, he smiled innocently. "Okay. Shall we go to work?"

Lizzie stared at her dad, a scowl on her face. "We are so discussing that later."

Red went to reply but was cut off by the ringing of the office phone. He looked around at the gathered group, their faces all showing their apprehension. Deciding to bite bullet, Red shrugged and picked up the phone.

"I'm sorry. The warden can't get to the phone right now. May I please take a message?" He paused for a long moment but received no reply. "Nothing? Not a 'Hello, how are you?' Say something, Luther." Red coaxed jovially.
"Reddington." A deep rumble came over the receiver.

"That's me."

"You're locked out, Red. I have complete control over this hellhole."

Red smiled easily though Braxton couldn't see it. "I'm confident you've got a plan for every imaginable scenario, but it's the scenarios you can't imagine that bite you in the ass, Luther, like me here."

"Do you think this is something that snuck up on me? After Belgrade?"


Braxton guffawed and Red imagined he was shaking his head in disdain. "It's funny— up until then, I was aimless, just an ordinary thief, but after Belgrade, I became known as the man who bested the great Ray Reddington."

Red's face lost all shadows of civility. "You didn't best me, Luther. You butchered and clawed your way into my pockets, and innocent people died in the process."

"You're such a snob, Red. Always considered yourself above the fray with your handmade suits and your fancy wine, your private jets. Do you even drive? You got everybody convinced you're so hard, Red, but I know better. You're soft."

Red was silent for a moment as he rolled his tongue. "You're not getting the Fulcrum."

"And how you gonna stop me, Red? Bore me to death with Beethoven? Put me to sleep quoting Nietzsche? Come on. We both know that in order to stop me, you got to have balls. You got to run the gauntlet. And after Belgrade, well that's just not gonna happen. So, tell me – how are you gonna stop me, Red?"

"A wise man can learn more from a foolish question than a fool can learn from a wise answer."

"Was that Nietzsche?"

"No. Bruce Lee." Red hung up the phone.

Ressler watched stonily as Luther Braxton brought his radio closer to his mouth.

"Okay, Harold, let's test your reflexes. This entire facility has been put into lockdown meaning that all existing codes that ran this prison have been invalidated."

"We're aware of that." Cooper's voice crackled over the line.
Braxton nodded decisively. "Good, then you must also be aware that one single code has been generated by the mainframe – a master code giving to the CIA and any rescue units all access. I want it."

"Understood. I can get my people working on that right away."

"Okay. Your reflexes, Harold– shabby. Mine, however– lightning quick." Braxton spun on his heel and shot a female guard who had been herded in here with a small group of prison employees. "You just cost an innocent woman her life, which means we'll just have to go get ourselves another one." Braxton walked over and stood directly in front of Samar.

"Let me set the scene for you, just like them old radio dramas your granny used to listen to. I'm standing in front of a tall, fit very attractive Persian girl by the name of Samar Navabi. Maybe you're familiar with her. Anyway, Miss Navabi has a noose around her neck– her very long, lovely neck, which is about to get a lot longer unless you give me the code. I'll give you 10 minutes."

He depressed the button and smiled up at Samar. Ressler wanted to kill him.

---

"Cooper." Cooper's voice came over the radio once more.

"The code." Braxton ordered.

"If I give it to you, what assurance do I have that no hostages will be harmed?"

"None. The code."

With a nod of Braxton's head, the Middle Eastern man pressed a button on the panel on the wall. A machine began to whir and Ressler looked around wildly. At the sound of choking, his eyes were drawn over to Samar where she was slowly being raised higher and higher, the noose around her neck tightening as she gasped and struggled.

"You hear that sound, Harold?" Braxton put the radio up close to Samar's face to ensure that the people on the other end could hear her death gasps. "That's the sound of Agent Navabi's neck being broken."

"Please. Stop." Samar gasped out.

"The code!"

"Dallas, Foxtrot, one, Charlie, three, seven, two. Now let– " Braxton shut off the radio and nodded once more at the Middle Eastern man. Samar was immediately lowered to her feet once more, coughing and wheezing as she forced air back into her lungs.

---

Ressler looked over at Samar as she began talking in Arabic – a short phrase but it seemed to do the trick as the man hesitated by the door before pressing a button. The man strung up between them immediately had slack in his rope and he fell to the ground with a pained groan.

---

"Hey, once you make that last turn, it's gonna be about 10 more feet." The British man's voice came softly over the radio as Lizzie crawled her way through the air ducts. "Gonna see a vent there
going down."

Lizzie groaned as she pulled herself forward. "Yeah, I think I see it. I'm here."

"Follow that, and you're in."

Lizzie coughed as she waited for the door to open, the mechanical whirring of the automated door moving at a snail's pace. The moment he was able, Red squeezed in and walked over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder where she was bent over, still hacking.

"You all right?" He questioned as the German walked over to the boiler and got to work.

Lizzie nodded, rising to her full height as she wiped her mouth on her sleeve. "Yeah."

"Are you sure?" He asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

Lizzie nodded once more. "Uh-huh."

Red nodded as they walked over to where the German stood, inspecting the boiler. "Have you ever heard of Bruno Ashmanskis? The most skilled cat burglar I've ever had the pleasure of working with." Red talked animatedly. "Bruno mostly did jobs on commission, but he always wanted to do something for himself, something special, so he got it into his head that he was gonna break into the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge to steal an imperial vase from the Qing Dynasty worth millions – the single biggest trophy of his career."

"What happened?" Lizzie asked, always enjoying her dad's stories.

Red shrugged his shoulders, his hands in his pockets and his shirt sleeves rolled to his elbows. "I never heard from him again. I'd always assumed he'd succeeded, that he was sipping some umbrella-clad cocktail on a beach in Tahiti, until five years later during a remodel of the Fitzwilliam, they removed a wall." Red looked over at Lizzie, smiling jovially. "There was poor Bruno – what was left of him, anyway – stuck inside a heating duct, still clutching that vase." He paused in thought. "I prefer to think of old Bruno on that beach in Tahiti."

Lizzie looked at her dad, her eyes half lidded with annoyance. She supposed she should just be happy he waited until after she got out of the air ducts to tell the tale.

"We have a problem." Gernert announced suddenly.

Red spun on his heel to face the German man. "Mm. What?"

"How much longer?" Khan questioned.

Red pursed his lips. "We've had a setback. Gernert is working on alternatives."

The aforementioned man shook his head. "I'm telling you– There are no other options. This model has redundant computerized safeguards. If I attempt to over-pressurize the boiler tank, those safeguards kick in automatically."

"There's nothing you can do to override it?" Lizzie asked.

Gernert let out a huff of air. "It would have to be done manually. That means someone standing
here, resetting those pressure-relief valves every 90 seconds, while someone else mans the
temperature controls until this pressure cooker hits 700 PSI, and that is not gonna be me." He
explained before turning on his heel and heading towards the door.

"You're not going anywhere." Red stated darkly.

Gernert snorted. "Yeah, I am. Because whoever stays here to do this manually is gonna be blown
into a million pieces."

Red drew the gun he'd taken from Desmond out of where he'd "holstered" it in the back waistband
of his pants. "Or just one." He stated, aiming at Gernert.

Lizzie stepped forward, her arm stretched out. "Wait. You shoot him, they'll hear. They'll be here
within 60 seconds – We can do this, you and I." Lizzie paused and looked over at Gernert. "After
the pressure reaches 700, how long do we have until it explodes?"

Gernert shook his head as he thought before shrugging. "Anywhere from 10 to 20 seconds, but
there's no way to know for sure. You're better off walking away now." He stated before following
his own advice and walked away.

The man with the British accent let out a hysterical burst of laughter. "Look, Red, you know that
after Delhi, I'd do anything for you, but the truth is, you'd be lucky to get off this rig, and whatever
your plan is, I'm not a part of it. I've helped you. I've done my piece. Way I see it, we're even for
Delhi."

Red gazed solemnly at the man before giving him a sharp nod. The man didn't hesitate to leave.

Lizzie walked up to her dad and placed her hand in his. "We can do this." She murmured.

\/
\/
\/
\/

Red cranked the lever and pulled away as a gust of hot steam came blowing out with a hiss. "One."
He murmured before going onto the next one. "Two." The air hissed once more. "Three." This
time, the hiss was accompanied by beeping.

Lizzie quickly flipped a switch on the control panel. "650 PSI. A few more, and the boiler blows."
She stated as she studied the meters. Tearing her gaze away, Lizzie looked over at her dad. "You
know I love you, right?"

Red's lips became white as he pursed them together. He blew out a loud breath from his nose and
looked away. "We're not doing this."

"Doing what?" Lizzie inquired with a small laugh riddled with tension.

"We're not doing the we're-about-to-die-emotional-outpouring thing. We're not about to die. I won't
allow that to happen. Do you understand me?

"Well maybe it's not a we're-about-to-die sort of thing, alright?" She asked, getting flustered.
"Maybe it's a we're-in-a-really-shit-situation-and-I've-realized-I-don't-say-this-enough sort of I love
you. You ass."

Red gave a bark of a laugh as he began going down the line once more, pulling levers and dodging
the hissing steam until the control panel beeped, at which point, Lizzie would hit the over ride
switch again.
"What's the number?"

"680," Lizzie murmured.

"You keep me from getting lost, Lizzie."

If he had spoken any lower, she wouldn't have been able to hear him. Even now, it took a moment for the words to form any coherent string in her head. "Lost how?" She asked hesitantly.

Red smiled sadly and looked away. "In Mexico, there are these fish that have colonized the freshwater caves along Sierra del Abra. They were lost. They found themselves living in complete darkness. But they didn't die. Instead, they thrived. They adapted. They lost their pigmentation, their sight, eventually even their eyes. With survival, they became hideous. I've rarely thought about what I once was." Red looked over at her. "But every time I come home from a deal or with new blood on my hands, I see you – a little sun burst. And I can imagine, just for a moment. I can imagine that I am regaining some pigment. That I can see again. And every time, you guide me out of the cage. Remind me who I am in your eyes." Red looked down at his feet. "You keep me from getting lost." He said gruffly before beginning to pull levers once more.

Lizzie stared at her father, wanting nothing more than to wrap him up in a big bear hug. Just as she was about to follow through, however, the panel began beeping. Though she flipped the switch, an alarm began to go off. It was about to blow.

A loud ping and a small rain of sparks let off near Red's head and he ducked quickly, pushing Lizzie to the side as a sudden barrage of gunfire followed their movements. Braxton's team must have found them.

"Get out of here!" Red yelled over the din, pushing Lizzie towards the exit as they hid behind some piping.

Everything went red.

\\\

Lizzie coughed, gasping in a breath as she sat up, wincing as her side twinged. Looking down at her legs, Lizzie sighed, moving a few bits of broken piping off of her. Lizzie then whipped her head back and forth, searching.

Her eyes finally alighted on the sight of her dad laying under a pile of sheet metal, unmoving. "Red?" She called. No response. "Dad!" Lizzie crawled over to him and leaned over him, trying to feel his breath on her cheek. There was nothing. "No! Breathe!" She cried, getting up onto her knees and starting chest compressions. "Oh, my God. Dad, breathe." She begged as tears began to leave clean tracks down her cheeks.

She sniffled, breathing heavily as she continued compressions. She paused, bending over in hopes of feeling his breath. Nothing. "Breathe, you son of a bitch!" She growled.

"Down here– the boiler room!" A distant voice cried, forcing Lizzie to pause. Thinking quickly, Lizzie covered her dad once more with the sheet metal, hiding him and sent a little prayer to whoever may be listening before standing up just as the wanna-be commandos walked up. Trying to keep their focus on her, Lizzie went on the offensive, punching the first guy in the face and landing a nice blow to the other guys stomach before they both converged on her, restraining her.

"Take her to Braxton." Thing 1 ordered.
"Paper-Dog, we are 10-zero minutes from primary target. Requesting authorization to arm and engage."

As the pilot's voice came across the speakers, Cooper turned to Goodson. "You can't let this happen."

Goodson raised a perfectly sculpted brow. "Don't put this on me. You gave up that code."

"You have three federal agents and at least 40 innocent hostages in that facility. Inmates included, over a hundred lives will be lost." Cooper tried to persuade her.

Goodson sighed, shaking her head. "I don't agree with this course of action, but I understand it. We're doing damage control because you couldn't make the tough call."

Cooper's lips thinned in anger. "We don't even know what Braxton's after. What the hell is so important in that database that someone wants to kill all those people on the chance that he might get it? If you think I'm just gonna roll with this, you're wrong."

Goodson snorted, rolling her eyes. "What are you gonna do? Go to the Post? The Times? This whole operation is deep black. It doesn't exist. Every trace will be incinerated the moment Reddington's a confirmed kill." She paused, allowing that to sink in. "You know what happens to whistle-blowers– kooks, paranoid freaks. You'll be a keynote speaker in their next woo-woo convention, and your people will be just as dead."

"Reddington, get up. You got to get up! Red!"

Red could hear shouting as if from a distance. Shaking his head, feeling woozy, he quickly came to, gasping and coughing as air forced its way into his lungs as if on its own volition. "Where is she? Where is she?" He spluttered.

Braxton raised a brow as Lizzie was escorted into the control room. "Who the hell are you?"

"The server's gone." Thing 1 stated. "She blew it up." He continued with a nod in her direction. "Carl is dead and so are the others."

Braxton frowned, glaring at Lizzie. Lizzie stared back, her shoulders square, a small smirk on her face. "Get Beck and Wolcott on it." He ordered his men.

"You don't understand." Thing 2 argued. "The prisoners are loose. And if they find out we have a chopper en route, we're gonna have a real problem. We need to go now."

Braxton paused a moment before bursting into action, his fist connecting with Lizzie's jaw, knocking her against some of the computer equipment. "Where's Reddington?"

Lizzie swallowed heavily. "He's dead."

"I count at least a dozen cells destroyed." Desmond grunted as he heaved a desk against the door, trying to form a barricade. "We've got inmates in the southeast quad."
Red's lips pouted in concentration as he loaded up a double barreled shotgun. "You seem like a decent guy, Desmond. You should do something else for a living."

Desmond shook his head, disbelieving. "I just told you the animals are loose. You can't get to the Nest without going through them. They're gonna kill you out there! What are you gonna do?"

Red cocked the gun, striding towards the door. "I'm gonna get her back."

Red kicked the door to the yard open, firing on an inmate who ran towards him.

"Hey! I'm talking to you! I'm gonna need that shotgun."

Red glanced at the man who stood upon a table yelling at him. Raising his gun, he fired, hitting the man square in the chest. He was a rather large man. It was a rather large chest. Hard to miss.

He continued walking, heading towards the North hall.

//\\\\

"It's over." Lizzie stated firmly. "The server's destroyed."

One of Braxton's men came jogging into the room. "Sir, we got reports of gunfire in the north hall. Now I can't raise anyone on the comms."

Braxton hissed, glaring at Lizzie. "Reddington." He murmured before looking back to his man. "Head him off. Get the chopper. Let Yousef handle the hostages."

//\\\\

"Paper-Dog, ETA two minutes. Making final approach to target."

Cooper stared at Goodson as Aram glanced from him to the screen which showed the radar image of the fighter jet heading towards the Factory.

//\\\\

Red could see through the window as Braxton forced Lizzie to kneel, aiming a gun at the back of her head. With renewed vigor, Red fired on any man in his way, his face a mask of cold stone. Just as he reached the Nest, the shotgun ran out of ammo. Throwing it away from him, he seamlessly drew his pistol, aiming rapid fire at the men surrounding Braxton and clipping Braxton himself in the shoulder. He watched as Lizzie threw herself to the ground as Braxton released his weapon, falling back against a control panel.

Red let out a small breath as Lizzie stood back up, aiming Braxton's own weapon at him.

"All this, Luther, and you don't even know what the hell you're looking for." He murmured as he walked into the room, his eyes glancing towards Lizzie in a quick body check. She looked alright. Except for a few scrapes. And a rather large bruise blossoming on her face.

Braxton was going to pay for that.

"I know what it's worth." Braxton stated, clutching his arm to his side in an effort to keep his shoulder still.

Red let out a guffaw, shaking his head. The man truly had no idea. "It's not what you think. It's not a golden ticket. It's a target on your back."
"I know all the stories, Red." Braxton replied with a sigh. "I know where it was and I know when it disappeared. I know about the house, the fire, the girl."

\\\\

Ressler looked over at Samar to see her eyes closed, her face placid. Accepting. As a gun cocked behind him, Ressler let out a small breath and closed his own eyes, an image popped into his mind's eye - of Lizzie laughing as she tickled Sammy on the couch. Little Sammy's joyful squeal.

\\\\

Aram spun in his chair to face Cooper. "Sir, I just got word. The missiles have been launched. Impact in 30 seconds."

Cooper closed his eyes against the onslaught of grief.

\\\\

Braxton seemed to freeze for a moment before looking over at Lizzie, his eyes widening. "No wonder you came for her." He looked to Red. "She was there that night, wasn't she? She's the one?"

Red's swallowed before his cool mask slammed into place. "Shoot him." He barked at Lizzie. "Shoot him!"

Lizzie cocked the weapon and paused, looking out the window as did both of the men at the sound of a high frequency whistle.

Then everything went red.

Chapter End Notes

I own nothing.
Hi guys, so in this chapter there is some talk of seizures (um… trigger warning?). The episode never explains what is actually happening to Lizzie while Dr. Orchard is with her but to me, it looks like lucid seizures …I have epilepsy so I promise it's an actual thing. There are all different kinds but basically it's where you're wide awake and well, lucid, but your body is doing something that you have no control over. You're just… watching it happen. It could be twitches, spasms, full contractions of your muscles. It could even be something as small as a twitch of the cheek. So again, I'm not completely sure that is what was happening to Liz but due to the rather brain altering affect the mentioned drugs had, I don't think it's too far off base.

Don groaned as he turned over onto his side, coughing. His ears were ringing and the world refused to come into focus. The sound of rattling chains and choked gasps entered his ears as if through a distant tunnel. He slowly turned his head towards the sound to see Samar still hung up, her body twitching as the lack of oxygen began to cause involuntary tremors.

The world suddenly sped past him, back into real-time and snapped back to reality as a surge of adrenaline coursed through him.

"Hang on, hang on!" He shouted as he jumped up and ran over to her. "You're not gonna die today. Hang on." Ressler took his Swiss army knife out of his jacket pocket and quickly cut off the zip ties around Samar's wrists. Her hands immediately flew up to her neck, grappling at the chains around her neck in an attempt to loosen them. Her gasps for air became a little clearer but he knew she wasn't out of the woods yet. She was lucky her neck hadn't snapped.

Ressler climbed onto the beam which was acting as a counter weight and keeping Samar in the air. Climbing closer, he quickly found the issue and cut the cable to the mechanism that the thugs had used to raise and lower their chain link nooses up and down. The moment the cable was cut, Samar crumpled to the ground, coughing and sputtering. Don jumped down from the beam and skidded over to her on his knees. Lifting her into his arms so she sat in his lap, he rubbed her back as she tried to breathe. "Okay, okay. Come here."

Her only response was a cough.

Ressler grunted as he helped her to her feet. He didn't know what the hell had hit them but he knew that they had to get off this rig. "Okay? All right. Let's get the hell out of here. Come on, come on." He encouraged as he tried to move forward, his arms tight around Samar's waist as she stumbled forward.

With a groan, Red heaved himself up off the floor with the aid of one of the center consoles of the control room. He looked around him, his heart in his throat as his eyes confirmed what he already knew. Lizzie and Braxton were gone. The bastard had taken her.
Red swung his head back and forth, assessing the carnage of the room – wires and steel beams hanging from the ceiling, small fires spattered across the room, sparks sporadically emitting from the computers. At the sight of a motionless man on the ground, Red staggered forward. He rummaged through the man's pockets and sighed as he took out a cell phone. Flipping it open, he smiled grimly when he found that it had plenty of battery life in it. Pocketing it, he looked around for anything else useful. At the sound of radio static, he lifted the man's body slightly and nodded. A radio. That could come in handy.

\\\\

Red spun on his heel at the sound of approaching footsteps. When Agents Ressler and Navabi rounded the corner and crossed the threshold of the room, Red let out a little sigh of relief.

"Reddington! Where's Liz?" Ressler questioned with a grunt, leading Samar over to an overturned chair. Quickly righting it, he helped her settle in.

"Braxton took her." Red stated darkly.

Don stared at him for a moment, swallowing thickly before nodding resolutely. Now was not the time to lose his shit. He knew that. Didn't make it easy though. "Are any of these comms working?" He questioned shakily.

Red swung his eyes towards the radio he had hanging amongst a sea of copper wiring, some of which was wrapped around its small antenna.

"That walkie has a range of a thousand yards at the most." Samar pointed out, her voice hoarse.

"Unassisted, yeah, but a dipole antenna array will boost the signal." Ressler reasoned.

Red raised an impressed brow before getting back to work among the wiring, attempting to boost the signal. "This rig is sinking. If we can't make contact, anyone here who doesn't burn is gonna drown."

Ressler nodded. "You said Braxton took Liz. Why?"

\\\\

Lizzie woke up, her head pounding along with the rhythmic beatings of the helicopter blades. Looking to her left, she saw a jacket with an ambulatory emblem on it. "Where am I? Where are Agents Ressler and Navabi? Did they make it?"

"Don't know. Don't care." Lizzie's eyes widened in horror at the sound of Braxton's voice. He was definitely not there to rescue her. "How does it feel to have something people are willing to die for locked up in that pretty little head of yours?"

So he thought the information was locked away in her head. That could be useful. Swinging her head towards him, she blinked owlishly. "I don't know anything." She stammered.

Braxton smiled grimly down at her. "We'll see."

\\\\

Lizzie's head was on a swivel as she was rolled through the halls of a hospital. They'd just landed on their Med Evac flight pad and taken an elevator down several floors.
"Look, I don't know who gave you clearance to land, but we're closed to trau –"

"He's got a g –" One of Braxton's thugs covered Lizzie's mouth just as Braxton pulled his gun on the Doctor who tried to barr their entry.

\/
/
/
/
/

Everyone's heads swung upwards at the distinct sound of helicopter blades.

Ressler looked over at Samar then over at Red, a grin on his face. "Cooper sent in the cavalry."

Within seconds, the radio crackled. " - We're on final approach. We need a head count on survivors."

Ressler ran over to the walkie and pressed the button to speak. "Helo Two. Helo Two. Emergency message, plus three."

Don spun around at the sound of a gun cocking to find the middle eastern asshole who took pleasure in watching the other agent hang in the air like a marionette had a gun trained on Reddington's chest. "You're not going anywhere." The asshole threatened.

They all flinched at the sound of a gun shot. As the thug fell to the floor, they looked to the door. Red grinned at the sight of the guard – Desmond.

"Let's go." The guard offered as he cocked his gun.

\/
/
/
/
/

She couldn't gasp. She couldn't breathe. She was drowning. She was going to die.

There was a sudden reprieve. The water stopped cascading over her face and the cloth was removed from over her face. As the board she was strapped to was raised so that she was no longer hanging by her feet and was now parallel to the floor, Lizzie immediately tilted her head to the side, coughing up water and gasping.

She continued to take in as many lungs full of air as she possibly could, knowing it was a limited commodity for her at the moment. As she slowly became aware of things beyond her dire need for oxygen, Lizzie heard the sound of heavy boots echoing across the tiled floor – a pool. She was in the bottom of an empty indoor pool.

"I'm hitting a wall." She recognized the voice of her interrogator.

"She'll talk."

"Oh, no. She's talking. Told me everything she remembered, which is nothing." *That's what you think, you piece of shit. I hope my Dad saves you for last.*

"You saying she wasn't there?"

Lizzie tried to keep quiet as she tested the straps around her arms. Unfortunately, they were thick leather straps buckled tightly around her wrists.

"I'm saying if she was there, she's repressed her memory – buried it so deep that I can't even get her to talk about it."

After a silent moment, Lizzie heard two sets of boots walking slowly down the stairs of the pool
before Braxton and her "interrogator" came into her line of vision. Braxton stared down at her for a moment before his hand darted out, smashing into her face. Lizzie's head whipped to the side with a crack. He had hit her in the same place he had at the prison. "The Fulcrum. Where is it?" He questioned.

Lizzie merely coughed, spitting out some more water, now tinged with the iron tang of blood.

Braxton let out a huff of breath of amusement out of his nose. "I envy you – your ability to block a horrible memory." He paused. "I needed help to do that. Lucky for me, the person who helped me forget is gonna help you remember."

\///\///

Braxton stood beside Liz with a pretty, professional looking woman. Lizzie tracked the conversation and the movements of the people around her with her one good eye – the other having swollen shut.

"The princess here has something in her head that I want. It's a memory. Now, you helped make all my memories go away. You made Khafji disappear. Boom!" Braxton gasped dramatically. "Just like a magic trick. I'm thinking, if you were able to bury one of my memories, then you can retrieve some of hers."

The dark skinned woman's hair swayed against her shoulders as she shook her head. "No. It's not that simple."

Braxton's pocket beeped and he quickly pulled it out of his pocket and pressed the button to accept a chat. He held the phone out to the woman and, though Lizzie couldn't get a view of it, she assumed it was a video call as the woman clutched at the phone, her eyes roaming over the screen desperately.

"Mom, they- they said they won't hurt me if you do what they say, so please, mom, plea-" The sound of the little boy's voice was abruptly cut off.

"Max!" The woman cried out as Braxton placed the phone back in his pocket. "Don't hurt him. Don't you hurt him." The woman begged.

Lizzie had to get their attention focused back on her. "Guys, there are people looking for me. If they find me, they'll find you."

Her interrogator suddenly inverted the board Lizzie lay on and covered her face with the wet towel once more. Within moments she was gasping, choking as he poured water over her mouth and nose.

\///\///

"Sebastian, brother. I didn't think you made it out." Braxton answered the phone.

"He didn't. I did." Red stated grimly from where he sat in an FBI vehicle, on the tarmac of an airport. They'd just been flown out by the rescue team and had made a pit stop in Juneau, Alaska before heading out once more. The side of Red's face itched with the drying blood but he couldn't spare it a thought.

Braxton laughed as realization dawned. "Oh, man. This is just like Belgrade, huh, boyo? Whatever you want, I get."
Red shook his head. "This is nothing like Belgrade."

"What was the name of that kid? You know, the one you had running point? I wish I could have been there when you opened that closet door and found him hanging by your necktie."

"His name was Henkel."

"Henkel! That's right. Kid was a talker."

"You're out of your depth, Luther. You don't know the people you're dealing with. You're a fine thief – meticulous and careful – but this is different. You're improvising, and you and I both know thinking on your feet is not your strong suit, Luther." Red watched from the SUV's window as Agents Navabi and Ressler were allowed to leave the ambulances where they'd been getting general first aid. Red had refused treatment. He had things to do. "You will make a mistake, and when you do, I will be there to indulge in the undeniable pleasure and sweet satisfaction of 'I told you so.'"

Braxton was quiet on the other line for a moment before speaking. "Well, you better hurry. 'Cause your girl, the princess, she's got the answers in her head that I'm looking for, and I found a way to get them out."

Red's eye twitched and he drew the phone away from his ear, staring at it in frustration as it beeped signaling that Braxton had hung up. The son of a bitch.

Red lifted his head at the sound of the car door opening and frowned grimly as Agent Navabi climbed into the car, a shock blanket around her shoulders.

"I spoke with Cooper. The Coast Guard pilots who transported us are being debriefed. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, you are presumed missing."

Red nodded decisively. "You need to look for any known associates of Braxton's with psychiatric medical training – neurologists, psychiatrists, pharmacologists –"

Samar shook her head, her eyes fluttering in confusion. "Wait. Slow down."

Red pursed his lips and looked out the window as Donald climbed into the front passenger seat. "A memory I had hoped she'd never have to remember." He murmured as the nameless agent in the driver's seat started the SUV.

Donald turned in his seat to look at Red as they drove away. "What's Braxton like? What…what do you think he's doing to Liz to get this memory from her?" He questioned quietly, hesitantly.

Red stared at Donald for a moment. "Donald, you don't need to – "

"Don't tell me what I need or don't need to know!" Ressler bit out. "That asshole has my girlfriend – the mother of my son!" Ressler panted angrily, closing his eyes. "I need to know what we'll be dealing with, how to help her."
"There's no way of knowing that until we find her, Donald." Red murmured.

"You know this guy, Red. What's he likely to do?"

Red sighed, looking out the window before glancing back at Donald. "I imagine he's already tortured her to get what he wants. She won't give him what he wants. She knows plenty but she won't give it to him."

"How do you know? Keen has never gone through any sort of interrogation training." Agent Navabi questioned.

Red pursed her lips. "Yes, she has."

The SUV was silent as the implications quickly dawned on the agents.

"You tortured your own daughter?" Donald asked, horrified.

Red's eyes hardened as he gazed at his daughter's partner. Before he could answer, however, Agent Navabi cut in.

"Wait – I'm sorry… daughter?!"

Donald winced and gave Red an apologetic look.

Red rolled his eyes, resting his head against the headrest behind him with a muted thump. "Well Agent Navabi, looks like we'll be bringing you up to speed on all the latest gossip once this is all over."

\\\\

Cooper looked up from his desk as Samar and Ressler walked into his office.

"Welcome back." He said with a gentle smile.

Both agents smiled back at him. Ressler opened his mouth to speak only to be interrupted as Aram came rushing into the room.

"Sir, sir, I think I found a doctor with a connection to Braxton." At Cooper's bemused expression, Aram finally looked around him, his eyes freezing as he took in Samar. "You're safe." He whispered as if to himself before springing towards her, wrapping Samar in a giant hug. Don and Cooper shared an amused glance as Samar awkwardly hugged Aram back, finally seeming to relax into it after a moment.

Soon enough, Aram pulled back and gave an awkward cough. "Uh, w– uh, what about Mr. Reddington?" He asked, looking around as if Reddington would pop out at any second.

"He's, uh," Samar's eyes shifted toward Cooper " - pursuing his own leads." They all knew what that meant. They'd have a body count to sweep under the rug. And since it was Liz that was in trouble, none of them could really bring themselves to be too upset about it.

Cooper cleared his throat. "Aram, the doctor?" He questioned, bringing the conversation back into focus.

Aram startled, having been lost in thought. "Yes, right. Uh, sorry. Okay. Her name is Dr. Selma Orchard. She's an attending in neurology at Walter Reed and was part of a team that discovered a gene that makes it possible to erase memories."
Cooper's brow furrowed. "I'm sorry. Erase memories?"

"Yeah, the gene is known as TET1, and it's critical to a process called memory extinction, where painful events are replaced with more positive associations. She was at Walter Reed."

"Was Braxton a soldier there?" Ressler spoke up.

Aram nodded as he opened a folder, spreading it out across Cooper's desk so the man could see it. "First Gulf War. He was part of a friendly fire incident with multiple casualties in Khafji. I assume he brought this home with him. Orchard must have treated him at some point for this."

Cooper looked up from the dossier and over towards Samar and Don. "Selma Orchard – Find her now."

Liz had been upgraded from the wooden inversion table to a leather cushioned chair that looked like it'd been stolen from a Dentist's office. Circumstances being what they were, it probably was. The chair was comfortable, but it didn't bring her comfort.

"It's called recovered memory therapy." The woman – whom Lizzie now knew was Dr. Orchard – explained. "I'm going to use a combination of hypnotherapy and pharmaceuticals to put you into a lucid, waking dream state. My field is in blocking trauma. Extracting it, "She hesitated. " there are probable risks."

Lizzie swallowed as she watched the woman fill a syringe. "You don't have to do this." She whispered.

Orchard looked away from Liz, up towards the top of the pool where Braxton and his men stood watching. "I'm going to give you a sedative. The mind turns things off for a reason. I found that what the mind fights, the body tries to fight, too. I need you relaxed." She began depressing the contents of the syringe into Liz's IV line. Lizzie watched in fear, rocking back and forth in a futile attempt at getting away. "This is for your own safety. He told me I need to take you back to a fire 26 years ago."

Lizzie whimpered and closed her eyes tightly as she shook her head. "I don't want to go back." She sobbed.

"I'm sorry." Dr. Orchard whispered brokenly.

Ressler walked into the living room and over towards where Samar stood, drowning out the chaotic noise of a crime scene investigation. "PD says there's no sign of forced entry or foul play, but Orchard never showed up for work."

Samar nodded, her eyes darting toward a sudden burst of police radio chatter from a group of cops standing off to the side before focusing back on Ressler. "I just got off the phone with the boy's school. He never showed up, either."

Ressler's lips thinned. "Braxton has them."

"Elizabeth, I want you to close your eyes. Now I want you to relax all of the muscles in your body."
Pretend that you can float. As you float, all of the tension leaves your body. Tension floats, too, but it floats away from you. Now I want you to breathe in… and out."

Lizzie did as she was instructed. It was easy to float. Her body felt so light, she wasn't sure if she was floating or flying. It didn't really matter. It was lovely.

"Good." The nice lady whispered in her ear. "All of the tension is floating away. You can't even feel it anymore. All you can feel is yourself, making the image of yourself clearer and clearer. Focus on that image of yourself. Only it's not you today. It's you 26 years ago. You can almost picture her, that little girl. I'm gonna ask the little girl to open her eyes. Are you ready? Three two one. … What do you see?"

"A little girl hiding." Lizzie murmured.

"Okay, stay here, sweetie. No matter what happens, you need to stay here and not come out until I come get you. Understand?" A man was talking to her. She knew that voice.

"Are you with her?" The nice doctor asked her.

"Yes."

"Where is she?" A woman – her voice vaguely familiar like the man's – questioned.

Lizzie looked down at the little girl she was hiding in the closet with and noticed her petting a rabbit. "Hey, what's your bunny's name?" She asked, trying to focus on a fixed point as the world around her sometimes shook. She felt as if the whole world tremored to the beat of her heart.

"I'm not leaving without Masha." The woman stated angrily. "Masha!"

"She's not going back with you."

Lizzie rested a hand on the little girl's shoulder as she whimpered. "I know you're scared, but it's okay. Lizzie? Can you hear me?" The little girl held out her hand and Lizzie grasped it in both of her own, kissing the little fingers as if to reassure her.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Red walked into the restaurant where his people had assembled several of Braxton's known associates and buyers. He walked over to the large round table the all sat at, his coat billowing around him. "Thank you for coming on such short notice." He greeted as he palmed his fedora, clasping his hands in front of him, holding his fedora with his thumb. Red looked around at the many faces in front of him and smiled grimly.

"Time is of the essence, so I'll skip introductions." Red paused to give a caricature pleasant smile. "I've asked you all here because you all have one thing in common – you all have business with Luther Braxton. As rewarding as those relationships may have been, they've come to an end." Red finished his sentence with a grim note. "Mr. Braxton has started something he cannot finish. He'll likely reach out to one of you for help. When he does, you will contact me at the number I have provided. Questions? Good." Red spun on his heel, deftly placing his fedora back on his head as he walked away.

"What's in it for us?" One of the men called out.

Red turned back around towards him and gave him a hard stare. "Life."
Lizzie could feel her muscles contracting. She grunted in pain and exhaustion as they continued to tense and release. She felt as if she'd been climbing for hours but it had been mere minutes since Dr. Orchard had drawn her out of the session when the lucid seizures had begun.

"This is not gonna work like this." The Doctor stated, gazing at Braxton over Lizzie's head. "These drugs, she could become hypertensive, develop an arrhythmia."

"I gave you everything you asked for." Braxton argued.

Lizzie could see the other woman shake her head out of the corner of her eye as she tried to force her body to relax to no avail. "Well, we should have an anesthesiologist or an ER doc here to titrate her meds. I told you there are risks."

"Well, then take the risks. It's either her or your boy."

There was a quiet moment before Lizzie heard a metallic tinkle beside her head – Dr. Orchard was picking up something from the tray. Lizzie gasped at the sudden burning cold that shot down her veins before sighing as she began to fly again.

"What's happening, Elizabeth? Tell me."

"They're shouting." Lizzie slurred. Something was different. She was more aware of herself – not just her dream self, but her surroundings as well – of Braxton and Dr. Orchard. It was like that one time when she'd gone to Niagra Falls with Sam. She'd stood in the middle of the bridge, one leg in Canada and one leg in New York. She was in both places simultaneously.

"Who? What are they saying?"

"Where is she?!" Lizzie could feel the restraints around her arms tighten as she lurched forward in the chair, her voice deepening as she shouted. But it wasn't her voice, it was his.

"Listen, you're in trouble." Lizzie could hear the woman say through the slated panels of the closet.

"Because of you!" He shouted.

"Don't be afraid." Lizzie murmured to the little girl as she began to shake.

"You told her." The man accused.

"Yes, I did. I told her."

"Come on!" The little girl suddenly sprang up and ran towards the back of the closet. Only... it wasn't. "Wait!" Lizzie called out as she gave chase, the hanging coats and scarves gave way to pine trees and falling snow. "Come on! Lizzie. Come on." The little girl laughed. Except she wasn't so little anymore. She was maybe eight now. Wearing a winter coat and a scarf as she chased after her little white rabbit.

* dashing through the snow in a one-horse open sleigh – o'er the fields we go *

"Come on!"

* laughing all the way * They both laugh as they race through the rows of trees.
"Wh-where'd he go? Where'd he go?" Lizzie asked as they looked around them, searching for the rabbit.

"I don't know."

Lizzie knew she was laughing as she sat in the bottom of the empty pool.

"What's happening?" She could sense Braxton's agitation.

"She might be having a tangent memory. Her brain is trying to replace a bad memory with a good one."

"Over there! Here!" The little girl shouted excitedly.

Lizzie got the sudden urge to dash. "Catch me!" She yelled.

* jingle bells, jingle bells – jingle all the way *

Lizzie came to a halt as the figure of a man stepped out from between the trees. "Lizzie."

* oh, what fun it is to ride *

The little girl ran up to the man, hugging him around his waist. The man bent forward to pick her up. "Lizzie, wait!" She cried out as she disappeared.

*in a one-horse open sleigh *

She was back in the closet, watching as the man lowered the little girl off his hip, into the closet. She gasped.

"What is it? What do you see?"

"Stay... here." Lizzie's voice was deep again. "Don't go... anywhere."

They were shouting. She couldn't understand them. She sat on the floor of the closet with her knees drawn up to her chest, trying to make herself as small as possible.

"What are they fighting about?"

The little girl put her index finger to her lips with one hand while the other clutched at her rabbit. "It's a secret." She whispered.

"Who's Masha?"

"You are."

Lizzie's brow furrowed and she lunged for the door.

"Don't go out there!" The little girl shouted, her little hands grasping at Lizzie's shirt."You can't go out there."

The hallway was shrinking. It seemed to stretch each time she took a step. The further she walked, the further she had to hunch over in order to fit until she was crawling.

She froze, one hand raised in front of her as she was on her knees. The little girl stood in front of her and Lizzie had to crane her neck to look up at her. "Turn around, Lizzie! Go back!"
The hallway was large again. She was standing up. "No! No!" The little girl clutched at Lizzie's hand. "Don't! He said not to come out!"

The little girl screamed shrilly and Lizzie turned just in time to see her running in the opposite direction, disappearing around a corner behind her. Lizzie continued walking, a window was in front of her, the wind billowing the sheer curtains.

She couldn't breathe. Her back arched. She gasped. Her arms burned as her body fought against the restraints. She could hear monitors beeping loudly.

"Okay, we're done. Her blood pressure's through the roof. She's in v-tach. She needs lidocaine."

Lizzie could hear animalistic grunting. Distantly, she knew it was her as he body refused to cooperate with her.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You won't find what you're looking for if she's dead."

"Daddy!" Lizzie cried.

\\%

Red walked back into the restaurant, back over to the table. "What have you got?" Red inquired, distantly noting that the man sitting in front of him was the same man who asked what he'd be getting in return.

"Braxton contacted me right after you left." The man with silvered side burns stated, sliding a tablet across the table.

Red looked down at the gadget dispassionately. "What's this?"

The man smirked. "Wiring instructions to an offshore account. I'm not giving you this information. I'm selling it."

Red gave the man a hard stare. "Let me clarify the situation. Braxton is holding a hostage. I want her back. Every second you waste reduces the chances of that happening."

The man gave a small smile. "I appreciate your urgency."

"I don't think you do." Red intoned darkly.

"But I'm not telling you anything until we agree on a price." He continued.

\\%

Ressler watched Samar walk up to him where he stood next to their SUV. They were currently canvassing a neighborhood where someone had sighted Braxton meeting with associates. "I have units covering the southwest sector, so start at the north end of the 700 block and work your way back." Samar said as she stopped in front of him. "Anything?"

Ressler nodded. "Two eyewitnesses confirm Braxton met with a Wilson Bishop. I had Aram run his profile. Turns out he's a third-year med student at Johns Hopkins."

Samar's brow furrowed. "What does Braxton want with a med student?"
"Your son, what's his name?" Lizzie asked, her voice hoarse.

Dr Orchard glanced over at her then went back to checking Lizzie's vitals. "His name is Max. He's nine years old."

Lizzie sighed as her mind went to Sammy. God, she missed him. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry you got dragged into this."

In the dream, you said he there was a man?

Lizzie nodded. "The girl, she called him 'Daddy.' But I know... I know he's not." She swallowed heavily.

"Did you see anything else or hear anything else?"

Liz shook her head. "The little girl stopped me. It's like she has some kind of a secret." Lizzie turned to look at Dr. Orchard, her brow furrowed in vexation. "But I'm the girl."

Dr Orchard smiled kindly at her. "The girl's a piece of your subconscious trying to prevent you from becoming aware of what happened that night."

Lizzie shook her head against the headrest of the chair. "I have no recollection of my mother or... him – not their faces, nothing." She paused with a sigh. "All I know is that I got this – " Lizzie held up her scarred wrist. " – that night."

The man looked up at Red with another of his stupid little smirks. "You can relax. An extra 15 seconds won't make a difference either way."

Both men looked down as the tablet chirped. "It's done." Stated Captain Obvious.

Red raised a brow at the man. "Speak." He ordered.

The man's lips pursed, taking offense to Red's tone. "He needed a place to meet someone, someplace out of the way."

"The address?"

The man handed Red a small card. He glanced at it before stretching his arm out, handing it over to Dembe. The moment the card was out of his hand, Red struck. His fist pummeled the man's face in the most... satisfactory manner. Once. Twice. Three times. He paused, the man grunted. Fourth for good measure.

Red shook out his hand, looking at his bloodied knuckles dispassionately. "You're right. An extra 15 seconds probably won't change anything, hmm?" Red punched him in the nose once more then walked away.

A cell phone rang on the tray beside them. Dr. Orchard didn't hesitate.

"Yes?" She answered, putting the phone on speaker.
"Mom? Mommy?" Lizzie could hear the voice of a young boy.

"Max!" Dr. Orchard cried out happily.

"Mom?"

"Max, hi. Are you okay, baby? Where are you? Everything's gonna be okay. I love you."

"I love you."

There was a shuffle on the other end of the line. "You have till 9:00. If I don't find out what the agent knows by then, you'll never see your boy again." Braxton's voice came over the speaker before silence.

"Wait. Wait! Damn it!"

---

"It's gonna be fine." Lizzie reassured.

Orchard shook her head, licking her top lip nervously. "It's too dangerous."

Lizzie waited until the woman was looking her in the eye before she spoke. "Something happened that night, something people are willing to kill to find out, and whatever it was involved me. I'm not doing this for Braxton or for you. I'm doing it for me. I need to know the truth."

---

"Nah, we're gonna get the intel out of that girl's head, even if I got to drill a hole in her skull and hang her upside down. All right. Will do."

Red could hear him on his phone. He was talking about Lizzie. His Lizzie.

Red watched from where he sat on the steps up to the old church as the man turned the corner of the stone courtyard. The moment Braxton noticed him sitting there, his legs crossed as if he hadn't a care in the world, the man stopped in his tracks.

Red smiled, showing his teeth, as Dembe came up behind the man, cocking his gun to announce his presence. Sighing in defeat, Braxton put his hands up and Dembe was quick to relieve him of his weapon.

Noticing the man's eyes shifting, Red smiled at him once more. "If you're looking for your driver, he's napping in the trunk." Red pointed with his pistol to the black sedan that was idling a few feet away from him.

Dembe urged Braxton forward by placing his gun between the man's shoulder blades. The man willingly walked forward, toward Red. "Son of a bitch." Braxton murmured, a small defeated smile on his face as he scratched his chin.

"Luther, I never thought I'd enjoy having anything in my mouth as much as Petty Officer Virginia Sherman, but this – " Red leaned back with a laugh. "My God! It tastes so good! I hesitate to swallow, and I certainly don't want to spit it out. Oh, what the hell. I told you so." The smile was wiped off of Red's face as he grew solemn. "Elizabeth Keen. Where is she?"

Braxton smiled. "I don't know. Maybe she's dead. Maybe you're too late, boyo. Just like you were for, uh, Henkel in Belgrade."
Red shook his head, a bemused frown on his face. "Can I let you in on a little secret about Belgrade? I barely remember it. I'd forgotten all about the Deutsche marks, and I don't think I ever even met Henkel. Tell you the truth – I don't think his name was Henkel." Red shrugged. "I don't know who the hell he was, but this – this, I can promise you, I will always remember." Red stood up from where he'd been sitting, his face now centimeters from Braxton's. Now get in the damn car."

"Elizabeth, can you hear me? Nod if you can hear me. Good. Now follow my voice and tell me where you are."

"The closet." It was Lizzie but it wasn't. It was little Lizzie that replied. Her high pitched voice at odds with Lizzie's grown body.

"What's happening?"

Lizzie listened from where she sat in the closet. "They'll kill you if you don't give it back to them." The woman shouted.

"They'll kill me if I do." The man replied angrily.

"They're arguing."

"What are they arguing about?"

"Did you really think I'd let it happen? Did you really think I wouldn't do everything – "

"Hey, you know what? .... It's the only thing keeping me alive."

The door chimed as Samar and Ressler walked into the small drug store. The police officers with them kindly took up guard duty in front of the door.

"Wilson Bishop, FBI."

The young man behind the counter sidled out from behind it, a poor attempt at being nonchalant as he tried to make his way toward a back door. Ressler gave him no such opportunity. "Come here. Come here!" He yelled, surging forward and putting the man in a headlock. .

"Hey, hey, hey, hey. What are you doing, man? What are you doing?"

Both men grunted as Bishop fought against Ressler's hold, slamming his fists into Don's arm.

"Luther Braxton." Ressler barked. "We know you met with him."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Ressler tightened his grip around the man's throat as Samar watched.

"You're a resident at a hospital with access to all kinds of psycho-pharmaceuticals. We know you sold to him. He kidnapped an FBI agent." Samar stated.

Bishop froze as if forgetting for a moment that he was trying to fight Don's grasp. "I don't know anything about a kidnapping."
"He's gonna use your drugs on that agent. She dies …" Don was unable to finish the sentence, only tighten his grip.

"He wanted diazoxide. Naloxone—" Bishop gave a cross between a grunt and a cough.

"Where is he?" Samar yelled.

"He had me deliver equipment …"

"An address?!

"… for sedations."

\\\\

"Braxton, call me back. Where the hell are you?" Red walked up behind the man who'd been speaking on his cell phone. Reaching his arms up, Red planted one hand on the man's chin and the other on the back of his head and twisted. The man's neck snapped with a satisfying crunch. Red allowed the man's body to flop to the group.

Red followed Dembe into the pool room. Dembe shot the first guard, a man guarding the entrance. Red took out the two standing beside the doctor and Lizzie. One blink. Two. They fell. It happened so quickly, the doctor's screams were a bit belated as her body caught up with what she'd just witnessed.

The woman continued screaming as Red hurried down the steps of the pool.

"Is she okay?" Red sighed, impatient with the woman's hysteria. "I'm not gonna hurt you. Is she okay?"

\\\\

"Aram, we found Wilson Bishop. We're en route, and we need you to send units to Coal Chute and Spring." Samar shouted into her cell phone over the blaring sirens as they sped down the road. She glanced over at Ressler as his cellphone began ringing.

Ressler looked at his caller ID and immediately picked it up.

"Donald. I have information regarding Lizzie's abductor."

"We're on our way to her now. We're 10 minutes out.

"Well, Braxton was holding a young boy. His name is Max Orchard. My people have secured the boy, but you need to send a unit. Dembe will give you the address."

Ressler swore as Red hung up on him. The least the asshole could do was tell him if he was with Liz. Tell him she was okay.

\\\\

"Max is my son." The Doctor stated shakily, her eyes like glass.

Red nodded, his eyes gentle. "The FBI are on their way to him now." He murmured as he picked up Lizzie's hand in both of his own, kissing her palm softly before touching it to his cheek.

"She's still heavily sedated."
"What happened?" Red questioned gruffly.

"But my son – Max."

Red frowned. "Your son is gonna be fine." He said, his voice hardening. He needed her to focus. "Tell me about Agent Keen."

Orchard let out a tremulous sigh. "She was undergoing a procedure called RM Therapy. Braxton was searching for a memory."

Red rolled his tongue as his eye began to twitch. "Does she remember the past?"

"Pieces." Dr. Orchard murmured with a shrug.

"What pieces?" Red demanded, his harsh voice incongruous with the gentle way he caressed Lizzie's cheek, tucked her hair behind her ear. He needed to touch her, to make sure she was okay. His sight kept honing in on the bruising around her face, her still moistened hair.

Braxton was going to pay. No one hurt his Sunshine.

Red began undoing Lizzie's restraints. First her arms, then her legs.

"A fire, an argument."

They both looked down at a sudden loud thump. Lizzie's back arched and Red stood up so quickly from the chair he'd been sitting on, that it hit the ground with a clang.

"Lizzie!" He shouted fearfully, clutching at her shoulders, trying to keep her from falling out of the chair.

"She shouldn't still be dreaming! I thought I gave her the correct dosage to get her out!"

"Well obviously you were wrong!" He yelled over Lizzie's unintelligible screams.

"Take her to– I need you to tell me where it is." Lizzie shouted, but it wasn't Lizzie. It was him.

"Let me go! Get away from me!"

Red choked on a sob at the sound of such a childish voice coming from his daughter's mouth. "Shh, shh, shh! You don't want to see this." He bent forward, murmuring in her ear. He knew what she was seeing. What she was about to see.

*Lizzie gasped. There was a man standing in front of her, blocking her view. She couldn't see down the hallway. "Lizzie, turn around. Go back." She knew that voice. It was her daddy.*

"Stop! You don't want to go in there." The woman yelled.

"Get away! Lizzie, turn around and go back." Her daddy begged her. He begged her from two places. He was there in the hallway, but she could feel him above her, grasping her arms as she sat in the chair.

"Go back, go back."

"Let go!" Lizzie screamed.

There was a gunshot.
Lizzie screamed and curled into a fetal position, rocking back and forth. "What happened? What'd she see?" Red looked to Dr. Orchard, his eyes blazing with panic.

"Listen to me. You have to say something. There's a fire." Lizzie said desperately to the little girl, clutching her shoulders. "I know you saw something out there and you don't want to go out there." Lizzie's voice broke. "But you can't stay here! You have to scream! Do you hear me? As loud as you can, you have to scream! You have to– " Lizzie screamed and the little girl began to scream as well.

"Hey! Hey. What the hell are you doing to her? What are you doing? Get her up. Wake her up now."

Red ignored the sudden chaos around him, ignored Donald making his way down the stairs toward them.

"Not now." Dr. Orchard argued.

"Reddington. Reddington!" Ressler tried to get his attention, thankfully, the man had enough sense to stand back.

"It's not safe!" The Doctor shouted.

"Wake her up now." Ressler demanded, taking a step forward.

"Wait. Not now."

"You do what you have to do. You do it now!" Red was going to kill the little shit.

"Wait."

\/
//\/
\/
//\/

A man slowly dragged himself up off the floor as the fire raged around them. It was so hot.

"Daddy! Please!"

He's reaching out his hand toward her. They're outside, by the kitchen window. Her daddy is on the ground, moaning. Her wrist hurts. Four shadows leave the house.

Lizzie's eyes flew open with a gasp. She looked around wildly, blindly, her body rigid. A blur in front of her soon sharpened into focus, morphing into her father. "Daddy!" She cried brokenly.

"Shh!" Red leaned over her and wrapped his arms around her as best he could as she sobbed, kissing her brow. "It's okay, you're okay now. I promise, Sweetheart."

Her dad continued to murmur softly to her as Lizzie sobbed. Distantly, she was aware of the room clearing out, of Don sitting down beside her, taking her hand.

"You're alright. Nothing will hurt you, I promise." Red murmured fiercely.

\/
//\/
\/
//\/

"Mm-hmm. I'm meeting with Braxton within the hour. Yes, of course I've discussed contingencies regarding Reddington with all of our colleagues." The man talked on his phone as he walked into his home. Looking around his living room, he noticed a large workman's boot on the floor. His eyes slowly tracked upward to the body of Luther Braxton, hanging from the dining room
archway. "I'm going to have to call you back." The man murmured before ending the call.

"You wouldn't believe how much he weighs." Red said jovially as he walked out of the shadows. "Sit." Red offered the man a seat in his own home as he made himself comfortable in one of the wingback chairs.

"Do you have any idea who I am?" The Director questioned as he remained standing.

Red chuckled. "Yes. I know just what you are." He pulled his pistol out of his suit jacket. "Sit the hell down."

The Director slowly lowered himself into a seat. "I've alerted security."

Red nodded, his eyes laughing. "You seem younger in person than you appear to be when lurking in the background on television. Are you a swimmer?" Red questioned with a chuckle.

The Director raised a brow. "I'm someone not to be trifled with."

"Mm. Then we have something in common. You hire a simple thief to find the Fulcrum because you believe I don't have it. So I return him to you, defects and all, - " Red waved his gun at Braxton's body. " – to make it abundantly clear that you should never again doubt who I am and what I have."

"I know exactly who you are. A thug." The Director stated bitingly. "You may have convinced some of my colleagues that you are a force to be reckoned with, but I do not share that assessment. So consider yourself warned. We will not hesitate to use every resource at our disposal. Whatever it takes we will cripple you."

Red leaned forward in his chair. "I don't think you have any real comprehension of the depth and breadth of your vulnerability." He uttered darkly. "But only the one who possesses the Fulcrum could possibly fathom that."

"I think you're bluffing. I don't think you have it. I don't think you ever did."

"Try me. Call my bluff. Please. Call my bluff." Red stared at the Director, his face rigid.

Then, he suddenly sprang up, out of his chair with a chuckle. "Oh, my God." He murmured, shaking his head as he looked up at Braxton's body. "I don't know what the hell you're gonna do with him. Honestly, he's like a damn side of beef."

\\\

"This morning, there was an attempted takeover of a US detention camp in the Norton Sound. We believe that the timing of this uprising was set to coincide with the transfer of international fugitive Raymond Reddington."

Red and Lizzie watched as the female CIA agent – Goodson – gave a press conference.

"Are you saying that he was responsible for the breach?" "How did he orchestrate an attack if he was in custody?" "Did he succeed?" "Is Reddington in your custody now?"

Reporters fired off questions at breakneck speeds.

"I'm not going to be taking any questions right now, but I can confirm that the whereabouts of Raymond Reddington are unknown."
"Well, it looks like you're in the wind again, Dad." Lizzie murmured, shutting off the TV before throwing the remote in the general direction of the loveseat beside her.

Red chuckled as he tightened his arm around her shoulders and Lizzie gladly snuggled her head deeper into his shoulder.

"Haven't you heard? I'm like a cockroach. It takes much more than a CIA black site to keep me down."

"Mmm. I'll have to get my hands on some nuclear waste then." Lizzie teased, causing her dad to let out a bark of a laugh.

Quiet fell as both their minds fell to the day's events.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart. If you ever remember more, I need you to know that I'm here. If you feel the need to talk – "

"Why can't you just tell me what happened?" Lizzie questioned.

Red sighed, leaning his head against the back of the couch. "Lizzie what happened that night… No little girl should have ever been a party to. If even after everything Doctor Orchard did, your mind is still only giving you bits and pieces…" Red paused, wiping his face with his hand. "Please Lizzie, don't try to force it anymore. Memory is a double edge sword. Sometimes the safest thing to do is to lock it away and not touch it." Red heaved another sigh. "The only useful thing you could have learned from that night was the location of the Fulcrum, Lizzie. And you already have it."

Lizzie ran her thumb along the length of her scar. She wanted to argue. She wanted to demand that she had the right to know what happened that night. But then she remembered. She remembered the agonized look on his face as his back burned – as he rescued her. She remembered how broken he looked when she'd come out of the dream. She remembered all the times that he'd come to her rescue. So she remained silent. For now.

"It's starting, isn't it Dad?"

Red didn't need her to elaborate. "Yes." He murmured gravely.

"Are we ready?" Lizzie asked, her voice unsteady.

Red turned his head to kiss her forehead. "As ready as we can be."

Neither of them were willing to be separated for very long so Lizzie's dad had gladly agreed to stay in the guest bedroom of her house. The old twin sized box spring mattress from her old bed in Nebraska wasn't exactly the lap of luxury but it was close and that's all that mattered.

All of the occupants of the house had finally settled down for the night. Lizzie and Don lay awake in their bed. Lizzie was curled against Don's side, careful of the bruises on her face. Don's arm was around her shoulders and her leg was flung across his hips. Sammy lay sleeping on Don's bare chest, Lizzie's hand resting on his little diapered bum. Neither of them could bear to have him anywhere else.

"I could have lost you today." Don murmured, his eyes fixed on the ceiling as he swallowed heavily.
"But you didn't." She reassured, carefully leaning forward to kiss his neck without waking Sammy.

"I could have lost you and I had to act like the FBI poster boy, like nothing was wrong – it was just a case. Even though it felt like the world was crumbling."

"Don – " Liz whispered brokenly, tears springing to her eyes.

"No Liz." Don whispered, cutting her off even though she wasn’t sure if she’d have been able to continue. "Part of me, a part that grows almost everyday, wants to just pack up. Take you and Sammy and get out of here, get away from this mess." Don let out a frustrated groan, freezing for a moment as Sammy snuffled in his sleep.

With a much quieter sigh, Don continued on a whisper. "It's only going to get worse, isn't it?"

"It's going to get worse before it gets better." Lizzie corrected before carefully lifting herself up on her elbow to look directly at Don. "But I promise, it will get better. We have amazing people on our side, Don. We're going to do this."

Don stared at her for a moment before nodding his head in agreement, his lips thinned with determination. "Long road ahead?"

Lizzie leaned forward and captured Don's lips sweetly with hers. "Mmmm. Lucky for us, my family are experts on playing the long game."
Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She couldn't move. She couldn't breathe. She was drowning. The water cascaded over her face, unrelenting. The sound echoed around the walls of the emptied pool, the bucket full of water sounding like a waterfall releasing tons of water every second. And she was drowning beneath it, could feel the weight of it pulling her further into the darkness, —

"Liz! Babe! C'mon wake up!"

Lizzie's eyes flew open as she sucked in gasps of air. She fought against the person holding her down, her heart racing in panic.

"Liz! It's me! Babe, calm down."

She recognized that voice. She knew the arms that now cradled her against a hard chest. "Don?"
She questioned hesitantly, still sucking in large gulps of air.

"Hey beautiful." Don murmured against her hair before placing a kiss there as he rocked her, the bed sheets gathered up near his waist.

Lizzie threw her arms around Don's bare torso, burrowing into his side as wracking sobs shook her frame.

"Hey, shh. You're alright." Don ran his fingers through her hair as he continued to rock her. "You're safe, I promise. It's going to be alright."

Don continued to whisper words of comfort in her ear as he held her until Lizzie's sobs eventually subsided into sniffles. Lizzie's grip on Don loosened but she didn't let go, merely nuzzled against his chest.

"You feeling better?" Don asked quietly, sliding down in the bed so that he was laying down once more with Lizzie laying across his chest. Don began lightly running his fingers up and down her spine in a gentle soothing caress. He knew how much she loved it.

"Yea." Lizzie whispered hoarsely.

"Wanna talk about it?"

Lizzie shook her head fervently. He knew what had happened. She had been debriefed and she knew that her dad had also told him. She knew they were worried, trying to help her deal with it. And they were so sweet, even Dembe had taken to texting her at least every hour to ask how she was.

But they couldn't do anything to stop the dreams.

"Alright, that's fine." Don leaned down to give Lizzie a soft kiss which she gladly returned. "You know I'm here though, right?"

Lizzie giggled softly, nodding. "Of course you are. I know. But for now I just… need you here. You know? Just like this." Lizzie tightened her arms around him to try and demonstrate what she
"Yea, I understand."

\/

"Well isn't this quant?" Red said jovially as he swaggered into the conference room at the post office. Everyone else had been there for ten minutes but of course Red – and therefore Dembe – had to be fashionably late. "I hope you haven't been waiting long." Red stated in a tone that clearly meant he didn't actually care.

Lizzie rolled her eyes from where she sat. "Oh hush and sit down." She grumbled good naturedly, a small smile crossing her face.

Red smiled but obeyed, sitting on her right as Donald was already sitting to her left. Once he was situated however, an awkward silence took over as no one knew how to start.

As the moments ticked by, Aram coughed into his hand and fidgeted into his seat. Samar's eyes tracked every movement of every person in the room.

Finally, Cooper spoke up. "Miss Scott, I believe the proverbial ball is in your court on this one."

Liz winced at Cooper's purposeful slip of the tongue.

"Miss Scott?" Samar questioned. "Does the fact that you didn't say 'Agent' have anything to do with the fact that Liz is Reddington's daughter?"

"Wait…what?" Aram perked up in his seat, his head on a swivel as he looked around at the people in the room. "Really?" He questioned, looking directly at Liz.

"Uh…yea." Lizzie murmured.

"Oh…wow. Ok." Aram nodded hesitantly, his eyes flicking over to Red and back around the room. "I'm sorry, why does that mean you're a 'Miss' instead of 'Agent'?"

Lizzie lowered her eyes to the table, a sad smile on her face that grew slightly brighter as Don squeezed her knee in comfort under the table. Liz looked over at Aram. "Because I've always known. Director Cooper only found out I knew a few months ago."

"And he couldn't let you remain an agent with your father being who he is added to the fact that you clearly falsified some records." Samar deduced. "But why the subterfuge? Why pretend that you still are an agent?" Here, Samar's eyes flicked over to Cooper in accusation, the silent question of why he would allow it written all over her face.

Lizzie looked to Red, her face pleading.

Red's lips turned upward in a smile before he turned to Samar. "That, my dear desert flower, is a rather simple question with a very complicated answer."

Aram and Samar looked at each other. "Okay, then simplify it." Aram said bravely.

Red quirked an eyebrow, rather impressed at Aram's sudden backbone, before continuing. "Well, to simplify it would be to answer your question with a warning."

"And what would that warning be?" Samar questioned, clearly growing impatient with the run around.
"That if we answer your question directly and you remain on the task force – continue to work with us, you'll essentially be committing treason." Everyone turned to Don in surprise as he spoke.

Samar and Aram stared at Don in shock then as one their eyes turned to Cooper. "And so you…" Samar started hesitantly.

"Are knowingly working against the government, yes." Cooper stated, his rich voice filling the room heavily.

"Oh come, Harold! It's not so black and white!" Red said jovially. "We're not going against the government, per se…more like there are several people high up in the government who would have a vested interest in framing you all if they ever found out that this task force was working against them!" Red expounded on this as if he were announcing the week's weather forecast.

Lizzie shook her head in exasperation.

"Ok… I think we need to start at the beginning." Aram said hesitantly.

Lizzie looked intently at Aram. "Are you sure? Once you know… there's no going back. It is very likely that a time will come where we'll all become fugitives. We can't protect you from that. Not if we as a group continue on as we are."

Aram and Samar turned to each other and had a silent conversation. After a time, Samar turned back towards Red and Lizzie. "I think if the situation is dire enough to make even Captain America risk a life on the run – " Samar's eyes danced over to Cooper and everyone let out a small chuckle as Don muttered under his breath. " – then I think we need to hear it."

"Perceptive of you, Agent Navabi!" Red agreed before gazing at Aram. "Agent Motjabai, do you agree with Agent Navabi?"

Aram sat up straighter in his chair and gave a small determined nod.

Red turned to Lizzie. "Would you like to tell it or shall I?"

Liz sighed. "You should probably tell them. You've been wrapped up in this a bit longer than I have."

Red nodded and took a deep breath. "As you well know, I was Naval Intelligence. One of my assets was Lizzie's mother. She had information about a global clandestine organization that had infiltrated governments, corporations, banks, you get the idea. They're everywhere." Red's voice had turned solemn and both Aram and Samar sat up in their seats, at full attention. "My direct superiors – those that tasked me with being Lizzie's mother's keeper had no idea what they'd sent me into. However, as time went on, those up above – those who began to worry that Lizzie's mother knew too much – came after me."

Lizzie fidgeted in her seat and began rubbing her thumb across her scar. Noting her discomfort, Red shifted and placed his arm on the back of her chair before continuing.

"They set their home on fire. Her mother was worried, she felt she was being watched so she had called me before hand. I made it in time to save Lizzie," Red looked over at Lizzie and they shared sad smiles. "So I took her to Sam to raise her. I visited as much as possible and tried to prepare her for the inevitable." Red sighed, shaking his head as his eyes grew distant. "But they began to suspect me as well. The organization began to worry that I knew too much. So they came after me. They – as far as I knew at the time – killed my wife and my other daughter."
Lizzie took Red's hand and squeezed it in comfort as Red cleared his throat. "So I did what I had to do to protect Lizzie and myself. I told them that I had it – the blackmail file that Lizzie's mother had obtained, that had all the information about this organization. I told them I had it and threatened to expose them if they touched me or mine."

"So why did you become a criminal then?" Aram questioned softly.

Red smiled wanly at Aram. Poor, naïve Aram.

"Because I knew they wouldn't stop. I knew blackmailing them wasn't going to hold them back for long. And they're too powerful in the political sphere to allow me to gain any sort of foothold to keep them at bay."

"But you don't actually have the file. So you gained power in other ways. They had control of the 'legal' channels, so you took control of the illegal ones – learned who their backroom associates were by hiding in the room's shadows, building the list." Samar finished.

Red gave a simple, direct nod.

"So what does this mean exactly – for us?" Aram asked softly.

"It means that, if knowing this, you choose to remain on this task force, you will be making very powerful enemies. The time is rapidly approaching when we will have to show our hand. These people will bring the full might of the US government – as well as many others – against us."

"How could we ever hope to combat that?" Samar questioned.

Lizzie gave a quivering smile. "And because I have the file. The fulcrum."

Red nodded. "Even with the fulcrum, it's not going to be easy. I'm putting safe guards in place – if you agree to remain, there will be contingency plans made."

"You mean, if we have to go on the run." Samar clarified.

Red shrugged, his lips pursed. "It's not a matter of 'if,' my dear, but rather of 'when.'"

Aram swallowed heavily at this and Samar merely nodded. Don shifted in his seat at Lizzie's side as Cooper cleared his throat and Lizzie looked down at the table. The idea of becoming fugitives in the near future didn't exactly settle well with anyone.

"However, as I said, I have contingency plans and, well, I am the Concierge of Crime. I've quite the name for myself, I'm extremely wealthy, and I have very powerful associates." Red smiled brightly. "Yet to do what must be done, this task force is eventually going to need its own funding. I'm not sure how much longer you'll be able to act as an FBI unit. We will need money. And friends." Red gave the group another smile. "And it just so happens I've got the perfect case for that."

/
/
/
/
"Aram, would you do us the honors?" Red asked, slapping a newspaper down on Aram's desk. "I think you'll find today's most intriguing story on page 20, bottom-left corner."

Aram picked up the paper, his eyes shifting between Red and Cooper. When his boss remained silent, Aram cleared his throat. "Uh yea… ok…" He quickly turned to the aforementioned page. "According to Uzbek authorities, Father Aleksandr Nabiyev, a local priest in the Tashkent Region
of Uzbekistan’– wait, you're intrigued because a priest was kidnapped?” Aram looked up at Red, his brow furrowed in confusion.

Red tilted his head to the side and smiled. "No. I'm intrigued because the priest is not a priest. From what I hear, the good Father Nabiye is an agent of the CIA. That's a crime, Agent Motjabai. Going back to the Cold War, the CIA has a long and controversial history of using religious figures as spies in violation of executive orders, internal CIA policy, and promises made by every president since Ford.

Lizzie raised a brow from where she stood leaning against one of the agents' work stations. "And you know who kidnapped this agent?"

Red nodded quickly. "I do. Unfortunately, he's an associate of mine. His name is Ruslan Denisov. He commands a nasty, little band of separatists known as SRU. Translated, they are the supreme republic of a free, righteous, and independent Uzbekistan." Red shook his head and heaved a put-upon sigh. "I told Ruslan it was a bit much, but he can be quite melodramatic, not to mention violent and entirely unreasonable. Politics are his passion, and to fund his separatist agenda, he's become something of an abduction mogul, specializing in senior executives of foreign corporations working in or passing through the region. He holds them for ransom at prices far above market standard."

Ressler looked at Red incredulously. "And you do business with this man?"

Red tilted his head back and gave Don a closed lipped smile. "Don't underestimate the usefulness of a nasty band of armed separatists. But lately, Ruslan's been breaking promises. His temper has cost me and my partners considerably more than he's worth."

"So everybody wins." Lizzie stated, placing her hands on her hips. "You help us rescue the agent, we eliminate a thorn in your side."

Red nodded at this. "Don't misunderstand me. He's currently costing me more than he's worth but I believe he has the potential of being a great ally for us." Red palmed his fedora and placed it on his head at his favorite jaunty angle. "Careful on this one, Lizzie. You have more than just a blacklister to worry about this time. The CIA will do whatever it takes to keep this quiet." With that parting shot, Red headed towards the elevators.

Don turned to Lizzie and Cooper. "Wait, did he just say 'a great ally for us?'" He questioned.

Cooper lips pursed in thought. "He did."

Lizzie looked between Cooper and her dad's retreating back.

"Reddington! Get back here!" She called.

Red stopped in his tracks before turning on his heel, his brow quirked in question, his lips pursed. She may be his daughter but they were in public and he did not appreciate her tone.

"Pardon me?" He asked crisply.

Lizzie swallowed, realizing that they'd garnered the stares of all of the agents in the war room. Her eyes crinkled in apology as she tried to back track. "Uh… I think we should have a discussion."

Lizzie swept her hands behind her, indicating the rest of the team to be included. "In private."
Once they were all in Cooper's office, Red looked to Liz expectantly. Lizzie sighed and leaned against the front of Cooper's desk. "Dad – " Red couldn't stop the small smile as she called him 'dad' in front of the group. It was nice to have their relationship acknowledged. Very nice. "We're all in this now. We know you have a plan. You've gotta let us in on it."

Red sighed and looked down at his lap, his face pensive. "Anneca Oil is poisoning the water supply of Denisov's village. We're going to save the CIA agent, make Denisov a local hero, force Anneca Oil out, and seal a deal with another oil company who are well known for ensuring the safety of it's pipelines – thereby stopping the poisoning, bringing money into the area and making a very powerful and wealthy ally in the process." Red looked around at those in the room. "Any questions?"

Everyone merely stared at him, their faces displaying various stages of shock.

"Uh yea… several actually." Aram murmured, his eyes wide."

------

"Richard Gagnon, Executive VP for a French video-component manufacturer. Here he is before he was taken – " Aram's fingers danced across his keyboard as he brought up two pictures. One of them was obviously a professionally done photograph of a wealthy, good looking middle aged man. The other photo was of a haggard, half starved bearded man. " – and here he is the day SRU released him in exchange for $2 million cash." The two pictures were polar opposites yet they were both clearly the same man.

Liz placed a file down on the desk in front of her. "We have a list of over 30 victims."

"I don't understand." Samar spoke up. "This guy makes a fortune taking corporate execs. Now he takes a CIA agent. Why change the business model?"

"Let's find him and ask." Cooper stated darkly.

"I'm sorry, but people's faith is sacred. Religion should be off-limits to spies. Wouldn't work in my country." Aram contributed passionately.

Ressler sighed, shaking his head. "I get that. But helping this guy Denisov – he's bad news. This doesn't sit right with me."

Lizzie looked over at him, her eyes flashing in anger. "His people are being poisoned!"

"I know! Doesn't mean you should go around kidnapping corporate executives and CIA agents!" Ressler argued.

Lizzie looked around the war room and stepped closer to Don. "My dad became an international criminal in order to protect me and take down a global clandestine organization." She whispered hotly. "And you're going to become a fugitive in order to help that cause. I don't really think we should be throwing stones at people who will do anything to protect those they care about. Do you?"

------

"We've got the green light from the CIA to go get their man." Cooper stated. "Of course, they will neither confirm nor deny that he is, in fact, their man." He continued, frustrated. Cooper looked
over at Liz and Ressler.

"I want you on the first plane out of here."

\--------------------

"Hey, are we alright?" Don asked hesitantly as they stood in their bedroom, packing for a longer trip – necessitating a bit more items than their usual go bags.

Liz sighed, not turning from the closet. "I don't know."

Don came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her belly. "I'm sorry." He murmured kissing her neck. "I know you worry that I don't understand what I'm getting into. I do." Don sighed as Lizzie leaned her back against him. "I just… there's a difference between being treated as criminals and actually being a criminal. We haven't crossed that line. And I'm going to be completely honest. I don't know if I can."

Lizzie swallowed before nodding her head. She could accept that. She had to. The idea of a possible life of crime to get done what needed to be done didn't sit well with her either. But she also recognized that having Raymond Reddington as her father had skewed her judgment. She would do what was necessary, even if she didn't like it.

Lizzie turned in his arms and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Okay." She murmured.

"Yea?" He questioned before he leaned in and kissed her lips hesitantly.

"Yea. I get it." She stated simply, before kissing him in return, her lips gentle yet persistent.

\--------------------

Lizzie and Ressler walked out of the airport and looked around for their supposed escort. They were apparently spotted first as a man in military uniform walked up to them, his eyes hard as his men flanked him on either side. "Commander Kushan. I'm Agent Keen." Lizzie said, holding her hand out to shake. When the man merely looked at her hand with disdain, she awkwardly lowered it to her side. "This is Agent Ressler. On behalf of the Bureau, we appreciate your help."

"Let me be very clear, Agent Keen. It is you who are here to help me. This is an Uzbek military operation."

Liz glanced to Ressler. "All due respect, sir, an American citizen has been abducted."

"Which is why we have extended the courtesy of our invitation." He stated, his tone condescending. "But you will not be negotiating with Ruslan Denisov, and you will not be negotiating with me. And you will turn over your firearms. If that's a problem and you wish to return to your country –"


Kushan nodded sharply before stepping to the side, sweeping his arm out to point to the soldiers behind him. "My men will escort you to your hotel."

The soldiers immediately walked over and positioned themselves – two in front of Liz and Ressler and two behind. It felt more like they were being escorted to prison rather than a hotel.

Looking to her left, Lizzie noticed a man in a suit standing on the corner of the side walk as they
walked to the Uzbek military vehicle. "We're being watched." She murmured, leaning closer to Don.

Ressler followed her eyes and nodded slightly. "I didn't notice him. I was too busy checking out Hugo Boss on the corner." He muttered, nodding his head towards a man in a luxury sedan who was wearing shades though the weather was rather cloudy. "Whoever he is, he isn't a fed. That suit wasn't bought on a government salary."

Ressler and Liz entered the hotel bar, planning to grab a drink before going to bed after their long day of travelling. The moment they entered, however, they heard Red's infamous, boisterous storytelling voice.

"The other one, the watercolorist, she – legs like a shot-putter. She gets me in this headlock. I black out. Next thing I know, I wake up, no sheets, Vaseline everywhere. The lipstick on the mirror overhead reads, 'Same time next year? I haven't missed an art expo in Basel since.'" Lizzie stood there in the aisle, her arms folded over her chest as she glared at her dad who seemed to finally take notice of her and Don. "Lizzie!" He cried out, throwing his hands up in the air joyously before turning to the men around him who had been howling at his story. "Please excuse me."

"What are you doing here?" Lizzie questioned as he walked up to them.

Red looked at her as if she were a simpleton. "I can't be an effective resource if I'm thousands of miles from the action. I've got a deal to broker." He answered quietly.

"It's not safe. We just saw the CIA at the airport. They see you –"

Red smiled innocently. "I'll be sure to say hello. Uzbekistan has no extradition treaty with the United States." He stated before taking a sip of his Scotch.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Then the least you could have done was let us hitch a ride on the jet." She muttered. "The guy next to me kept hogging the arm rest."

"You were in the window seat, I was sitting right next – " Don narrowed his eyes. "Oh shut up." He muttered in jest.

Both Red and Lizzie laughed at Ressler's expense until they quickly realized where they were and who may be watching.

Lizzie coughed into her hand. "So should I assume that Ezra is on nanny duty again, watching Sammy since you were supposed to be doing so?" Lizzie questioned her dad, her words sharpened as her mother bear instincts came to the forefront.

Red smiled brightly. "Of course! And Mr. Kaplan has also decided to spend a little quality time with our dear Sammy. He's become quite the little mascot among my people. Rather adorable, actually." Red's eyes took on a distant note as if reminiscing.

Lizzie rolled her eyes, biting her lip to stop herself from smiling. Her dad was right. It was totally adorable the way every one of Red's men became a pile of cooing goo around Sammy. Getting her face under control, Lizzie sighed before nodding at the table that Red had just vacated. "Who are your friends over there?"

Red didn't bother looking behind him. "A few associates as well as the Senior Vice President of Savillion – the company who will be taking Anneca Oil's place. " Red smiled innocently as
Ressler and Liz shifted on their feet. Rescuing a kidnapped CIA Agent was their realm of expertise. Playing a game of corporate espionage was not. They were depending heavily on Red's lead and they all knew it.

"Go get cleaned up. We'll have dinner. I know a wonderful little hole in the wall that's actually in a hole in the wall."

\///\\

The elevator dinged as the doors opened and Lizzie and Ressler quickly walked in, pressing the button for the floor to their respective rooms.

"This is weird, right? I'm not the only one who thinks this is weird, yea?" Don questioned.

Lizzie gave a small snort and nodded her head. "Yea, it's weird. Until now it's always felt like he was helping us do our jobs." Lizzie sobered up quickly. "Now it's the other way around."

Before he could formulate a reply, the elevator stopped with a thud. A second later, there was an eerie creak behind them before they were lifted off their feet, arms pulling them backwards and everything went dark.

\///\\

Their hoods were whipped from their heads and Lizzie blinked against the sudden influx of light. "Aah! Welcome to my country." A ruggedly handsome bald man cried. "The FBI in Uzbekistan – for a year, I tried to get your attention. Now here you are because the only thing Americans understand is violence."

Lizzie raised a brow recognized the man from the pictures. This was Denisov. "If you know so much about Americans, you'd know that our government doesn't pay ransoms to terrorists." She stated as she subtly tested the tightness and strength of the ropes around her wrist.

Denisov shrugged his shoulders. "One man's terrorist, another man's freedom fighter. I don't want your money – not for myself, anyway." He stated, shaking his head. "As you can see, business is good." Denisov said slyly, pointing towards several cages and crates that lined the walls of the cave. "I took your Agent Burke for another reason completely."

"Yea? And what would that be?" Don questioned from where he sat back-to-back with Lizzie.

"Almost 25 years ago, my country sold an American company, Annea Oil, the rights to build a pipeline through Tashkent to Andijan Region. The price was absurd. The Uzbek people received a fraction of the value." Denisov spat. "Corruption – well, you know. These things happen, and I don't care. But now, the pipeline is leaking."

"Leaking?" She may not be a fan of what they were doing but Lizzie could be a good actress when she wanted to be. And right now, she had to play clueless.

"Hundreds of villagers have been killed, hundreds more are sick, and the company does nothing. Our lawyers are no match for your wealthy attorneys. The American embassy looks away. The CIA is here, watching, doing nothing, reporting on any threats to your American interests."

"Mr. Denisov –" Denisov silenced Lizzie with a raised hand and nodded to his guard who stood beside the two bound agents. The man quickly leaned over and sliced through the ropes binding them.
Denisov ticked his head to the side, indicating for them to follow as he headed down a passageway, further into the cave. Liz and Don shared a hesitant glance before following him. Within moments, they found him in another cavern, standing next to a large metal tank with taut chains hanging into it. The tank was too tall and Lizzie couldn't see into it. She doubted she wanted to.

"I took one of theirs. A vice president of Anneca Oil. I tell him that there are chemicals in the water that we drink, that our children bathe in. But he says no. The company did tests. The water is safe. So I did a test of my own." Denisov began cranking the wheel beside him and Liz and Don watched in horror as a man was raised from the tank, hanging by his hands. His head was dry but the rest of him had water pouring off of him as he hung limply. Lizzie gasped at the sight of the chemical burns and rotting flesh. The man didn't have a single healthy patch of skin anywhere below his neck. "I give him back to you now to show you my good faith so you can show the others the truth. The negotiations for your Agent Burke begin tomorrow."

\---

Lizzie sat in the passenger seat of their rented vehicle, holding her phone up so that Don could hear clearly as well as she had it on speaker. "We saw hostages, at least four. I don't think Agent Burke was one, but he's probably there."

"We have got to find that compound." Cooper's voice came over the speakers.

"That won't be easy. The local army can't even find them." Ressler stated.

"Well, we got your photo of the guy Denisov released – the Anneca VP – compared it to known company execs and got a match – Jeffrey Hanover."

"How long ago was he taken?" Lizzie asked.

"That's the thing. I don't know." Aram piped up. "From what I can tell, Anneca never reported him missing."

Don and Lizzie shared incredulous glances. "You're kidding."

"They tried to handle it privately. If that pipeline is leaking, the last thing they want is attention."

Liz scoffed in disgust. "Yeah, well, I'll tell you one thing. Whatever it was eating at Hanover's flesh, it wasn't just water."

\---

"He should survive. His skin has been burned, corroded."

Ressler nodded at the female doctor as they stood off to the side of the hospital room. "And the chemicals?"

The doctor sighed, looking down at the chart in her hands. "It's certainly consistent with prolonged exposure to benzene and polycyclic hydrocarbons commonly associated with oil development."

Lizzie's lips pursed as she held back a curse. She shouldn't be surprised that her dad was right. She wasn't. She just wished he'd been wrong. That this had all been some misunderstanding. "Thank you, Doctor."

The doctor nodded and walked away just as a man wearing a suit that screamed of money walked up to them. He completely ignored Liz and stuck his hand out at Ressler. "Agent Ressler. Dean
Walker, EVP at Anneca. Just wanted to say thanks for bringing Jeff home."

"Don's lips thinned as he plastered on a smile for the man. "It's all part of the job."

Walker nodded pleasantly. "I just flew in. Company sent me straightaway. If there's anything you need, I'm here to help."

Ressler and Liz both scoffed at that. Only Ressler deigned to answer, however. "Yeah, I doubt that. We saw you this morning watching us at the airport. How long have you really been here?"

Walker stared at them, his jovial manner turning to ice in a matter of seconds. "Three weeks. The company sent me to deal with Denisov, see if we could work something out."

"Privately?" Lizzie questioned.

"Jeff's family wanted it that way. They were afraid if the FBI got involved –"

"Maybe you're the ones who were afraid." Lizzie cut in sharply.

Walker merely raised an innocent brow. "Anneca's got nothing to hide."

"This leak Denisov keeps talking about –"

"He's the one responsible. It's a scam." Walker spoke over Lizzie. "His men sabotage the pipeline and then demand a fortune because the locals are getting sick."

Ressler and Lizzie barely made it into the hotel lobby before they were being swarmed by Commander Kushan and his men. "So this is how you respect my operation? I told you, you have no authority here."

"Denisov contacted us." Ressler argued.

"Commander, I know this is your case, but if Denisov wants to talk to the FBI –" Lizzie started.

"Not an option."

"It's an option if Denisov says it's an option." Lizzie bit out. What the hell was with men thinking they could speak over her today? "He's the one who's holding an American hostage. Yes, a Frenchman, a German, and many others. So I'm sorry. You can't order us not to talk to him."

"I could arrest you and your partner for interfering in my investigation." Kushan threatened darkly.

Ressler scoffed, his hands on his hips, one hand inching towards his holster only to remember that these men had taken their weapons. "What investigation? You've been tracking this guy and his group for over a year. He's still abducting innocent people, holding them for ransom –"

Kushan glared at Don. "You and your partner will remain at the Tashlan Hotel under military guard. If you try to leave, your stay in Uzbekistan will be a lot longer than you bargained for, hmm?" With that parting shot, Kushan made for the exit, his men following like puppies.

"Well, you certainly make friends fast." Liz and Don spun at the sound of Red's voice to see him tipping back a finger of Scotch. "Truth is, I'm impressed. Not with you – with Ruslan. He never really struck me as a man of the people."
Ressler shook his head grimly. "The guy's a psychopath. He's in over his head. He doesn't know anything about pipelines."

"Ruslan's a criminal." Liz agreed. "Even if Anneca comes to the table, Denisov would have no idea what to ask for. The guy doesn't even know enough to know what he wants. The lawyers would eat him for lunch."

Red shrugged his shoulders, unaffected. "You may be right. When's the next sit-down?"

"Tomorrow morning." Ressler answered.

"Well, given your new entourage," Red nodded towards the door that Kushan and his men had just exited. "I gather you may need my help to attend."

Ressler and Lizzie shared a smirk. "Actually, I think we've got that covered."

\////////\\

Liz and Don walked into the elevator and with a grim smile in Don's direction, Liz hit the button. Within moments, the doors closed with a ding. Once again, the wall behind them slid open and they were grabbed from behind, bags thrown over their heads.

\////////\\

Lizzie gave a pleasantly forced smile as soon as the bag was lifted from her head and she was forced into a chair. "Mr. Denisov, thank you for your willingness to talk to us." She said, irony dripping from her words. "I've got good news and bad news." She continued. "Bad news is, since technically we got here from the hotel elevators, I must regretfully give the hotel a one out of five stars. Your hospitality could really use some work."

"Liz…” Don growled warningly under his breath from where he sat beside her.

Denisov's eyes narrowed angrily but held up his hand in warning as one of his men stepped forward menacingly.

Lizzie gave Denisov's henchman a winning smile. "That brings me to the good news!" She said brightly. "The Bureau spoke with Anneca Oil, and the good news is, they want to fix this."

"That is good news. To be honest, I was a little worried." Denisov smirked darkly. "I mean, who am I? I'm just a criminal. I don't even know enough to know what I want." Lizzie took a deep breath through her nose as she heard her own words from last night parroted back to her. "I will not be negotiating this deal myself. I've decided to bring in a professional, someone to make sure that the company lawyers don't eat me for lunch."

At that moment, Red turned the corner of the dark cavern where they were secreted, his opened coat flapping gracefully behind him in a wind he created as he palmed his fedora. Red came to a halt beside Ruslan and gave him a closed lipped smile. "Mr. Denisov, it is my pleasure to be here." He greeted as he tapped his fedora against his thigh.

"Hello." Red said, turning towards where Liz and Don were bound to their chairs. "My name is Raymond Reddington. And you are?"

\////////\\

Thankfully, Red had pulled Denisov aside and gave him a lecture about the merits of hospitality
during a business negotiation as Lizzie and Don were soon untied and allowed to walk freely. Well, of their own volition anyway. Denisov insured one of his men always had eyes on them. As They walked out of the tunnel, Red turned to Denisov and Lizzie and Don stopped in their tracks, pretending to be murmuring to each other as Red spoke, his voice echoing through the cavern. "I will see to it that every one of your interests and expectations are met or exceeded."

Denisov gave Red a small smile and walked off. Liz and Ressler quickly walked over to Red who gave Lizzie a pointed look.

"What the hell were you doing back there?" He questioned angrily.

Liz reared back in shock. "What do you mean?"

"From what I heard before I made my presence known, it sounded as if you were taunting him, Lizzie." Red bit out. "Denisov is not a man you want to mess with. I thought I made that quite clear back in the States."

"You ask me, it seemed like a bit of a like-father-like-daughter moment." Don grumbled, causing Liz to shoot him a glare.

"I was evening the playing field." Liz argued. "He sees Don and I as nothing but government lackies. I had to show a bit of backbone, otherwise, he never would have taken us serious."

"He just as easily could have taken your life!" Red barked.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "But he didn't, did he?" Lizzie questioned pointedly. "Now, can we stop yelling at the only one here trained to negotiate in hostage situations and move on to the next stage of this thing?"

"What is the next stage?" Don asked softly.

Red continued to stare at Lizzie a moment, the fire in his eyes flickering between anger and worry before he finally sighed, looking down at the ground as he scratched his forehead and clear agitation. After a breath, he looked back up, his usual I'm-innocent-and-charming smile back on his face. "Let's go on a field trip, shall we?"

\/

Lizzie looked around woefully as they walked through the village. She subtly tried not to breathe through her nose though she apparently wasn't very successful as Denisov looked at her from the corner of his eye and smirked. "What you're smelling is benzene, a common pollutant in oil production. It's in the air we breathe and the food we eat." He stated, pointing to a vegetable stand in the small outdoor market they were currently walking past. "This way." He murmured before heading into what looked to be a run down soup kitchen or community center.

Denisov quickly guided them to the kitchens. "We boil all our water for drinking and add andrographis to counteract the toxins."

"Does that work?" Lizzie questioned.

"No." Denisov answered grimly before leading them out into the hallway, Red and Don trailing silently behind. As they entered the hall, Lizzie had to fortify herself at the sight of so many ill people sitting on gurneys. There were elderly people, children, people of all ages. "Carcinogens are ingested and cause melanomas, damage internal organs— lung, liver, and kidney failure."
"Somewhere, 6,000 miles away, a group of bean counters in a boardroom did a cost-benefit analysis and concluded that these people aren't worth the cost of responsibly maintaining their pipeline." Red said grimly.

"The exec I talked to, he said your men were sabotaging the pipeline. Said it was a scam." Ressler spoke up.

Denison turned to face him, his nostrils flaring. "My youngest brother died of benzene poisoning last year." He stated before walking further down the hall.

The two agents and Red lagged behind. "So, who's the hostage here, Agent Burke or these poor devils?" Red murmured.

Lizzie looked back to Ressler as he shook his head in disgust. "Look, I don't care what math they did. No company can ignore this. It's bad for business."

The corners of Lizzie's eyes crinkled in sympathy. "Only if someone can prove the truth. Anneca spends a fortune on lobbyists to make sure that doesn't happen. Maybe we can contact the State Department, see if they can apply some pressure, try and clean up this mess."

"And I can see to it that Agent Burke is released unharmed." Red said, giving them a jaunty smile, any trace of his grim demeanor from moments before dusted away like cob webs.

"And then he looks at me, his eyes blown wide as if he can't understand what's just happened, his little face crumples and he begins to cry." Lizzie finished the story of the time Sammy had sneezed while in the bath and blew literal snot bubbles everywhere to the delight of both Don and Red. Don had already heard the story as he had only just been in their bedroom at the time it happened but it didn't stop him from laughing anyway. It was just too adorable.

Lizzie took a bite of her baklava as she chuckled under her breath. "Mmm you were right, this is delicious." She murmured, smiling over at her dad. They were just finishing up their meals in the hotel restaurant and were taking the time to just relax and chat.

Red returned her smile and acknowledged her statement with a small nod. "Well, I for one, miss our little tyke terribly. I'd very much like to take him out somewhere when we get back – how about to the zoo?"

Lizzie smiled indulgently at her dad. "Sure, but only if we all go. It'll be his first time and I definitely don't want to miss it."

Red laughed and Don nodded his head with a smirk, agreeing with the sentiment.

"Of course, of course, Lizzie! A family day at the zoo it is then!" His eyes dimmed for a moment as he gazed around the room, a far off look in his eye that Lizzie had come to recognize. He always got that look when he was stuck in a memory and Lizzie was willing to hazard a guess that this one was about her sister.

Just as she reached out a hand to comfort him, his eyes sharpened and his brow furrowed. As he held his gaze to a fixed point.

"What's wrong?" Lizzie questioned, her eyes following his.

Red's lips purse before he muttered darkly. "Everything."
Lizzie's eyes finally alight on what he was staring at. It was a man sitting at the bar, his eyes shifting, purposefully looking anywhere but at them.

Between the perfectly clipped hair to the dark suit, the man screamed CIA.

"Shit." Liz and Don cursed at the same time.

Lizzie and Don stood in Lizzie's hotel room. Lizzie held out the phone as they had Cooper on speaker.

"When exactly did this happen?" Lizzie questioned.

"Last night around 2100 hours. Uzbek Special Forces are reporting a full-scale raid of the compound."

Don cursed, his hands on his hips as he began to pace. "It was the CIA – the man in the restaurant, he wanted to be seen in public."

"What about Burke?" Lizzie asked. "They went this damn far, they better have found him alive."

"According to the official report, they haven't found him at all." Samar's voice came over the speaker.

"It was an all-out assault. At least a dozen SRU fighters were killed by an army unit led by Commander Kushan." Cooper explained.

"How the hell did he know how to find the compound?" Don questioned, his brow furrowed.

"Heyworth." Cooper said the name as if it were a curse. "That son of a bitch was ordered to stand down."

There was a knock on the door and Don hesitantly walked over, and swung the door open only for Red to walk in as if he owned the place. For all they knew, he might.

"Who's on the phone?" Red questioned in lieu of a greeting.

"Cooper." Lizzie supplied.

"Harold!" Red greeted exuberantly. "Good. I want you to hear this."

"Reddington, you know this wasn't our move." Cooper defended the task force preemptively.

Red nodded in understanding though Cooper couldn't see it. "The CIA – The CIA did what the CIA does. I expected as much, which is why Agent Burke and the other hostages were moved from that compound. The question is why on earth you would share the compound's location with the very people I advised you not to trust."

"I'll deal with Heyworth." Cooper growled.

Red snorted, shaking his head. "Oh, Heyworth is the least of your troubles now. I warned you about Denisov. I told you he was violent and unstable. How do you think he'll react to losing a dozen of his men?"

"You think he'll kill Burke?"
"I have no idea. But now I'm afraid Denisov may not trust me, and I certainly don't trust you. This is a huge setback, Harold."

Don and Lizzie were lounging in her hotel bed, waiting to get the all clear from Red once he's smoothed things over with Denisov. Lizzie flicked through the channels on the TV aimlessly. All of the channels were in either Uzbek or Pashto.

"So yesterday – " Don led off gruffly before clearing his throat. "That was uh… weird."

Lizzie looked over at him, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"When you talked to Denisov… it was eerily like your dad. I uh… it was the first time I actually kind of associated you with him, as his daughter." Don's eyes flickered to the TV then back at her. "I mean, you kind of look like him but that was… weird."

Lizzie sat up, resting her back against the head board. " Weird how? Does it make you uncomfortable?" Lizzie tried to keep her voice even as her stomach became unsettled.

"I mean, it's just that you seemed so comfortable doing it – it was more than just playing a part, going undercover. It was… you. You weren't negotiating a hostage situation, Liz. That was a game of manipulation." Don swallowed. "And you liked it."

Lizzie stood up from the bed, running her fingers through her hair. "What the hell do you think negotiation is, Don?" She questioned, beginning to pace. "Negotiation is manipulating the other person to a different way of thinking – it's getting your way."

"No, negotiation is compromise."

Lizzie stopped in her tracks and looked wide eyed at Don. "You have got to be joking. How naïve can you be?" She spat. "Do you really view, say, hostage negotiation as a compromise? Are you crazy?" She shouted hotly. "It's lying to a criminal – telling them they will get what they want – to keep the hostages alive."

"Is that what we're doing with Denisov? Lying to him?" Don questioned.

Lizzie scoffed. "No, this time, it's actually a bit more what you think negotiation is. We're getting Agent Burke and helping Denisov stop the poisoning of his people in exchange."

"See, compromise." Don taunted.

Lizzie snorted, shaking her head. "'Compromise' suggests that both parties are meeting in the middle to an end that satisfies only part of their original goals. In this instance, we want Agent Burke and we want to help these poor people. It's no hardship for us to aid him with that."

Don rolled his eyes at her. "Yea, and Denisov doesn't care about Burke. He couldn't care less to be rid of him."

"Wow." Lizzie said drily. "Don – " Lizzie shook her head. "Burke is his only play. He knows we want him back and he also knows that once we have him, we could just leave and not help him." Lizzie sighed and sat back down on the bed. "You know that. I know you do. You're just arguing for the sake of arguing. Why?"

"Because you scared me, Liz. I didn't like that
Lizzie looked at Don, her eyes burning with hurt. "That side of me' got Denisov to respect us. 'That side of me' helped us to get the ball rolling and save these people – both Burke and the villagers. 'That side of me,' as you said, proves that I am my father's daughter. He taught me – trained me I guess you could say – how to survive. In this world that we're in – that we're going to be in the thick of – surviving doesn't always mean knowing how to dodge a bullet or kicking someone's ass. It's playing the game. You have to play the game, Don."

Don shifted uncomfortably.

"Don…I'm still me. I'm using what my dad taught me to save those people. I became an FBI agent because I want to help people. But I also know that what I learned is going to come in handy in the months – years to come. But if you can't understand that, if you can't come to terms with that, Don, I need to know," Lizzie sighed in exhaustion. "Because I don't know how much longer I can handle you second guessing what we're doing, second guessing us."

\/\/\/\ 

"I was stupid to trust you!" Denisov spat angrily as Red walked over towards where Denisov and his men were removing their dead comrades – wrapped in bloodied sheets – out of a truck and preparing them for burial.

"Ruslan."

Denisov shook his head angrily. "I was stupid to think that they respected us or would deal with us fairly!"

Red opened his hands out in front of him placatingly. "Take a breath. I told you to move the hostages. You did. Your assets are intact."

"He – " Denisov pointed to a man who was currently squatting in a too small cage. " – was left behind at the compound, abandoned by his commander." He spat before removing his pistol from his holster.

"Ruslan, he's more valuable alive than dead." Red said urgently.

"Not to me." Denisov shot the man and Red watched as the poor soul slumped forward, his face smashing against the rusted bars of his cell.

"I hope that made you feel better." Red said baldly and watched as Ruslan stomped away, towards one of the buildings of their temporary compound. "Apparently not." He murmured.

\/\/\/\ 

Red turned the corner of the hallway just as Burke tumbled out of the closet where Denisov had apparently had him tied up.

"The CIA killed you, you understand? They did this!" Denisov shouted as he aimed his gun at the back of the kneeling CIA agent's head.

"Sacrifice the bishop. Reykjavik, '72." Red murmured, attempting to distract Denisov. "God, I can remember it like it was yesterday. I was in Steven Bash's rec room down in the basement, eating fried egg and bologna sandwich when he did it."
Denisov looked over at Red, his gun still trained on Burke as his brow furrowed in confusion. "Did what? Who did?!"

Red smiled as he reminisced, for all intents and purposes appearing as though he were in the middle of a park on a sunny day rather than a dank abandoned building next to a CIA Agent who had a gun aimed at his head by a off-kelter terrorist. "Bobby Fischer. It was game 13, move 50–rook takes bishop, B5. He sacrificed his bishop." Red barked out a laugh, slapping his leg. "That's when Russia lost the Cold War. It was staggering. Spasky had no answer because he had no endgame, and neither do you." Red paused, his demeanor changing drastically as he gazed steadily, coldly at Denisov. "When you capture and kill a CEO, you incur the wrath of a company. When you capture and kill a CIA agent, you incur the wrath of the US government. That's boots on the ground, drones overhead. What will be your answer to that?"

"My men were murdered. A message has to be sent." Denisov dug the muzzle of his gun into the side of Burke's head, causing the man to grunt.

Red shook his head as if he were a parent and Denisov was his wayward teenager. "You're only seeing the next move. People have been pillaging your country's resources since time began. Someone has to offer a better alternative. That someone could be you. Ruslan, there is an endgame here that you don't yet see." Red looked down at the CIA Agent. "But you see it, don't you, Agent Burke?"

Burke's eyes shifted from the floor to look at Red as best he could without moving his head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Denisov here is so blinded by anger, he thinks this problem started when he became aware of it. But you and I both know that's not true. Why don't you tell us about Zhabin?"

Burke froze for a moment before shaking his head. "I don't know anything."

Red scoffed. "The CIA put you here for a reason. They violated their own policy and federal law to hide you among locals because there's a secret they want to protect. Now tell us about Zhabin."

"No."

Red took a step forward and squatted down next to the man, leaning forward. "Make no mistake, Mr. Burke." Red said ominously. "My friend here is still making the bed he'll have to lie in for the rest of his life. But my bed is made, and I assure you my bed accommodates a broad spectrum of behavior. So you tell us what little you know about Zhabin, or I'll put you in the ground myself."

He stood back up quickly and held his hand out towards Denisov. "Give me the gun."

"Leonid Zhabin – he's the former cabinet minister, part of the old Soviet regime." Burke said hurriedly, his speech quickened with fear. "Ran this whole region from the late '70s to the early '90s. A ruthless, corrupt, evil man. He gave Anneca the right to build the pipeline. And in return, he got a massive kickback and piece of the ownership interest. Possibly insane, very religious now, as if that can save him. All these sick people are his fault."

\\$

Red listened carefully as the man entered the confessional and began muttering his prayers. When the man received none of the expected replies, he hesitated. "Why does the Lord hide his face from me?" He questioned in Uzbek.

Red slid back the screen so that the man could finally see his face. "Maybe he doesn't like you."
Zhabin reared back, his eyes wide. "For you, I'm afraid absolution won't be quite so easy to obtain." Red stood and exited the confessional as Denisov reached into the adjacent one, pulling Zhabin out and forcing him to his knees. "I need all the details of exactly how the Anneca Oil rights were sold – for how much, including gratuities, contingencies, and all the participants."

"I want absolution in the next world, not a life in prison in this one." Zhaban stated, gazing up at Red with false bravado.

Red smiled benignly and began to walk over to a small alcove of the chapel. "Understandable. But it's the confession, not the priest, that gives us absolution."

With a nod of Red's head, Denisov forced Zhabin to stand and dragged him over to Red stood, dunking the man's head into the font of holy water. After several moments, he could hear the man's panicked gurgling as his desperate lungs forced him to open his mouth, receiving nothing but water.

After another moment, Denisov yanked Zhabin's hair, pulling him out of the water.

"The US government says this isn't torture." Red said loud enough to be heard over the sound of the man coughing and throwing up water. "What do you think?"

Denisov dunked the man's head back into the water at Red's nod of command and Zhabin's hands scrabbled against the side of the font, trying to gain purchase against the wet porcelain. With another nod from Red, Denisov yanked Zhabin's head up once more.

"Let me talk, please." Zhabin sputtered.

Red came closer, shaking his head as he gazed down at Zhabin. "Look at yourself. Rich as Croesus, and you let Anneca Oil poison your own countrymen."

"We didn't just poison our countrymen. We killed them, hundreds of them."

Lizzie's cell phone was ringing and she quickly rushed to the table where it sat to answer it.

"Where have you been?" She questioned the moment the call connected. She and Don had had to stay together in anticipation of Red's call and the time spent in Lizzie's small hotel room had been silent and rife with tension since their argument.

"Good news. I've spoken with Denisov. Negotiations will resume immediately."

"Burke's dead, isn't he?" Don questioned.

"No. We have new evidence to present. There is one proviso, however. That mouthpiece from Anneca, the one you spoke to? Bring him along." This was obviously meant as a parting shot.

"Wait, wait." Lizzie shouted before Red could hang up. "We can't leave. Kushan's doubled the guards outside. It's too risky."

Red was silent for a moment. "I may need to have a chat with this Commander Kushan. We'll come to you. See you in an hour."

"Sorry. Sorry." Red apologized loudly as he entered the decadently furnished room with Denisov
and Zhabin. "Traffic coming into the city. Price of progress." Red murmured. "This is Dean Walker from Anneca." Red said, gazing at Denisov as he pointed to the man who was sat between Liz and Ressler.

"Who's this?" Lizzie questioned, her eyes on Zhabin.

Red smiled brightly "The smoking gun. Ugh!" Red groaned with flare as he placed his messenger bag on the floor and sat down, motioning for Zhabin and Denisov to sit as well. "That sounded dramatic. Leonid Zhabin." He stated, introducing the man to his right.

"This is the new evidence that you were talking about." Walker, the executive of Anneca oil said with a scoff. "Ex-minister Zhabin hasn't been in power for 20 years, and with all due respect, sir, the man is not mentally well."

Red shrugged nonchalantly. 'Perhaps not, but 'In a mad world, only the mad are sane.' Kurosawa."

"What the hell is he talking about?" Walker questioned.

"History, Mr. Walker." Red stated. "My new friend knows a great deal about the history of your company's pipeline."

Walker shook his head in annoyance. "History is not new evidence."

Red wobbled his head from left to right as if indecisive. "Or maybe it is. As it turns out, we do agree on one key detail. Your company's current pipeline is not the worst thing on earth."

Lizzie looked over at Red in confusion. "Then what is?"

"The first pipeline– the one Anneca built in 1988, four years before the current one."

Walker shifted on his seat and attempted to pull off a scoff of derision. "Is that what he told you? The man is delusional."

"Probably." Red agreed personably.

"There was only one pipeline." Walker continued. "We broke ground to build it in '92. Read the contracts."

"You're right. The contracts do say that."

"It started before the Wall fell." Zhabin cut in as he opened the leather portfolio folder that he'd brought with him, displaying a stack of legal papers. "Uzbekistan was still a constituent republic of the Soviet Union. Mr. Gorbachev was changing our future. I was allowed to secretly open our markets for an American pipeline."

Walker shook his head. "This is fiction." He stated hastily, looking over at Lizzie as if to convince her.

"I sold the rights to them that year, and they built the first pipeline right away." Zhabin stated, sliding a bill of sale across the table to Liz. "You couldn't even wait to do it right!" He shouted suddenly. "We were all so greedy. The first line was an unmitigated disaster. Hundreds were killed. Whole villages became ill." Zhabin's eyes took on a far away, haunted look. "I still see their faces."

"Then the Soviet Union collapsed, and all hell broke loose." Red chimed in, allowing the man a moment to gather himself. "Anneca paid Mr. Zhabin to orchestrate a cover-up. Bury the dead,
destroy any record that the first pipeline ever existed. It wasn't the only disaster cloaked by those momentous events, hidden from view in the fog of a new world order."

"It's a good story. But that's all it is– a story from a crazy old man." Walker attempted to discredit Zhabin.

Red nodded his head slowly. "Who happened to keep a complete set of the original documents in the hope that, one day, he might find the courage to set things right. Your engineers did better the second time around. At least this one took 20 years to start leaking."

Lizzie shuffled through the papers that Zhabin had given her as Red spoke. "If this is true and Anneca is responsible for hundreds of people's deaths, then you and the other high-level executives will be prosecuted." She said, turning to Walker, her brow crinkled in anger.

Walker licked his lips as he swallowed. "Reparations can be paid to the alleged victims. We can fix this."

"Reparations are all well and good, but the people I represent don't want you to fix it." Red stated.

"They don't?" Walker asked, confused.

"No. The Uzbek people have had quite enough of Anneca's promises. They want you to leave. Pack up your pipeline and leave."

Walker scoffed, shaking his head. "That won't happen."

Red gave his best angelic smile. "Mr. Denisov thought you might need some additional incentive, so Mr. Zhabin was kind enough to direct him to one of the mass graves where victims of the first pipeline are buried. His men are on their way there now. I can stop them if we have a deal."

Walker cleared his throat as he shifted in his seat. "Can I get some water, please?"

"Oh! Yes! Of course." Red pulled a mason jar out of the messenger bag at his feet and set the jar in front of Walker. "This is the water they drink in the villages, the ones directly above your pipeline. Drink up!" He ordered gaily. "Talk to your board. You have 24 hours until we go public."

"Effective immediately, Anneca Oil has elected to cease operation of its local pipeline. And we are thrilled to announce some exciting and highly profitable new initiatives on the horizon..." Lizzie turned from the TV at the hotel bar which was showing a spokesman for Anneca Oil doing a news conference at the sound of someone coming up behind her.

"We got to go." Don announced. "SRU just confirmed – Agent Burke's being released."

"Where?" Liz questioned, standing up from the bar stool.

"Drop point outside the city."

Red smiled from behind the man's desk as the startled Commander walked into his own office.

"Commander Kushan. It's good to meet you. I've heard nothing but terrible things."
"Agent Burke. Welcome back." Lizzie greeted the man warmly as he was led away from the SUV he'd alighted from. They all stood in the middle of a dirt road in the middle of nowhere and Lizzie tried not to let her eyes wander to the tree line and keep her eyes off her father and Denisov.

She knew the CIA, knew how they thought. They weren't going to let two targets like Raymond Reddington and Ruslan Denisov escape untouched. She could only hope that Cooper got to their superior officer in time.

Lizzie led Agent Burke to the SUV Lizzie and Don had driven to the meet and it was like the world was moving in slow motion. He climbed into the back seat and she went around the side, climbing into the passenger seat as Don got behind the wheel. She watched as Red and Denisov both climbed into their SUV. Thank god.

The old military Humvee sputtered as it drove away, having dropped off a UN Humanitarian Aid crate.

Denisov looked to the crate with disinterest and walked over to Red. "I need your help. Commander Kushan and his men are at my compound."

Red smiled at Denisov. "His men are."

"If you can get me out of the country –"

Red nodded. "I can. But I won't."

"They will arrest me." Denisov argued urgently.

Red shrugged. "Perhaps. Sooner or later, we all must pay for our crimes." He murmured softly.

A knock came from the box and Denisov looked from the box to Red in confusion. Red smiled back.

"Is Kushan – ?" Denisov finished his question with a pointed look at the box.

Red shook his head and stepped towards Denisov. "You still don't see it, do you? The endgame. You could run this country, Ruslan." He stated passionately. "What you've done is that important. You brought a multinational corporation to its knees, saved countless lives. You'll make this country billions. You may go to prison for a bit. But you will emerge a hero. One of the few standing in your way is Commander Kushan." Another knock on the box and a muffled shout. "Well, not standing." He amended.

"More on this breaking story. Just hours after Anneca Oil's announcement that the company is shutting down its pipeline comes this surprising development. The government and French oil conglomerate Savillion have reached a deal to nationalize a brand-new pipeline. The deal, said to be worth billions, should gain easy approval and will be finalized within days."

Liz couldn't help the small smirk as she sat at the hotel bar once more, watching the news. Turning in her seat, her smile brightened slightly at the sight of Red and a stranger walking towards her.

"Elizabeth Keen, this is Claude Hippeau, Senior Vice President of Savillion." Red introduced and Lizzie's eyes alighted with recognition. This man was an Executive for the new oil company – the
one that wouldn't poison the Uzbek people and that would bring millions of dollars of revenue and jobs into the surrounding areas.

"Enchanté." Savillion murmured as he leaned forward to kiss the back of her hand.

"It's a pleasure, Monsieur Savillion." Lizzie greeted. "Congratulations on your future pipeline."

Savillion smiled brightly, nodding his head in thanks before turning to Red. "Au revoir, mon ami." He murmured and the two men embraced, giving a kiss on each cheek in goodbye.

"Give my regards to the wife – and the mistress."

\\

Lizzie and Don had sent Agent Burke on his merry way back to the States on a military plane and taken Red up on his offer to fly back on his jet.

Red watched as Don stared at Lizzie as she napped on the small leather couch of his plane, a thin blanket draped over her. The man was staring at his daughter, clearly lost in thought, his brow furrowed in agitation.

"It appears to me as if there is a bit of strife between you and my daughter." Red finally spoke up. He didn't like being in the dark. Especially when it came to his daughter and her happiness.

Don turned to him with a dark look. "I don't think that's any of your business."

Red raised a brow and continued. "Due to recent events, I can only assume that it is due, at least in part to how Lizzie first started off the negotiations with Denisov."

Don's silence and the way his gaze burned holes into Lizzie's slumbering form was answer enough.

"There is something you should know about my family, Agent Ressler." Red stated, his voice losing all amusement, forcing Don's gaze back to him. "Elizabeth is the North Star – she is the guiding light of my moral code."

Don scoffed, making it clear what he thought of Red's moral code.

"Everything I have done, everything I will ever do, is in an effort to keep her safe and protect her. That fact is the foundation of my moral code. I. Will. Do. Anything." Red leaned forward in his chair, closer to Ressler who sat across the small aisle from him. "I want you to think long and hard as you wait for the papers to go through that will make Sammy your son. Don't worry, Agent Ressler, I know that you don't need papers, that he is already your son in every way that matters. Which is why I want you to remember that when you get home this evening and look at our little Samuel. As you watch him sleep in his crib, I want you to ask yourself, 'What would I do to keep him safe?'"

Don swallowed heavily as he looked at Red, unable to look away from the man's fierce gaze.

Red sat back in his seat and crossed his legs. "I believe, Agent Ressler, that you will find your answer will be 'anything.'"

Chapter End Notes
I own nothing.
Don shut and locked the front door behind him and gave a tired sigh. He was finally home. Though the thought gave him little comfort. Liz had gone home as soon as they landed and left him to do the paperwork while she came home to Sammy, giving Ezra a break from his newfound nanny duties. When she'd left though, she'd left things unchanged between them. Don was unsure of his welcome.

He hesitantly walked into the living room to see Lizzie on the floor playing with Sammy. Lizzie was looking at him from the corner of her eye but most of her attention remained on Sammy.

"Uh… hey." Don said softly.

At the sound of his voice, Sammy's head whipped around and he gave a happy squeal. "Dada!"

Don choked on a sudden bout of tears as Sammy got onto all fours and raced over to him as fast as his little hands and knees could carry him. "Hey little buddy!" Don greeted as he crouched down and picked up Sammy – his son, holding him close as he gave him a reverent kiss on the forehead. It was the first time Sammy had called him 'dada' and the moment could not have been more bittersweet.

As Sammy chattered away to him in his baby talk, probably telling him all about his time with Uncle Ezra, Don looked over to Liz to see her watching them intently with glassy eyes.

Don swallowed heavily. "Listen, I think we need to talk – I want us to talk. But I think it's someone's bedtime. If you don't mind, I'm gonna put him down before we talk."

Lizzie merely nodded as she leant against the sofa from where she continued to sit on the floor.

\/

Once Sammy was down and out like a light, Don came quietly down the steps and into the living room. Liz was now sitting on the couch, her hands in her lap as she nervously stroked the scar on her palm.

"Hey." Don murmured stupidly as he sat down beside her.

Lizzie gave a small snort of amusement. "Hey."

There was an awkward silence as neither knew how to start.
"I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry."

Well apparently they both thought that was the perfect way to start.

They both gave a small chuckle.

"No but seriously Liz. I'm sorry – "

"Don, stop." Lizzie interrupted. "I'm the one who should be apologizing." She hesitated. "I forget sometimes that this whole situation is…new for you. And it's going to take some adjustment. I get that." Liz paused, biting her lip. "Well, I'm trying to get that anyway." She corrected. "I just…I've basically spent my entire life preparing for this. My dad and I knew that this was pretty much inevitable. And well, that fact has sort of shaped me, shaped who I am as a person." Lizzie looked down at her hands. "But you've known about this whole thing for about a year now and I get that it's a huge priority shift for you." Lizzie looked back at Don, her face earnest and sad. "And I understand if you can't handle that shift. If you want to – "

"Shut up." Don interrupted.

Lizzie reared back slightly, her eyes widening in shock. "What?"

Don shook his head in fond exasperation. "I know what you're about to say. So shut up. I'm not going anywhere. This is exactly where I need – where I want to be." Don smiled softly. "Your dad gave me a bit of a talking to while you were asleep on the plane. Gave me a bit to think about." Don gave her a small smirk. "But don't tell him I said that. His ego is big enough without anyone telling him he was right." He teased, causing Lizzie to snort.

"But what he made me realize is, family comes first." At Lizzie's raised brow at the obviousness of the statement, Don continued. "I mean, he said that you were his moral code. That everything he does is to keep you safe." Lizzie smiled warmly at this.

"And I get it. You and Sammy…I would do anything to keep you two safe. You're my family. If that means taking down a shady power hungry cult with any means necessary, then lets do it." Don reached over and took Liz's hand. "But I can't promise I won't have more crisis of conscious. I'll do what it takes, but it's not going to be easy and I'm probably not going to like it." Raising her hand to his lips, Don pressed a feather-light kiss to her knuckles. "And I know you well enough to know that even though you have had a lifetime to prepare for this and that some of this stuff is gonna be easier for you to handle, I know that doesn't mean you don't care. You're not a bad person, Liz. I'm sorry if I ever made you think I didn't know that."

Lizzie sprang forward, wrapping her arms around Don's neck and Don got only a quick glimpse of the tears running down her cheeks before they were enfolded in each other's arms.

Glen sat back in his office chair, the hinges creaking as he rocked it back and forth as he cackled. "Not interested. Can't be done."

Red shook his head. "Glen, you have found things for me with far less to go on."

"Ernie's retirement party's tonight." Glen continued as if he hadn't heard Red. "I got to pick up the shrimp platter."
"You found Jerry Minkie's wife after she ran off with the uber driver, the one with the Subaru." Red cajoled, gesturing excitedly with his hand.

"I don't even like shrimp." Glen muttered.

"You found, uh, the other guy – who was that? – That mobster who was hiding out in Needles. Glen, look, you and I we've had our differences, but I have enormous respect for your abilities. You know that." Red stated desperately. "If anyone can help me, it's you."

"It's not the shrimp. It's the dip, that sauce. I don't like sauces."

Red rolled his tongue "You know what?" Red muttered, getting up from his seat and palming his fedora. "Forget it. I don't need this."

Glen stood up from his chair, his arms raised at his side. "What are you so upset about?"

"There isn't a retirement party, is there?!" Red yelled, spinning on his heels. "You're making it up! That's what this is about! This is what you want– to see me get all lathered up!" Red gestured to himself as if to showcase an actual lather. "You're pathological. You realize that, right? Ernie's shrimp platter?! You can't be serious! Do you even see the irony in that?" Red waved his arm at Glen, pointing out the man's short stature.

Glen merely smiled at him, clearly enjoying this, causing Red to groan in agitation.

Knowing when to push Red's buttons and when to cool it had become an art form for Glen. With a small sigh, he sat back down. "Tell me about the safe."

Red shook his head, his lips pursed. "Glen, I'm upset!"

"Your spook friend – he said it was critical."

Red sighed before falling back into his seat. "As I've already told you, he said there is a safe in St. Petersburg on the second floor of I don't know where – a bank, an apartment. He died before he could tell me more."

Glen nodded and leaned forward to grab a pencil and a pad of post-its. "The spook – What was his name?"

"Alan Fitch." Red said succinctly, his mouth biting at the consonants in his aggravation.

"Alan … " Glen murmured as he wrote before pausing and looking up at Red over the rim of his glasses in a clear question to have him repeat himself.

"Fitch!"

/////

Red shook his head. "I am not taking you to St. Petersburg."

"You are if you want to know where the safe is." Glen stated with a shrug.

Red leaned forward in his chair in Glen's stupid office at the god forsaken DMV. "How do I even know you've found it?"

Glen smirked at him. "You don't. But I got two weeks of vacation I got to take before the end of the year or I lose it."
"It's February!" Red barked.

"We could take your jet, have a few laughs on the way, some of those nuts – the honey-roasted ones."

"I want what I paid for – the location of the safe." Red stated darkly.

Glen sighed and leaned forward. "Can I be honest with you?"

"I doubt it." Red scoffed.

"I've never been out of the country. My dad, our vacations as a kid, we drove everywhere – South Dakota, Florida. But you – I look at you and all the places you go and I'd just like to do that once. Plus, I think it'd be fun. I feel like we might have a good time."

Red looked at the poor shrimp of a man, his gaze turning from annoyance to pity. He sat back in his chair with a small sigh and waved his hand in acquiescence.

Glen scoffed and sprang out of his seat. "I'm screwing with you! I was born in London, but I've never been on a private jet." Glen cleared his throat as he began shuffling papers and throwing them into his suitcase. "Anyway, I clock out at 5:30. I'll need to stop by the house, grab a shower, feed the turtle. I can have a bag packed and be wheels up by 9:00."

Red stared at Glen, his eyes wide in horror as he contemplated the logistics of wrapping his hands around the short man's stump of a neck.

/\\\\\\\

"Kenyon's unaccounted for. … Slaughtered. … No sign of him."

Red sighed, his latest burner phone pressed to his ear as he discussed the latest Blacklister with Lizzie from the rather uncomfortable chair in an apartment that looked like it hadn't been decorated since the 80's. Seeing as how he was in St. Petersburg, that may very well be the case. Communism tends to put rather a dampener on cultural progression.

"That's puzzling." Red murmured.

"It appears all the adults were murdered and the children are gone."

Red shook his head. "Kenyon's ideology has always been about vanquishing the infidels and rising to power, not about killing their own. This is a group of survivalists."

"They might have been attacked by a rival militia. We found a number of dead bodies surrounding the perimeter."

"And the storage containers?"

"Located, secured, and searched – about a dozen of them so far. They've been pretty much cleaned out – no weapons, no ordnance. According to an inventory list, we're missing small arms, RPGs, three Hellfire missiles, plus over a ton of Semtex, C4, Demex, and plastite."

Red looked towards the sound of shattering glass where one of his men who had been searching the apartment had accidently bumped into a side table.

"What was that?" Lizzie questioned, having clearly heard the crash.
"That was a vase." Red murmured dispassionately. "What about the vehicles?"

"All the church's vehicles are accounted for, except for one."

"Another bomb." Red said darkly. "Something's gone sideways, Lizzy. Kenyon is the devil we know, but now either others are involved or there's been a complete breakdown in the organization. Either way, be careful out there."

Red quickly hung up at the sound of the toilet flushing. He stood up as Glen came back into the living room, still cinching his belt.

"You're sure this is the apartment?"

"This is the apartment." Glen said in what he obviously hoped was a convincing tone. It wasn't.

"You're positive?"

"Your tone is insulting." Glen huffed.

"My tone?!" Red shouted. "I endured 13 hours with you on my jet, 12 of which you had your shoes off. You snored. You insulted my flight attendant!"

"I thought she was pregnant."

"Glen, the safe!" Red yelled, trying to bring the conversation back around to the task at hand before Glen went off on one of his tangential tall tales. "We haven't found it yet, have we?!!"

"I know everything one can possibly know about Alan Fitch." Glen bit out. "I worked on this 'round the clock, and you know how irritable I can be if I don't get my 10 hours. I've reviewed six years of bank records, and I traced the cash payment he made to purchase an apartment in this very building on this very floor. Trust me, the safe is here."

"I don't trust you."

Glen stared at Red for a moment before walking over to the coffee table. He opened up the brief case he'd brought with them and picked up a piece of paper with a flourish.

"What the hell is this?" Red questioned, snatching the paper out of Glen's hands.

"The title to apartment 221. Apology accepted."

Red stared at Glen, the tick under his eye going full force as his eyes blazed with murder.

"What?" Glen questioned.

"We're in apartment 212."

"You don't know the cross that I bear, the things I've had to overcome – my dyslexia."

"You're not dyslexic!" Red turned from the wall where he'd been tapping with his knuckles, trying to find a hollow spot.

"Raymond." Dembe's voice drew Red over to stand next to him, in front of a rather terrible painting of a Victorian woman.
"Oh, really, 'doctor?' Is that your professional opinion? Forgot to pack my medication. I was shocked when you told me I could come along. It threw me. I left my dyslexia pills on the counter."

Red turned away as Dembe took the painting down, revealing a safe. "There are no pills for dyslexia!" He shouted, forcing Glen to shut his mouth and stare at the floor in embarrassment.

Red quickly turned the dial of the safe, using the code that Fitch had given him just before he died. Once it was open, Red reached in and withdrew the only thing that was in there – a business card with a phone number on it. Turning to Dembe, he handed the card to him. "Get this to Sorenson for a trace on the number."

\\n
Red sat back and practically melted into the leather of the car's backseat as he closed his eyes with a weary sigh. They'd just left Lizzie and Don's home after a lovely visit. He hadn't had an opportunity to see Sammy since he'd gotten back from St. Petersburg and he wanted to check up on the state of affairs between Lizzie and Donald. Everything seemed put back to rights – whether that had happened before they were kidnapped by the little cult of Kenyon boys or after remained to be seen but the end product was the same, that's what mattered. His little girl was safe and happy.

Though his eyes were closed, Red sensed a shift in the shadows of the car behind his eyelids and peaked one eye open. He was met with a view of Dembe outstretching his arm awkwardly from the driver's seat, trying to hand him a burner phone.

"The number from the safe traces to a blind exchange. We can't identify the party you'll be speaking to."

Red paused a moment, gazing at the blue luminescent screen of the archaic flip phone. With a fortifying breath, Red quickly dialed the number from the business card and hit the green button.

Just as Red began to fear that the call would go unanswered, he could here the distinctive click of the line being picked up.

"Yes.' A gruff voice answered.

Red cleared his throat, realizing he had no idea what to say. It was as if everything he'd been doing for the last 25 years had led to this moment and he had no idea what to say. "I'm calling on behalf of Alan Fitch…"

"The safe. You found the safe?" The man on the other line questioned urgently.

Red pulled the phone away from his air to give it a quizzical look before placing it back against his head. "Who the hell is this?"

\\n
"Agent Scott."

Lizzie tried not to huff at the sound of Cooper's voice on the other end of her phone. Really she did. But he was calling her and it was her day off. She was allowed to be a little grumpy, right?

Lizzie hoisted Sammy higher on her hip and held her head away from him as he made a grab for the phone. "Hello sir."
"I was wondering if you could come in, Agent Scott. There's something that needs to be discussed."

Lizzie couldn't hold back a sigh as she looked down at Sammy. "Sir, I have Sammy – "

"Bring him. I'd love to see the little guy and this won't end with you chasing down a suspect. I promise."

Her boss was attempting a light hearted tone but there was something there that put Liz on alert.

"Alright sir, I'll see you in a half hour then."

\///\///

"Gampa! Bay Bay!" Sammy's excited squeals at the sight of Red and Dembe caused everyone in the conference room to laugh as Lizzie and Don walked in with Sammy perched on Lizzie's hip.

Dembe smiled widely at the little boy but stayed put as he knew that Raymond would monopolize his grandson in 3…2…

"Sammy! My darling boy!" Red cried exuberantly as he rushed over and took Sammy from Lizzie's grasp without even a 'by your leave.' Lizzie merely smiled indulgently as she watched her dad and son interact. The two were currently holding on a rather riveting conversation about Sammy's day – Sammy's side of the conversation was indiscernible but that didn't stop Red from answering and replying solemnly and with great mirth, whichever he felt was warranted at the time.

Looking away from the sight, Lizzie smiled over at Cooper as he – and the rest of the team – watched the interaction between the grandfather and grandson with awed incredulity. The image of the Concierge of Crime overlapping with that of Red the family man was still a new experience for them.

"You wanted to speak to us, Sir?" She spoke up, trying to gain everyone's attention and turn their focus away from her son and onto the topic at hand – whatever that may be.

Cooper suddenly pursed his lips and looked down at his hands. After several moments of watching the man fidget, Liz realized that Cooper was nervous. That couldn't be good. Looking around everyone else in the room, their expressions said that they had come to the same realization.

"Yes, well. I have some news and…I would like some advice as well." Cooper gruffed hesitantly.

Lizzie gazed at Cooper with growing horror and sadness. She had come to care for this man – as she did everyone on the team. She respected him. To know that he was…

"I'm so sorry to hear that, Director Cooper." Red said solemnly. "Did the doctors give you a prognosis?"
"They estimated a matter of weeks." Was the gruff reply.

Lizzie heard multiple gasps overlaid with her own. This wasn't fair.

"I offer you anything I can do to help, Harold. I mean it." Red vowed. "However, I get the feeling that this is not the end of your tale."

Cooper nodded and pulled out his chair again to plop down into it with a sigh. "Yes, I started getting visits from an old friend – Tom Connolley."

Liz sat up straight in her seat. She remembered the name. It'd be hard not to. It was the Assistant Attorney General who'd been kidnapped with Cooper by the Judge. The same Assistant Attorney General who'd called her Miss Reddington.

"He first came to offer me the Directorship of the FBI, once he is elected in as Attorney General."

"He seems rather sure of himself." Red murmured.

Cooper shrugged with a small smile. "However, I had just heard of my illness and refused him, told him why." Cooper paused. "There is an experimental trial that held promise but I wasn't accepted. I mentioned this to him. A few days later, he came in and said he'd gotten me into the trial."

"But… that's a good thing, sir, isn't it?" Aram asked hesitantly.

Cooper shook his head as he wrapped his knuckled against the table sharply. "I don't know anymore." He coughed. "He then came in and asked for a favor – a friend of his was about to be indicted. He wanted me to warn the man." Cooper looked down at his lap. "I'm ashamed to say, I did. Tom put me in a position by getting me into the trial… I couldn't refuse."

There was silence in the room as everyone shifted awkwardly.

"Sir… I don't blame you, I imagine I would have done the same if I were in the same position." Liz hesitated and looked to her dad who gave her a small nod of assent, knowing where she was heading. "But Sir, I wish you would have mentioned this before – at least about Connolley coming to visit."

Cooper frowned at her. "I wasn't aware you were to be given final approval of my friendships, Agent Scott." The man murmured.

Lizzie felt her cheeks burn and she looked down at her lap. "That's not what I meant, Sir. It's just that… Sir, he knows who I am."

A chorus of "what's" echoed from around the room, the loudest being from Don who sat up in his seat, his eyes wide and alert.

Lizzie nodded her head. "During the case with the Judge, he called me Miss Reddington." Lizzie looked over at Cooper. "Sir, there's only one way he could have known that."

Cooper sighed heavily and wiped his brow with his hands. "So you're saying that Tom is a part of this organization – the Cabal." He said tiredly.

"I'm afraid so, Harold." Red stated solemnly. "I'm also afraid that you may have unwittingly aided him – and therefore the Cabal – in some small way by warning that friend of his."

Leave it to Red to really dig salt into the wound. Lizzie gave her dad the stink eye for kicking the
man while he was down.

He ignored it. "However, Harold I have a question for you." Red paused, folding his hands over his stomach as he leaned back in his chair. "How long had it been since you'd seen Tom and how soon after you got your diagnosis did Tom start appearing?"

Cooper's brow furrowed in thought. "I hadn't seen him since the case with the Judge and… he started showing up a few days after my diagnosis."

Red nodded sagely but remained silent.

"You think it wasn't a coincidence." Don said softly.

"Very good, Donald." Red said in his usual teasing manner before looking to Cooper. "Yes, I don't believe this was a coincidence at all. How would you feel about having someone I trust very highly – an extremely skilled oncologist – for a second opinion?"

"You think that Connolley got to the doctor first – fudged my results somehow?" Cooper questioned sharply.

Red shrugged as he held up the small toy that Sammy was playing with in his lap, keeping him entertained. "I don't know. That may very well be the case, or Connolley just used the opportunity he was given to worm his way in. The best way to find out is a process of elimination."

Cooper sat for a moment in deep thought before nodding his head decisively. "Yes. Okay, if nothing else, it will ease Charlene to have a second opinion." He said gruffly.

Liz shot Cooper a sympathetic glance and went to stand up as everyone else did, assuming the meeting was over.

"Actually, while I have you all together, I have my own announcement to make – in the interest of full disclosure, of course."

Sammy chose that moment to use the table as a brace to leverage himself shakily onto his feet on his grandpa's lap. Red gently wrapped his hands around the baby's diapered waist as Sammy looked around the room with all the seriousness a 10-month old could muster. "Aba a bo da spoon."

Lizzie and Don immediately laughed, Cooper and Dembe both let out an amused chuckle and Samar let out a snort while Aram let out an adoring gasp, "Oh my god he's so cute!"

Red laughed boisterously, causing Sammy to join in the hilarity with a squeal of giggles.

"I could not have said it better myself, little one!" Red agreed jovially as he leaned forward to kiss his grandson's wavy dark hair.

Once the amusement died down, Red cleared his throat.

"Anyway, as I was saying before I was so cutely interrupted – " Red nodded his head towards his grandson who was now bouncing on his lap in a sort of bouncing baby squat – "I recently found the safe that Alan Fitch was alluding to just before his death." Red said with more solemnity though he could not remove the small smile from his face as his grandson entertained himself.

"Within was a business card with an untraceable number."
"Did you call the number?"

Red raised his brow at Don, clearly unimpressed by the obvious question. "Yes, Donald. I did."

"Who answered?" Aram asked hesitantly.

"I have no idea."

Red hurriedly picked up the receiver of the grubby pay phone the moment it began to ring. "Yes?"

"Sorry I cut our previous call short." The same gruff voice from the last call greeted Red. "I was not confident the line was secure."

"Tell me your name." Red demanded.

"Not yet."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage."

"Yes."

Red rolled his eyes and rested his forearm against the top of the pay phone booth. "Alan Fitch directed me to that safe. Your number was inside. He wanted us to talk. Why? What does he want me to know?"

"It is happening."

Honest to god. Could this man say more than three words? "What is? What's happening?"

"No, not like this – in person. Broadway and island, south side."

Oh look – a full sentence. His mother must be so proud.

Lizzie walked into the living room and flung her purse onto the sofa before plopping down into her favorite overstuffed chair. It'd been another long day of hunting the deer hunter. Don had left a couple hours earlier to pick Sammy up at daycare. They'd both been feeling guilty about the time they'd been putting in at work – away from Sammy – so they had vowed to take turns making sure to pick him up at a normal hour rather than having Ezra be the baby's nanny. It wasn't exactly in the job description they'd given when Liz had first given the poor man his guard duties.

"Hey Babe."

Lizzie smiled, her eyes closed as strong arms wrapped around her shoulders from behind as Don leaned over the back of the chair. Tilting her head back, Lizzie gave Don a warm kiss in greeting.

"Mmm hello to you too." She murmured, opening her eyes. At the sight of Don's adoring gaze, her smile brightened. "Is Sammy asleep?"

"Yep. Just put him down a few minutes ago. He was out like a light." Don said gruffly, nosing Lizzie's hair out of the way to give himself access to her neck. Once access was granted, he took the lobe of her ear between his teeth and tugged gently before soothing the spot with his tongue, enjoying the moan of appreciation the maneuver had enticed. As Lizzie tilted her head to the side,
combing her fingers through Don's hair, he placed a lingering kiss on the soft spot behind her ear.

In a flash, he stood upright and clapped his hands. "Alright! Time for dinner!"

Lizzie spun to face him, her face a mix of bereavement and playful anger. "Oh no you don't, jerk! Your pert butt is coming with me." Lizzie demanded, as she stood up from her seat and grasped Don's hand in hers, marching towards their bedroom.

\\\\

Red stood on the corner of Broadway and 92nd. It wasn't yet 2 but that didn't stop him from checking his watch for the 90th time then eyeing the people around him – sizing up the men to try and match the voice he'd heard on the phone to the various physiques. None of them quite fit.

Just as he lifted his hand to see how many seconds had passed, his burner began to ring. Red groaned before reaching into his pocket to take out his phone.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart, now is really – "

"Someone tried to break into the day care, Dad!" Lizzie's frantic voice gave Red pause and he looked to Dembe, pointing his finger at him then down at the spot where Red now stood, his face an unemotional mask which put Dembe on immediate alert.

"I will be there as fast as I can, Lizzie. Do you hear me?" He questioned gruffly.

"Yea." He could hear the distinct sound of sniffles over the line. "I hear you."

"Good. Now is Sammy with you?"

"Uh huh. We brought all the kids into the Post Office." She said before laughing wetly with a small hint of hysteria. "They're playing with all of Aram's computer parts."

Red chuckled out of duty rather than any actual amusement as he headed to the car, holding his hands out for the keys. "I'll be there soon, Sweetheart."

Red quickly hung up and tucked the phone back into his pocket.

"There's been a security breach at the day care. Stay here. Wait for him."

Dembe looked ready to argue, probably wishing to go to his sister and nephew's aid. However, the somber man took a small breath with that intense gaze of his and nodded, taking up Red's place on the corner as Red sped off.

\\\\

Dembe stood on the corner, attempting to keep his mind in the present yet it continuously drifted to his little sister and his nephew. He could only imagine her panic as his own was mighty.

His thoughts were scattered away at the shrill sound of a telephone ring. Looking around, Dembe quickly found the source of the noise – a payphone several feet away. That wasn't part of the plan.

The phone continued to ring and Dembe jogged over to it before it could ring out.

"Yes?"

"Who the hell are you?" The voice on the other line asked angrily.
"Mr. Reddington asked me to –"

"Why are you wearing a sidearm?" Dembe looked around in every direction. This man could see him, but he could not see the man.

"He needs to reschedule." Dembe stated, still casting around surreptitious glances.

"No, no. That's not how it works. I told him to come alone. I gave very specific instructions."

"Mr. Reddington's a man of his word." Dembe stated, his own anger rising at the apparent besmirch to Raymond's character. "If it were possible, he would be here."

"Wherever he is, whatever the hell he's doing, I hope it's important."

"Lizzie!" Red shouted the moment he was out of the yellow industrial elevator. His daughter immediately spun in her chair, Sammy in her arms as Donald hovered over them both.

"Gampa!" Little Sammy cried, though his enthusiasm was dampened by the heavy mood of the war room, he still outstretched his little arms in greeting.

Red quickly snatched up his grandson and held him tightly. "Hello my darling boy." He murmured, kissing Sammy's head. Red then looked to Lizzie and Donald, his eyes displaying his expectation of some answers as he perched Sam on his hip.

"There were three of them. One guy was trying to cut the power while the other two covered the door." Don spoke up, his arm around Lizzie's shoulders. "Ezra noticed the guy first – shot him from his perch on the roof." Don continued gruffly. "He alerted the other guards. Andrew took out one guy. The other guy tried to make an escape when his friend went down, Andrew put an end to him too."

"Any witnesses?" Red asked gruffly as he swayed on his feet as little Sammy blinked sleepily.

Lizzie shook her head as she squared her shoulders. Though a small sniffle escaped, she steeled herself to the task at hand. "No. It took place in the alley between the post office and the day care."

Red nodded thoughtfully. "And all three are dead? Why would Andrew and Ezra do that? They know we would have wanted to talk to them."

Lizzie gave a sad smile. "They feel guilty about that but they've got a soft spot for the kids. Especially Sammy. These guys were trying to kidnap them."

Don scoffed bitterly. "I don't blame them. I would have done the same."

Red nodded, forced to agree.

"How close did they come to getting in?" Red asked.

"Not close at all." Aram stated from where he sat at his desk. He immediately blushed when he looked up from his computer to see them all staring at him and realized he'd just butted into their conversation. "Uh…right. Sorry."

Red waved his unoccupied hand at Aram in a 'please continue' gesture.

"Yes. Okay…so, the guy trying to cut the power from the outside would have been completely
unsuccessful."

"How so?" Red questioned encouragingly.

"The box out there is a decoy. It doesn't shut off anything. No one keeps a fuse box outside anymore." Aram said with a scoff. "And we spliced the power to that building – the power for the lights and stuff, that's controlled by a fuse box in the basement." With a few clicks of the fingers, Aram brought up a blueprint of the day care onto the large screens above them. "The power for the security system is here in the post office."

"What? How?" Lizzie questioned.

Aram brought up another schematic – this one was obviously of the post office and the day care and included the alley between them. "We ran cables – encased in titanium that is encased in cement that's encased in more titanium – under the alley, connecting the day care's security system to its own box here in the post office." Aram paused. "The only way they would have been able to shut down the power would be to drill a 10 foot hole in the alley then cut through the titanium and cement casings in order to get to the wires, or break into the post office."

Aram looked between the three people, expecting to see relief and happiness. Instead he saw worry and concern. "Uh… guys?"

"They would have cased the building – even if they were just trying to break into a chemicals warehouse, they would have cased it, learned about the dummy box." Don murmured, referring to the front that they'd created to mask what was truly inside the four walls of the day care building. "Any actual surveillance would have told them that."

"Yea… so? Maybe they didn't case the place." Aram suggested.

Lizzie shook her head. "No. It was a team. Teams – especially thieves – don't work on a whim. Thieves like to case a place."

"Theft is only a crime of opportunity for addicts and indebted gamblers. And most addicts and gamblers would set their sights on residences, not warehouses." Red agreed.

"Okay… so what's that mean?" Aram asked.

"It means they had no intention of getting in in the first place." Lizzie murmured worriedly.

"But that doesn't make sense!" Aram said in agitation. "Why would they take that risk?"

"Because someone told them it wasn't a risk. Someone who told them what to do." Red stated solemnly, his eyes never leaving Lizzie. "This was never a kidnapping; this was a threat."
“This is insane!” Cooper barked. “You’re saying that Tom hired some thugs to attempt to break into the daycare to threaten us? He wouldn’t do that.” Cooper shook his head, refusing to believe what he was hearing.

“Harold, the man you knew – the man you thought you knew, doesn’t exist.” Red said solemnly.

The team were all squashed into Cooper’s office. Red was sitting in the seat on the opposite side of Cooper’s desk from the man himself, Lizzie leaned against a filing cabinet with Don standing beside her. Samar stood in front of the door, her feet planted and her arms crossed over her chest while Aram stood in the corner of the room, attempting to become one with the wall.

“Harold, have you spoken to Tom recently?” Red continued. “Have you given him any reason to doubt us – to doubt you?”

Cooper sighed and wiped his hand across his face. “I haven’t spoken to him since our last meeting but… I dropped out of the trial.”

Lizzie made a small distressed sound in her throat, blushing as everyone looked to her. “Sir… I think we’d all understand if you wanted to take advantage of the trial, just in case…” Lizzie cut herself off with a wince though everyone in the room knew how the sentence would end – just in case you’re going to die.

Cooper smiled sadly at Lizzie and shrugged his shoulders. “I have a meeting with the doctors that Reddington introduced me to. We’ll be discussing my test results. And if…if the prognosis is still just as bleak, then that’s okay.” Cooper said heavily. “I will not accept charity from anyone belonging to the Cabal. Even if they’re supposed to be my friend.”

Lizzie nodded in understanding though the entire room had grown solemn.

“It’s not exactly charity if he expects things in return, Harold.” Red countered gently, forcing Cooper to nod in agreement.

“So what are we going to do?” Samar spoke up. “If Connolley suspects that we know about the Cabal, should we assume that the entire organization is also aware?”

“They’ll wait, bide their time.” Surprisingly, it was Don who spoke in his usual gruff manner. “They’re not going to come after an FBI task force just because a guy decided not to do an experimental medical trial.” He continued, throwing an apologetic glance over at his boss at his blasé manner of speech. “There could be any number of reasons Cooper may have dropped out – the most likely being that he just wasn’t comfortable doing favors for Connolley in return.”

After a moment of heavy silence in which everyone contemplated the veracity of Don’s speech, Red clapped his hands causing several of the people in the room to jolt in shock. “Now! Aram, if you would please allay my dear daughter’s worries and explain all of the security measures currently in place at the daycare in excruciating detail. Please.”
Red pulled Aram off to the side of the hallway as they all exited Cooper’s office.

“Red, I need your assistance locating the source of a call that was placed to a pay phone – at 92nd and Broadway.” Red said, his voice a low murmur in Aram’s ear as he held onto the young man by his elbow.

“I need a warrant.”

Red stared at Aram, his face a cold mask. “You won’t need a warrant.”

Aram swallowed heavily. “Of… of course I won’t need a warrant.”

“This is the number.” Red reached into his pants pocket and withdrew the business card that had been in the safe. “The call was placed at exactly –” Red paused and squeezed Aram’s arm when the man didn’t seem to acknowledge that he was still speaking, only continued to stare down at the card. “Aram?”

Aram seemed to shake himself, looking back up at Red. “Yes.”

“I can’t stress enough the urgency of this matter.”

Dembe checked the caller ID as his phone buzzed, absentmindedly bouncing the plastic giraffe in his hands, forcing the poor thing to do some strange zombie dance. Recognizing the number, he quickly answered.

“Yes?”

“… Uh, yes … Uh, Mr. Reddington said I should call as soon as I traced the call.” Aram’s stammering voice came over the line. Dembe couldn’t help the small smile that quirked at the edge of his lips. He enjoyed the nervous man. He was funny, and a kind soul. Also brave when it was needed.

“Did you have any success?”

“… Uh, yes, I have an address. Uh, 3130 Sheridan Road, Park Slope.”

Dembe hung up on Aram and looked down beside where he lay on the floor when he felt a small smack on his hand. The sight that greeted him was a little Sammy attempting to scowl at him in obvious affront.

“Bay Bay!” Sammy demanded.

“I’m very sorry, Sam.” Dembe said with as much sincerity as he could muster around a small chuckle. “Shall we play with the blocks next?”

Lizzie looked up from her paperwork at her son’s sudden squawk. Although the day care’s security had proven top notch and next-to-impenetrable, Cooper had allowed any parents who didn’t have an alternative, to bring their kid to work if need be. Lizzie had taken full advantage of it, not wanting to let Sammy out of her sight. She knew Dembe and Ezra could watch him, there had already been a few times she and Don had to go out into the field and the two body guard/ nannies had taken over Sammy’s care. But Liz found it incredibly difficult to let go. No one had dared to
mention that Sammy would be the most likely target of any hit on the day care. No one needed to
mention it. The fact bounced around her head every moment.

Liz watched as her son bounced excitedly in his play pen in the corner of the office as her dad
walked in.

“By all means, come right in.” Lizzie said sarcastically. Red’s only answer was a benign smile as
he walked over to Sammy’s pen and plucked him out. “Make yourself at home.” Lizzie teased.

“Madeline Pratt has been abducted.” Red stated without preamble as he sat down in the chair
across from Lizzie’s desk and plopped his grandson onto his lap. Sammy immediately wrapped his
tiny little spit-soggy hands around his grandpa’s tie. To his credit, Red didn’t bat an eye at the
ruination of a tie worth hundreds of dollars.

Lizzie watched the scene as Red stared bemusedly down at his grandson as Sammy amused
himself with his attire. “What do you care?” Liz questioned. “She almost got us both killed.”

Red shrugged a shoulder. “Foreplay. My relationship with Madeline is nuanced. Confounding, yet
captivating, she’s a singular woman, and the world is far more interesting with her in it. What’s
more, her abductors meet every requisite that defines inclusion on the Blacklist. The Kings.”

Liz scrunched her nose in disgust. “Okay first of all – I’m gonna need you to cut the word
‘foreplay’ from your vocabulary. Secondly – the kings? Of what?”

Red chuckled at his daughter’s discomfiture at even a whisper of sexuality coming from her dear
old dad. “Not ‘king’ as in ‘king and castle.’ Earl King and his two sons, Tyler and Francis,
descendants of a Senescent Dynasty.” Red elaborated. “Their forefathers built a fortune on the
backs of British undesirables, forcing them into decades of indentured servitude– a tradition that
has been passed from generation to generation that still continues today.”

“So, what does this have to do with Madeline Pratt?” Lizzie questioned, as she sat back in her chair.

Red supported Sammy’s bum with one hand as the tot pulled himself up by Red’s tie – choking
Red in the process – to stand wobbily on Red’s lap, leaning towards his grandpa to hold onto his
shoulders. “Madeline has made a number of well-heeled enemies over the years, many of whom
would pay a handsome price for her head.” Red chuckled as his grandson stared up at him before
leaning forward slightly to blow a raspberry on Sammy’s cheek, causing the baby to squeal with
laughter. Once they’d both recovered from their mirth, Red continued. “If merely saving a
woman’s life isn’t enough to warrant the Bureau’s interest, consider what taking down a dynasty
like the King family would mean. Every transaction meticulously recorded for posterity in the
family ledger. Sometimes, years pass between auctions. They’re never held in the same place
twice. The guest lists are constantly changing. This is your chance to solve a century and a half’s
worth of abductions and thefts from the Davidoff Morini Stradivarius to the disappearance of
Raoul Wallenberg.” Red grabbed Sammy around the waist and leaned to the side, fishing
something out of his coat pocket before tossing it onto Lizzie’s desk. “This phone belonged to a
boy in the port of Lisbon, where Madeline was abducted.”

Lizzie took the phone and quickly navigated to the photo library. “Pictures of the kidnapping.” She
stated as she thumbed through the photos.

Red nodded, his mood turned somber. “Find the jackals who took Madeline and they’ll inevitably
lead you to the Kings.”
Ressler leaned back against one of the work stations in the war room, folding his arms over his chest. “So, we’re going after one blacklister to save another.” He framed his question as a statement as he gave Liz a raised brow you-can’t-be-serious look. “Tell me how that makes sense.”

Liz smirked and shrugged her shoulders as she shuffled through the files laid out in front of her. “Earl King and his two sons, Tyler and Francis – from available intel, they appear to be an eccentric family of trust-fund billionaires. According to Reddington, they supplement their family fortune with profits from their illegal auctions.” Lizzie grabbed one file and slapped it against Don’s chest, forcing him to grab it or let the pages flutter to the ground. “Six months ago, seized by MI5 disappeared from their evidence vault in Leeds. The painting – stolen from the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.” Lizzie said as she pointed to a photo in the file of the painting that she spoke of. “Red claims both these items will fall under the gavel at the Kings’ next auction.”

“I think I might have something.” Both Liz and Don’s heads spun as they turned towards Aram before they quickly walked over to his desk. “I isolated this image from the pics, ran it against our known-tattoo database, and got a hit.” Aram hit a button on his keyboard with a bit more force than necessary, drawing up a man’s mug shot onto the large screen. “Silvio Haratz, a Brazilian-born kidnapper working the world’s K&R hotspots. If the auction’s gonna be held on US soil, Haratz is headed here.”

“We’re gonna need local intel.” Don muttered.

Aram nodded in agreement. “The DOJ has an active file on Haratz, but it’s restricted access.”

Liz, Don and Aram’s eyes all slide over to Cooper who’d been standing behind them as they discussed, listening without being overbearing. As their eyes all fell on him, Cooper sighed and rolled his eyes, harried, before rubbing his hands over his face.

“Do what you gotta do.” He murmured gruffly.

Lizzie and Aram shared a small secret smile while Don nodded decisively, his lips thin.

\\\\

“Scott.” Lizzie’s voice comes over the line.

“Hello Sweetheart!” Red greeted before turning the phone towards his back seat companion and putting it on speaker. “Sammy, want to say hi to Mommy?” He asked happily.

On the other end of the line, Lizzie laughs. “Hi baby! Are you having fun with Grandpa?”

At the sound of his mother’s voice, Sammy immediately began kicking in his car seat, his mouth widening in a gummy smile as he cooed and strung together a string of words that made sense only to him.

“That sounds wonderful, baby! I’m so glad you’re having a fun time. I think I need to talk to grandpa though. I love you!”

Sammy gave a garbled response back and Red took the phone off speaker, still chuckling at his grandson’s antics as he put the phone to his ear.

“The suspect’s name is Silvio Haratz. He’s using a safe house called The Palace. We’re on our way.”

Red sat up in his seat, his face growing harsh as he leaned forward, tapping Dembe on the
shoulder. Knowing immediately that something was up, Dembe pulled over. “No. I know The Palace. You people get within a mile of that place, he’ll be made. I’ll handle it.”

“Forget it, Dad. You can’t call us off. We’re on it.”

At the sound of dead air, Red cursed under his breath as he stuffed the phone into his pocket.

“Raymond, language.” Dembe said sternly, looking at him disapprovingly through the rear view mirror.

Red smiled apologetically over at Dembe before switching his gaze to Sammy. “Yes, I do apologize. Please do not repeat that fun sounding word around your mother, yea? She’ll have my head.” He said with mock solemnity before turning to Dembe.

“Call Ezra. We’re going to need a babysitter.”

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Red and Dembe moved through the decadently decorated and sparsely lit hotel room, their weapons raised in front of them as they stuck to the walls and cautiously rounded corners. As they entered the living room area, Red slowly crept towards the man who seemed to be slumped in a chair. As he approached, he noticed that the man was tied up… and that he had taken a bullet to the head. He quickly ID’ed the guy as the man with the terrible tattoo – one of the guys that took Madeline.

Red heard a distinctive click and both he and Dembe spun towards the noise. Red watched as Maddie walked through a doorway, her wrists seemingly tied behind her back as an average looking man in glasses wearing a high end coat followed behind her.

Red knew he was surrounded. Dembe was on a swivel, keeping his gun raised, unsure who to hit or if he even should.

“How much do you want for her?” He asked, his voice low.

Four eyes – Francis King – snorted and pushed Maddie forward. “You can have her.”

Madeline appeared to stumble towards Dembe. Just as she was about to fall right into the man, she brought her hands up – the hands that Red had thought were tied behind her back. The sound of electricity crackling broke through the quiet of the room.

“Sorry, Dembe.” Red heard her murmur as Dembe fell to the ground with a dull thud.

“Well-played, Madeline.” Red said darkly, his pursed lips the only outward sign of his anger, his fury. “Payback for my little gambit last year, I presume.” Red continued as he held his hands up at his sides and was immediately swarmed by cronies.

Madeline gave him a coy smirk. “Consider us even.”

Francis King stepped forward, not liking be the center of attention. “Raymond ‘Red’ Reddington. Lot number 11.” Red held his head high as King inspected him like he were prized cattle. “Beautiful.”

Red raised a brow at the vigorous frisking he was receiving from the cronies. “Careful there, boys. You don’t want to bruise the merchandise.”
Red was shoved into what appeared to be a warehouse cellar. He was a bit disoriented as they’d placed a bag over his head while they were in transit. However, as he was shoved through a doorway, he could see crates, paintings…cages, all lining cold cement cellar walls.

He was pushed towards a man with salt and pepper hair wearing a well-tailored suit who sat at a desk, pen in hand and a ledger sat in front of him. The man smirked at him before picking up a polaroid camera. Red’s lips pursed as the guards who held him forced him to stand up straight just as the camera shutter went off.

He watched as the man glued his picture onto the thick page of the ledger and wrote Red’s name.

Lizzie and Don slowly made their way through the dark hotel room, cautiously rounding corners and sticking close to the wall. As they came into the living room, Lizzie gasped at the sight.

There on a chair, his hands tied behind his back, was their suspect. Someone had clearly gotten to them first.

“Liz.” Don murmured Lizzie’s name from where he stood further in the room. Her brows furrowed, Lizzie came to see what he was looking at and cried out. She rushed over, dropping to her knees.

“Dembe!” She shouted, shoving her brother onto his side. “C’mon Dembe, wake up!”

Her brother let out a groan and opened his eyes. Lizzie let out a huff of a laugh in relief, her eyes stinging. “Hey asshole.” She teased wetly.

Dembe gave her a weak smile, his eyes flitting across the room. He must not have seen what he’d hoped to see as his eyes began to furrow in concern.

“Raymond. Is he here?” He questioned urgently.

Lizzie shook her head as worry gripped her.

Dembe sat up with a groan. “He has been taken, Elizabeth. It was a set up. Madeline was helping the Kings.”

“Shit.”

“We intercepted Dembe.” Don shouted as he and Lizzie ran into the Post Office war room.

“He informed us they used Pratt as bait, faked the kidnapping in order to bring Red into the Kings’ custody.” Lizzie explained as they reached the work station where the rest of the team were gathered.

“King family auctions are all about providing criminals with items of value.” Samar said softly. “What’s more valuable than Reddington?”

Cooper’s mouth thinned as he spun around to face Aram. “Where are we on potential auction locations?”
Aram cleared his throat before he hit a button on the edge of the table they surrounded causing the table top to suddenly become a giant screen. “The Kings have real-estate holdings all over the world.” He murmured, touching the screen lightly with the pads of his fingers to bring up real estate listings and pictures. “You’d have to be invited to know where this thing is.”

“Let’s not focus on the Kings. Let’s focus on the Kings’ guests.” Lizzie ordered. “Try and match the items we know they have for sale with the people who might be interested in buying them.”

“We’ll put together a list.” Cooper dictated, obviously agreeing with Liz. “Alert Immigration and the TSA on major points of entry. Identify and report only. Do not detain.”

Red stood upon a short pedestal inside of a clear fiberglass box. His elbow was crooked and held out like a broken wing as a silent tailor took his measurements. “Your insistence on not speaking, sir, is making a tedious exercise ever so much worse.” Red murmured.

Expectedly, he received no response. However, Red watched as a cage was rolled in, a man with perfectly coifed hair, wearing dress slacks and a button down underneath a rather nice sweater strode in behind it.

“Over here, gentlemen.” The man pointed boastfully to a clear area in the room and the men rolling the cage followed his direction.

Red swallowed heavily as he got a glimpse inside the cage. It was a young boy – no older than 12.

“Please. Someone help me.” The boy cried out. Red’s blood boiled. He imagined the boy were Sammy. He regretted the thought the moment it flitted through his brain.

The man in the sweater walked towards Red’s cage, his hands in his pockets as he stuck out his chest – still waltzing about on a high from his own ‘catch.’

“Raymond Reddington in the flesh.”

Red gave a pleasant smile. “You must be Tyler. I hope you’re not as short-sighted as your brother. I could be one of your most valued customers.”

Tyler chuckled as he shook his head. “As I recall, you’re one of the few prospects who rejected an invitation to our auction. Nice try, though.”

Tyler chuckled as he shook his head. “As I recall, you’re one of the few prospects who rejected an invitation to our auction. Nice try, though.”

“I haven’t even begun to try. There is one thing about your family that’s always intrigued me. Statistically, 65% of inherited family fortunes are frittered away by the second generation.” Red stated as the tailor continued to take his measurements. “By the third generation, it’s 90%. How is it that the Kings have successfully defied that trend? You must tell me your secret.”

“Winner takes all.” Tyler stated as if that explained everything.

“And the loser?”

“None of your business.”

Well that was ominous. Red silently watched as Tyler turned on his heel and walked away. Red winced and looked down to where the tailor was taking his measurements for his inseam. Rather more intimately than necessary.
“Really, I’m all for being thorough, but at this point, you’re just taking the nickel tour.”


Aram’s fingers danced over the keyboard as he sent several documents and pictures to the overhead screens.

“Alexi Koskov, a Russian oligarch with an extensive collection of stolen masterpieces.” Lizzie stated as she looked at the screens. She’d already look through the file and knew it by heart but it was nice to have a visual when you spoke about someone. “The Art Crime Division says he’s been trying to acquire the Van Gogh since it disappeared in 2002.”

“Koskov’s on the no-fly list. How can he get into the country?” Samar questioned.

“He can’t.” Aram stated simply. “But his new acquisitions emissary, Josephine Sullivan, flew in from LA this morning.” Aram brought up a picture of the pretty blonde woman dressed to the nines in couture. “She just checked in to The Vanguard.”

Cooper nodded decisively. “Bring her in.”


“We know you’re working as a representative for Alexi Koskov to authenticate and purchase a stolen painting from an illegal auction. As such, we can charge you as an accessory after the fact, not only for the Van Gogh, but for every crime the King family has committed to acquire the rest of their stock, including kidnapping and false imprisonment.” Samar stated, her face a passive mask.

Lizzie tossed a file across the desk and it landed with a thick thud. “This is the Bureau’s file on you and your boss.” She stated as she gazed at the woman sitting across from her in the interrogation room. “Koskov is untouchable. But you’re right here.”


“Her instructions were to introduce herself to the concierge at The Harleston Read Hotel. Owned by the King family trust.” Samar explained as she leaned against Aram’s desk.

“Everyone there is on their payroll.” Lizzie continued.

“That’s it?” Cooper asked warily.

Samar shrugged. “She’s supposed to ask for a room with a view of the Capitol.”

“Then what?”

“She’d get a room number.” Samar expounded. “After that, no idea. She’s never attended the auction. Beyond the hotel and the password, we have nothing.”

“That’s not necessarily true.” Liz spoke up. “They’re expecting an American named Josephine Sullivan. We can give them that.” Out of the corner of her eye, Liz saw Don stand straighter, his hands going to his hips in his typical don’t-fuck-with-me stance.

“Undercover? Forget it.” Cooper dismissed.

Samar looked to Lizzie, her eyes crinkled with sympathy. “I know you want him back, but there has to be another way.”
Liz scoffed angrily. She didn’t want sympathy. She wanted her dad back. “If you can think of one, I’m all ears.”

Cooper sighed and scratched his forehead. “Okay. We do it. But only as far as the hotel. Go there. Get what you can. I’ll have a tac team standing by to hit the auction as soon as you give us a location.”

\//\//\//\n
“You’ll need this for the elevator. Enjoy your stay.” The receptionist stated with the typical customer service I-have-to-say-this-every-soul-sucking-day-but-they’re-paying-me-to-smile false cheer.

“Thank you.” Ressler murmured as he took his key and leisurely made his way over to one of the couches in the enormous lobby.

“She should have a tracker, coms at least. She’s going in blind.” He murmured grumpily, knowing that Samar would hear him through the com.

“She can handle it.” Samar’s voice consoled.

Before he can come up with a response, Liz walked into the lobby. And damn she looked good. Dressed to the nines in a pant suit that put anything Hilary Clinton ever wore to shame. Everything she wore spoke of money – from her sexy no-nonsense blouse and slacks to the come hither heels, Liz looked like a million bucks. And that probably wasn’t too far off the mark from the actual price tag. Being the daughter of Raymond Reddington had its perks and Lizzie never really took advantage of them.

She was always beautiful but… damn. Ressler had no words to describe the fantastic mix of sexy and classy so he merely stared at her as she walked passed and murmured into his com. “She’s in.”

\//\//\//

Liz could feel Don’s heated gaze on her and though it felt damn good, she felt like slapping him upside the head. Now was not the time. “I have a reservation. Sullivan. Josephine Sullivan.” She said, affecting the slightly pompous air of the nuveau riche as she leaned against the reception desk.

“Of course, Ms. Sullivan.” The male receptionist murmured before he began clicking away on his computer. “We have you in a one-bedroom suite.”

“With a view.”

“Excuse me?”

“I requested a view of the Capitol.”

The receptionist smiled brightly. “That can be arranged.” He said cheerfully before his fingers began to dance across the keyboard once more. With a final nod, he pointed towards the elevator bay. “Last elevator on the left.”

\//\//\//

Red sat shackled to a barber’s chair in the middle of an expansive room, his head tilted cock-eyed as a barber shaved his face with a straight razor. At the sound of a door opening and a mechanical
whirring, Red looked up, careful not to move his head.

“Good heavens, Earl. You’ve never had any feeling in your heart, but now it looks like there isn’t much going on below the waist.” Red said jovially as he watched a man – who he knew to be around his age but appeared to be much older – navigate his electric wheelchair into the room.

Earl smiled wolfishly before pressing his hand to his tracheal tube. “I do all right.” Red held back a wince at the mechanical sound of the man’s voice produced by his intubation. He sounded like a telemarketing robot. Or a shitty GPS. “The wheelchair is just a little memento of our time together in Bolivia.”

Red smiled benignly. “No hard feelings, I trust.”

Earl smirked as he continued to keep his hand over his throat. “Just a few. But this is only business, Red. Besides, you warned me. ‘Pigs eat – ‘”

“‘Hogs get slaughtered.’” Red said with a laugh as the barber swathed some more lather onto his face. “All you had to do was listen. But that’s always been your problem – all that money clogging your ears. I told you to come with me that night out on the Altiplano.”

“I had millions invested. I couldn’t just walk away like you.”

“Poor choice of words given what those soldiers did to you.” Red stated with a chuckle as he looked pointedly at Earl’s chair. “I’d hate to see you play the hog yet again, Earl.”

“No, no, Red. You taught me an invaluable lesson. Dispassion is the businessman’s best friend. One mustn’t get emotionally involved in business. You have to listen to the market. You hear that? That’s the market telling me you are in demand. What kind of a commodity are you? A wealth of secrets and information? Or are you an impulse purchase for a buyer to settle a score? You scare people, Red. How much would you pay to be rid of your deepest fear?”

God, men with electric voices should not be allowed to give monologues. Red had to suppress a shiver at the creepy sound. “I’ve always found fear to be my most valuable sense. But then again, you Kings demonstrate a propensity for having more dollars than sense.” Red paused with a chuckle. “Your son Tyler was telling me– ‘Winner takes all,’ I believe he said. I’m curious strictly from an estate-planning perspective. What exactly does that mean?”

Earl’s face clouded over with anger and he quickly spun his wheelchair around and left the room.

\///\\

Lizzie walked around the ball room, a champagne flute held daintily in her hands as she roamed around, taking a peek at all of the ‘merchandise’ as the classical music played. Soon, the musical cut off abruptly and everyone seemed to turn as one towards the center of the room where the Kings – Earl and his two sons Francis and Tyler – stood (well, in Earl’s case, sat).

“Ladies and gentlemen.” Earl greeted and Lizzie visibly cringed at the man’s robotic voice. She felt guilty but it always gave her the creeps when she interacted with someone who had a tracheal tube. “Welcome to The Vicarage. I would like to thank you for traveling many a weary mile to join us on this very special evening. As is customary, you will have 30 minutes to spend among the lots – a taste to whet your appetite and loosen your purse strings.”

Everyone in the room laughed politely.

Earl took something from his son, Francis and struck a large gong that had until then gone
unnounced by Lizzie. “It begins.” He announced.

The music soon resumed and everyone began to mingle amongst the ‘merchandise.’

Lizzie moved towards one of the fiberglass cages and read the placard. “Hello Vincent.” She said, trying to keep her voice aloof as she stared at the young boy.

“See something you like?” Lizzie turned as if startled at the sound of Tyler King’s voice as the man came up behind her to stand with her. “Little Vincent Peretti, Ms. Sullivan, of the Peretti family. Big Vince has turned state’s evidence. There are half a dozen Serbians and Sicilians willing to pay dearly for the leverage to insure his silence.”

Lizzie smiled and raised her brow in apparent interest.

“So, I understand you’re here on behalf of Mr Koskov.” Tyler continued.

“Yes, I am.” Lizzie stated, walking over to the painting that she was supposed to be interested in and leaned as close to it as she could, fully aware of the velvet rope keeping her from getting closer. “It’s rumored Van Gogh actually painted it at the beach, and up close, you can see the grains of sand bonded to the canvas.”

“Remarkable.” Tyler said in a tone that clearly indicated he found the fact anything but remarkable. “So, which Ivy League did you attend? It’s no secret Alexi fancies a certain breed.”

Lizzie chuckled airily. “Columbia, then Princeton.”

“Really?” Tyler questioned happily. “I’m a Princeton man. Mm!” The man chuckled, his eyes going distant for a moment as he reminisced. “The Dinky was such fun, wasn’t it?”

Lizzie swallowed before bringing her hand up to her nose and letting out a small sneeze. It was the oldest trick in the book. Best way to divert the conversation from somewhere you don’t want to be – especially if it’s going to blow your cover – then sneeze. Nine times out of ten, the person you’re with will forget what they had asked. Her dads taught her well.

“Bless you.” Tyler murmured.

Lizzie smiled apologetically as she feigned a sniffle.

“Oh, the Dinky.” Both Tyler and Liz turned at the sound of Red’s voice. “No matter the time of day, that damn train is always full of hung over frat boys and co-eds in the throes of morning-after regret.”

Lizzie raised her brow in surprise and walked down towards Red’s cage. Jesus Christ, her dad was in a cage. Lizzie had to swallow the bile and unclenched her hand, her mind drawing up images of various ways she wanted to kill the Kings. “Is that who I think it is?” Lizzie murmured, her voice tinged with curiosity rather than the simmering anger that she felt.

“Well, I can see that you are a woman of good taste.” Lizzie turned her head towards the new voice – Francis King. Francis looked to his brother as he sidled up on Lizzie’s other side. “Tyler, I believe the Sheikh has questions about your guidance chips.”

As Tyler excused himself, Lizzie stepped closer to her father’s cage. “The Raymond Reddington. Impossible.” She said softly in apparent awe.

“You’ve changed your hair.” Red murmured and Lizzie covered her smile by taking a sip from her
champagne flute. Of course her dad would know that the woman she was pretending to be was blonde.

“You know each other.” Francis said with surprise.

“Unfortunately.” Liz drawled.

“Perhaps you’d like to make a bid.” Francis offered as if he were selling cars. Lizzie wanted to take his glasses, snap them in two and then gouge his eyes with the broken pieces.

“I’ve heard he’s far more trouble than he’s worth.” Lizzie said with a chuckle. “It’s probably easier to let someone else buy him. Let him be their problem. I’m here for the Van Gogh. He’s probably out of my price range, anyway.” As she spoke, Lizzie wandered back over to the painting, not wishing to appear to show too much interest in Red.

“Not mine.” Out of the corner of her eye, Lizzie watched as a dark skinned man with a thick accent and wearing a rather terribly fitted tuxedo walked up close to Red’s cage.

“Yaabari. How are the boys?”

Lizzie’s brow rose high. Yaabari the Cameroonian warlord who used boy soldiers?

Yaabari chuckled darkly. “They still tell tales of the man in the hat who burned down our compound.”

Red looked Yaabari up and down. “I must say, you’ve come up in the world, depending on how you look at it. How did you manage to wrangle an invitation? Who’s backing you?”

Yaabari merely gave Red a gleaming smile. “I’ll see you after the auction.” He stated before walking off.

FBI: Just give us the location.

Cooper sighed as he sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Unfortunately, his peace was shattered by the sound of a knock against the door frame leading into his office.

“Sir, uh, we may have a problem.” Aram murmured, wincing in apology, having noticed that he’d disturbed his boss. “I was checking with DOC on Josephine’s transfer to Hazelton. They allowed her to make a call to her lawyer.”

Cooper stood abruptly, causing his chair to wheel back and slam into the cabinets behind him. “I gave an order. If she gets word to her people, Keen’s cover is blown. Get DOC on the line now!”

Lizzie watched as a stolen manuscript was sold to a man from Maldives, clapping along politely with the rest of the audience.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, one of the most exciting items of the night, a mainstay on the FBI’s most wanted list, this gentleman has been on the list longer than any other criminal!” Lizzie stood up straight and slowly made her way closer to the stage, on the fringes of the crowd as her father was lead out by several guards while the Auctioneer spoke. “A former naval intelligence officer, he possesses a wealth of classified information and presides over one of the world’s most
prosperous extralegal empires. You may know him as the concierge of crime. I present Raymond Reddington.” The crowd murmured excitedly as Red in the center of the stage, his face a mask of dispassion. “I will commence the bidding at $2 million. Able to bid now two. Who will give me two? I’ve got two right here.” The Auctioneer pointed to a nameless face in the crowd. “Who will give me 2.5? Able to bid now 2.5.”

Lizzie raised her hand.

“Thank you, ma’am. Able to bid now three.”


\еждуежду

Red looked away from the scene that Lizzie was creating and shifted his gaze to the King family. As they whispered hotly, their gazes turned fixed on Lizzie, Red swore under his breath.

“Who will give me nine?” The Auctioneer repeated.

“Nine.” Red shouted, causing a stir of murmurs to ripple across the crowd.

“I beg your pardon?” The Auctioneer questioned hesitantly, his gaze shifting over to the Kings.

“$9 million. I assume my money’s good here.” Red stated simply, his gaze also turning to the Kings.

“Ten!” Yaabari shouted angrily from his place in the crowd.

“Certainly as good as his. I got to be worth as much as that fake Xuande Ming vessel was.”

“18.”

Red kept his gaze upon Lizzie as he spoke. “Sorry, Santos, but those cat’s eye Chrysoberyls are brown, not green. An expensive forgery, but a forgery nonetheless. 20!” Finally, she made direct eye contact with him and he looked pointedly towards the doors. Lizzie, thankfully, got the message and began looking around. She noticed the sudden influx of guards and began making her way towards the doors.

“Ignore that bid!” Tyler King yelled out.

“That hardly seems fair.” Red protested, keeping one eye trained on Lizzie as he tried to appear invested in the conversation.

“Get him off the stage now!” Tyler ordered the guards who flanked Red.

The Auctioneer looked to Yaabari. “Does the gentlemen maintain his previous bid of $18 million?”

“You’re leaving money on the table.” Red shouted angrily, shifting his full gaze on Earl. “What kind of business are you running here, Earl?”
“$18 million going once, going twice, sold for $18 million to the gentleman from Cameroon!” Yaabari’s boisterous laughter could easily be heard over the applause from the crowd.

Cooper slammed into the interrogation room where Ressler was questioning the driver of the car that had taken Lizzie from the hotel.

“Give us the room.” He ordered darkly.

“Sir?” Ressler questioned hesitantly as he slowly stood from his seat.

“Now, Agent Ressler.” Cooper barked.

Don gave his boss one more uncertain look before leaving the room.

Lizzie ducked around the darkened corner of the basement hallway at the sound of approaching footsteps. Within moments, the coast was clear and she continued on her search. Finally, she came upon the room where the ‘merchandise’ was held and quickly entered. At the sound of more footsteps, she quickly hid behind a crate and watched as a suited guard walked up to the glass case where little Vincent was held.

“Come on. Let’s go.” The guard ordered as he opened the cage.

“Excuse me. I’m looking for the Van Gogh. I paid a fortune for it.”

The guard turned to face her as she appeared beside him. “All items are held till the end of the auction. You need to –” Lizzie stepped on the man’s foot with her heel. As he reflexively bent forward, she followed up with an elbow to the nose. The man went down like a sack of bricks.

Liz rushed forward and grabbed the boy’s hand. “Come on. I’m getting you out of here. Come on. Stay with me. Okay.” She murmured hurriedly as she rushed over to Red’s cage. “Stay right here, okay?” She coaxed the boy, her hands on his shoulders before turning towards her dad.

Lizzie began trying to punch random numbers into the keypad on her dad’s cage.

“We have to get these people out of here.” Lizzie murmured, shaking her hands in frustration as the code was denied again. “How do you open this thing?”

Red leaned towards her to meet her eyes through the fiberglass cage. “Lizzie, you need to go.” He murmured gravely.

“Damn it!” Lizzie whispered harshly as another code failed. “What’s the code?”

“Listen to me. I was brought in through a series of tunnels that way. If you hurry, you’ll be miles away before they ever realize you’re gone. Take the boy and go.”

Lizzie finally looked up at her dad and swallowed. “You could be killed.”

They both froze at the sound of a man’s voice echoed down the corridor. “She’s off the main floor. Split up. Check every room.”

“Lizzie, you did everything you could. It’s time to go. Go!”
Lizzie’s eyes blaze as she stared at her dad a moment longer before spinning on her heel towards the boy. Damn him. Damn everything. Grabbing the boy by his hand, Lizzie made it out of the exit Red had indicated just as the door at the front of the room slammed open.

\[
\text{Spread out! We need to find that girl immediately. Okay, get in here. Get in here. Where the hell’s the Peretti boy?} \quad \text{Francis King shouted as he and his brother, along with a small contingent of guards and Yaabari walked in.}
\]

“I’m sure your friend with the glass jaw will enlighten you when he comes to.” Red stated jovially, nodding towards the guard who was still K.O.’ed. “What’s in this for you?” Red asked the brothers.

“You wouldn’t understand. You’re not a King.” Francis spat.

Red laughed. “Funny. Your father used to say that exact phrase as if it somehow excused him from the use of logic.”

“What’s in it for me? Hmm.” Francis said mockingly as he sauntered towards Red’s cage. “Legacy and the King family fortune.”

Red rolled his eyes with a huff. “If this is just about the money, that would be so banal. I bet your father would trade it all for one more walk in the park with a good friend.”

Red watched dispassionately as Francis input the code and the door to his cage swung open.

“Tell me, where are all your good friends now, huh?” Francis taunted as Red stepped out of the cage. “If you think there’s a soul in this world loyal to anything but your pocketbook, then you’re the one who’s excused himself from the use of logic.” Francis spun towards Yaabari and swept his arm towards Red as if he were a showcase. “Your prize.” Francis then turned towards the guards. “Let’s find that kid!” He spat as he walked off.

Lizzie stopped in the hallway at the sight of the door that Red had intimated. She leaned towards Vincent and rested her hands on his shoulders as they both took in deep lungs full of air.

“Vincent, I need you to run through that door. See it?” Lizzie physically turned the boy so that he was looking at the Door. “Go as far as you can, okay?”

“You’re not coming with me? You can’t go back!” The boy shouted clearly terrified.

“Run.” Lizzie ordered. “Go! Go!”

“Yaabari, before you exact your vengeance, consider this – I could easily provide you with enough influence and firepower to crown yourself king.” Red bargained as Yaabari led him down the corridor. “Isn’t it time you stopped running through the forest playing army with a bunch of kids?”

“A generous offer, but I’m here for more than just my vengeance.”

Red scoffed. “I knew it. Who’s backing you?”

“A man in Johannesburg has put a $40 million bounty on your head. I plan to collect it.”
“Good luck. A lot can happen between here and Johannesburg.” Red said, a small smile on his face.

Yaabari’s head tilted back in laughter. “You will not be traveling to Johannesburg. You are not listening. I said the bounty is on your head.” Yaabari held up a small case and shook it to prove his point.

Red swallowed heavily, not bothering to hide his fear. This was it. This little two-bit piece of shit who played Army in the jungle was going to kill him.

\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/
\/

Yaabari led Red into the center of a sterile white tiled room. “Right here.” He ordered before kicking out Red’s knees from beneath him. With a grunt of pain, Red’s knees hit the ground.

“Try not to take it personally. Business is business. In fact, Raymond, I’ve always been quite fond of you.”

“Can’t tell you what a comfort that is to me.” Red murmured as he closed his eyes.

Lizzie riding her bike.

Opening a safe for the first time.

Her little legs kicking in his lap as he read to her.

Red could feel the cold caress of the gun barrel against the back of his head.

Graduating high school.

Watching from a distance as Sam walked her down the aisle.

The metallic click of the gun cocking.

Lizzie playing with little Sammy on a blanket in their back yard.

“Lizzie.” Red murmured, a serene smile on his face.

BANG!

Red flinched, his mind stuttering to a halt as he…wait. Red heard the familiar dull thud of a body hitting the ground and he was 60% sure it wasn’t his. He opened one eye cautiously. At the sound of heels against the tiled floor, he opened both.

His Lizzie came around from behind him and fell to her knees, tears flowing freely down her cheeks as she set the gun down and leaped forward, wrapping her arms around him in a hug so tight, they had to both work to stay upright.

“Lizzie! The handcuff key’s in his back pocket.”

“Okay.” Lizzie said with a sniffle before she pulled away and shuffled over to where Yaabari now lay dead, blood pooling around his head. She quickly began to rummage through his pockets.

“Someone’s gonna come back. They must have heard the gunshot.” Red whispered urgently. “We got to get out of here.”
Within moments, the handcuffs were clattering to the ground.

As they rounded another doorway, Red could easily make out the voices of the King men. “Father, this is ridiculous. You must call this off.” Tyler plead.

“You know as well as I do. There is no calling it off.” Francis replied harshly.

“Get on with it.” Earl’s mechanical voice ordered.

Red and Lizzie walked into the room to find Earl positioned behind a large oak desk next to his butler, his two sons standing in front of the desk, Tyler aiming a gun at his own head.

Red walked into the room, his gun poised on Tyler, knowing without looking that Lizzie was right behind him, her own gun trained on Francis. “If that hammer falls on an empty chamber, you’ll be dead before you hit the ground. Put it down.” Red ordered with a bark.

Tyler quickly threw the gun down onto the desk and raised his hands in the air.

“Earl.” Red greeted convivially as he picked up the gun that Tyler had just tossed. “Someone should have put you out of your misery generations ago.” He quickly aimed the gun at Earl’s chest and pulled the trigger. Earl’s body twitched once with the force of the bullet.

Red chuckled as he looked over at the shocked faces of Earl’s sons as they stared at their father’s body. Tyler looked particularly ashen. “Oh, my God. What are the odds?” Red laughed as he tossed the gun back onto the desk and turned around, not a care in the world. “I’ll leave the three of you to your own misery. Avoid the yard, be nice to your cell mate, and whatever you do, don’t eat the franks and beans.” Red stated as he gestured with a wave towards the windows where red and blue lights were flashing and sirens had begun to wail as the Calvary arrived.

Red let Lizzie out of the room first and paused at the door, turning back to the two brothers. “Oh, and I don’t need your lousy tux. I want my clothes back.”

Lizzie gave a huge sigh as she hopped into the backseat of the SUV that her dad and Dembe were currently using, the flashing lights of the police vehicles severely dimmed by the blacked out windows.

“You can never do that again.” Red murmured hoarsely as she slid into the back seat next to him.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “You’re welcome.” She murmured sarcastically as Dembe pulled away from the curb.

“I’m serious.” Red said, his voice slightly hysterical. “You can never do that again. Promise me.”

Lizzie finally looked over at her dad and was taken aback by his haunted eyes. His face was gray and his eyes had bags like waves stacked one on top of the other.

“We took down dozens of wanted criminals, recovered millions of dollars in stolen property, and saved innocent lives.”

Red shook his head. “I’m not talking about that.”
Lizzie stared at her dad for a few silent moments until it clicked. “You. You’re talking about you. Wow.” Lizzie shook her head. “I cannot believe you have the nerve to ask that of me. To ask that I not save you.” Lizzie glared at her dad. “Your entire life has been centered around saving me, keeping me safe.” She yelled hotly. “And I love you so much for it. More than anything in this world. But god forbid that I save you for a change.” Lizzie said with a huff.

“That is precisely why you can never do that again.” Red rasped. “I have done everything I could to keep you safe. I refuse to let you jeopardize yourself in the name of saving me. Do you have any idea what that would do to me?” Red’s voice hitched. “It would ruin me. To know that you died so that I could live.”

Lizzie bit her lip fruitlessly. The tears still fell as she slowly shook her head. “It’s never going to get through your thick head, is it?” She asked wetly. “That feeling that you can’t even imagine – the feeling of loss that you can’t bring yourself to even contemplate at the mere thought of me dying – You still don’t believe that anyone, even me, could feel the same way.” Lizzie sniffled. “If I lost you – if I lost you knowing there was something I could have done… don’t ask that of me.” She whispered, her voice taking on a bitter edge. “Don’t you dare ask me to step aside.”

They stared at each other, each assessing the other until finally Red nodded tiredly and melted into the back of his seat.

“And when someone does something nice, you’re supposed to say ‘Thank you.’” Lizzie murmured, turning her head to look out the window.

Had there been even the faintest sound – the muffled rush of a passing car, Lizzie might not have heard the quiet “Thank you.”

/

Red had gone all out for this thing. It was a little bit insane in a flattering sort of way. Don didn’t want to think of who this house actually belonged to. All that mattered was that there was an enormous yard – big enough for the bouncy castle (that there was no way in hell that Sammy was getting in but the other agents’ kids seemed to be enjoying), several picnic tables (some for eating, some laden down with the catered picnic foods – “Oh! Donald! How could you live in D.C. for so long and not have eaten Q & M’s barbeque? Lizzie, Sweetheart, I’m afraid you may want to rethink the man in your life.”), and a petting zoo. A fucking petting zoo.

Both Liz and Don had tried to get Red to reign it in a bit but the man wouldn’t hear of it.

– Flashback –

“After all, it’s the only time I’ve actually gotten to pick who my grandson’s father is!” Red had said jovially.

Don huffed, unamused, while Lizzie chuckled, clearly exasperated with her dad. “Dad, you didn’t choose Don. If anything, I did.”

Red raised a brow and gave her a stern look. “Lizzie, sweetheart. Look at who you’re talking to. If I didn’t want him to be Sammy’s new dad, frankly, you never would have heard from him again.”

That day had put a new spin on the phrase ‘Thankful to be alive.’

– End Flashback –

Don’s gaze wandered over the party. Red was talking to Cooper and his wife, Samar and Aram
were over at one of the tables, munching and chatting. Don chuckled as his gaze stuttered on the sight of Dembe with Sammy on his shoulders, wading around with two toddlers sitting on top of his shoes, holding tightly to his legs and squealing each time he took a step. Don was sure that Sammy had no idea what he was laughing at but that didn’t stop the little tike – his son – from finding it hilarious.

\/
/\/
/\/
/\/

Don startled slightly as Lizzie came up behind him, but quickly relaxed and melted into her as she wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Hey you.” She murmured, pressing a kiss on the sensitive skin right behind his ear.

“Hey.” Don said huskily, taking a swig of his beer before putting it back down on the picnic table. The place had pretty much emptied out – most of the agents and their kids had left, especially once the rented bounce castle and petting zoo were all packed up. Now it was just the team and Red’s people. Don could admit, if only to himself, that he liked this half of the party a lot better. Less people and the company was better. Though he’d never tell Red that.

“You may want to prepare yourself, I think Dad was planning to give a – “ Lizzie was interrupted by the tinkling sound of a fork hitting the side of a glass bottle “– speech.”

Don groaned and his face began to flame as a sort of pre-emptive strike to the oncoming embarrassment.

Lizzie laughed and grabbed his hand in hers as she came around to his front to cart him off closer to the rest of the gathered party. As they drew nearer, Lizzie paused to take Sammy from Ezra and hoist the baby onto her hip.

“Hello all!” Red began happily. “I just wanted to thank everyone for coming to our celebration today and …well, okay. That’s a bold faced lie.” Red paused with a bright smile while everyone gave a small laugh. “Though I believe I can speak for the entire family when I say that I am incredibly grateful not only for coming to the party but for everything you have done for our family.” Red paused, smiling softly as he gazed at everyone there who gladly returned his smile. “A family” Red continued “Which has just grown.” Red lifted up his glass of scotch towards Don. “To Don, our little Sammy’s father in every way that matters.”

As everyone raised their glasses and murmured their agreement, Don cleared his throat which had suddenly become rather dry. Liz leaned in, wrapping her free arm around his waist as she hugged him from the side, leaning up on her tip toes to plant a kiss on his cheek.

Sammy, deciding he wanted in on the hug, threw his little body between Don and Liz in a sweet imitation of a hug. “Mama! Dada!” He squealed happily.

Don wrapped his arms around Lizzie and Sammy tightly.

\/
/\/
/\/
/\/

The sun was about to set and Sammy’s little head was bobbing sleepily where he sat on Don’s lap, leaning against his chest. Don knew it was now or never.

Don hunched over to murmur into Sammy’s ear. “Alright Buddy, time to give your mama her present, just like we talked about yea?” As he spoke, Don felt around under the table for the thing he’d hidden there earlier in the day.
At his words, Sammy immediately perked up, any sleep in his eyes gone without a trace. “Yea!” He squealed. The conversation around them paused at the baby’s exuberance but quickly picked up again as everyone assumed that Sammy was well, just being Sammy.

Don chuckled as he stood, carefully maneuvering Sammy onto his hip while keeping Lizzie’s present carefully concealed behind his back.

Everyone had gathered several chairs into a loose circle and were currently chatting away. However, conversations soon died off as Don made his way across the center of the circle towards Liz.

---

As Red looked away from their conversation, a small happy smile on his face, Lizzie followed his line of sight, her brow furrowing in confusion at the sight of Don walking towards her with Sammy in his arms. As she watched, Don stopped a few feet in front of her and crouched down on the ground, kneeling on one knee to put Sammy down on the ground. Once Sammy was on his own two wobbily feet, Don then murmured in his ear, withdrawing something from behind his back.

It was a teddy bear. A little blue teddy bear which Sammy eagerly snatched out of his daddy’s hands causing the group to chuckle lightly.

“Alright Buddy, give your mama her present.” She heard Don murmur.

“Kay!” Sammy said happily before turning towards Lizzie.

“Hey baby! Whatcha got there?” Lizzie encouraged.

Sammy laughed and trotted unevenly over to her, his little arms wrapped around the teddy bear. Lizzie quickly leaned over and plucked her son from the ground once he got close enough, sitting him on her lap.

“Mama! Look!” He said, thrusting the bear into her face. Lizzie chuckled and Red joined in as they realized that Sammy had shoved the bear’s backside into her face.

“Can I see, baby?” Lizzie asked sweetly as she gently grasped the bear to turn it around so that she could see it properly, her son happily allowing her to do so.

Lizzie turned the bear over to take a proper look and gasped. Lizzie’s head whipped up to look at Don who still kneeled in the grass in front of her and down at the bear.

Will you marry my daddy? Was stitched into the Teddy Bear’s belly. Lizzie tore her gaze from the bear and back towards Don, her eyes filling with tears. In the time it took her to read the words again, Don had taken out a small box from his pocket and opened it, holding it out towards her.

“I love you and Sammy more than anything in this world. I am awed every time I look at Sammy and I get to call him my son.” Don paused, clearing his throat gruffly. “The one thing I need to make our family complete though, is to be able to call you my wife. “Will you marry me?”

---

Chapter End Notes

Yes. I'm evil. Sorry!
Chapter 49

Crap guys! I am so sorry! I know it's been forever and a day. All I can say is...I really lost my drive there for awhile. I've been averaging about 10,000 words every weekend since January. I got burned out. I'm sorry! I'll try to be better! I hope this makes up for it.

Lizzie was in the bedroom, folding laundry, her iPod hooked up to the speakers and playing her favorite Pandora station lowly. She smiled, shaking her head in mirth at the sound of her fiancé stomping down the hallway, heading towards their bedroom.

"Liz, you gotta save me!" Don groaned as he walked in, closing the door behind him. "Your dad's downstairs with wedding magazines, asking me what I want to give to my best men." He bemoaned. "I don't even know who I want to be my best man!"

Liz laughed as she set aside some of Sammy's shirts to take to his room. "Sorry babe. You're just gonna have to deal with it for a little while.

Don heaved a comically great sigh, tossing his head back with his hands on his hips. He then seemed to pause before looking back over at her, squinting suspiciously. "Don't think I don't know what you did, by the way. That basket had been sitting in the laundry room for two days now."

Don accused, pointing at the laundry basket of clothes she was currently organizing. "You bailed on me and left me to deal with your dad alone!"

Laughing, Liz turned towards Don and wrapped her arms around his neck, drawing him closer. "Yes." She chuckled. "Guilty as charged." She teased, pecking his lips sweetly. "He's been driving me up a wall."

"I knew it." Don grumbled good naturedly.

Liz giggled before stepping away to continue matching socks. "But hey, we need to get better at handling it, okay?" She stated, growing serious. Liz paused and turned back towards Don, leaning her hip against the bed. "He's excited, Don. This... he didn't get to be a part of the uh... my wedding with Tom." Lizzie sighed, suddenly exhausted as she ran her fingers through her hair. "You know my dad, he doesn't do anything by halves. We've gotten him to compromise and understand that we want something small and understated but... he's probably going to get the most expensive of everything and want the decorations to be hand stitched and perfectly set." Liz gave Don a small smile. "It's the first time he will be recognized as the father of the bride. That's a big deal for him... for both of us, Don."

Don gave a soft sigh and returned her smile. He took a step towards her and rested his hands on Liz's hips, drawing her to him. "Yea, I get that, I really do." He murmured. "I can only imagine how difficult it must have been growing up with keeping your own dad a secret." Don took Liz's hands in his, placing a small kiss on each palm before he gently guided them back around his neck. "I get it. But I will never give two shits about floral arrangements."
Lizzie walked downstairs and through the archway to the living room to find her dad leafing through a wedding magazine, Sammy slouched beside him in nothing but his diaper, looking to his grandpa as he turned the pages of "Goodnight Moon."

"Dad," Lizzie greeted as both man and baby became aware of her presence, both adorning her with the same brilliant smile in greeting. Lizzie laughed at the sight as she sat down on the couch, little Sammy between her and her dad. Though not for long as Sammy quickly crawled onto her lap and plopped down.

Lizzie kissed her son's head as she wrapped her arms around the tired boy, letting him lean against her as he gave a wide yawn. Looking to her dad, Lizzie smirked. "I heard you've been discussing the merits of cigars over monogrammed flasks for groomsmen gifts with Don."

Red titled his head to the side innocently. "Well yes, I actually rather think that both are a bit clichéd at this point but when in Rome, I suppose."

Lizzie rolled her eyes with a snort of laughter. "Dad…"

Red chuckled, shaking his head as he scratched his chin. "Yes, I know. I know. I just.. Lizzie – "

Liz shook her head and outstretched her hand towards her dad, grasping his and settling their joined hands between them. "Don't, Dad. I get it. Really I do. I think I'm the only person who truly understands how amazing it feels to have you be able to be a part of this."

Red gave Liz a watery smile and merely nodded his head, not trusting himself to speak at the moment so instead gave her hand a tight squeeze.

"And I know that you also not-so-secretly love planning events." Liz teased, squeezing her dad's hand in kind. "But Don doesn't, Dad. You gotta reign it in a bit, yea?"

Red sighed and gave her a small smile. "Alright, Sweetheart."

Lizzie gave her dad a big smile and leaned over, causing a now dozing Sammy to grumble unhappily as she gave Red a kiss on the cheek. "Now, time for a distraction. I know you've got something for me.

Red smirked. "Oh Lizzie, I've got a doozie for you."

\/\/\/\/\

"Toshiro Osaka – A Japanese entrepreneur indicted in 2009 and knifed to death by an aggrieved business partner." Lizzie nodded towards Aram to signal for him to put the next photo up on the large screen as she leaned against his work station. "Miles Chapman – He was gunned down in Algiers while avoiding extradition for insider trading." Another nod towards Aram. "Lester Charles Conway – His Ponzi scheme was so massive, he's now serving up to 30 years."

"Their crimes cost hundreds of people their life savings." Ressler intoned, his hands on his hips as he stood beside Liz. "Pensions gone, homes in foreclosure, families torn apart. Why would I feel bad for them? They're criminals."

Lizzie gave both a nod and a shrug of her shoulders. "According to Red, they're innocent – Framed after months, sometimes years of planning by a woman with a deep-seated hatred for the 1%. She doesn't just take their money, she takes their reputations, their freedom, sometimes their lives. Her latest mark was Declan Saling, a flamboyant venture capitalist who specialized in biotech." Aram didn't need any signal, he just put the man's photo on the screen. "He was found last night in a hotel
bathtub, needle on the floor, dead from an apparent overdose. His personal laptop was taken into
evidence. CSI uncovered corporate withdrawals in excess of $27 million."

Cooper puckered his lips in what Liz could only think of as a duck-face though she knew it was the
face Cooper generally made when in thought. "Navabi, go see Salinger's wife." Cooper pointed
towards Liz and Don. "Ressler, Keen, the man in prison – Talk to him. If he was framed, I want to
know how."

Liz slid her chair back, the metal grating against the concrete floor loudly as she crossed her legs.
"We spoke to your attorneys, Mr. Conway. You claim to have been framed by a woman named
Claudia Sanchez."

"Or whatever her name really was." The man's handcuffs rustled as he sat back in his chair across
the bare table. "She made everything up."

Ressler raised his brow and gave a significant glance to Liz. "She make up the Ponzi scheme? The
$128 million you stole from your clients to fund your lifestyle? The ranch, the private jets –"

Conway sat back up and crossed his hands over top of the table, his lips pressed tightly in a thin
line. "Look, I've told this story a hundred times. We were sleeping together. She had access to
everything. My phone, computer, passwords. If you don't believe me –"

"We want to believe you. We do." Liz said with a sigh. "Tell us what happened."

"She was a seasonal worker at the ranch. Undocumented, one of many. My wife had no idea. The
affair lasted exactly six months. Then one day, she just disappears. Three days later, I'm arrested."

"Well, they also found a packed bag in your car, and your passport, and a plane ticket to Beijing."
Ressler taunted.

Conway glared at Ressler and took a moment to grind his teeth before speaking once more. "She
planted it all. That woman – She was diabolical. From the fingerprints on the suitcase to the airline
ticket she purchased using my computer – She got into my life."

Conway shook his head as he paused. "But that was nothing. The way she moved the money, her
knowledge of how it worked, issuing false statements, creating shell companies. I hired the best
defense money could buy, and after they looked at the evidence against me, they recommended I
cop a plea." Conway scoffed as if he was still unable to believe it. And well, frankly, it was pretty
unbelievable. "I pled guilty to a crime I didn't commit. That's how good she was. And the money
she took, most of it belonged to my clients – Teachers, doctors, pension plans. Over 278 people
lost everything because of some ghost."

"Never went to trial, but your lawyers – You said that they gathered a lot of evidence. We need to
see it."

Red smiled winningly as he walked up to the man who stood beside the industrial sized grill in the
abandoned restaurant kitchen. Well, it wasn't so much abandoned as commandeered for a few
minutes...well, the owner was a friend. "Hello, Roger." He greeted as he stopped a few feet from
the man.

"The Director called for a vote."
Straight to business then. "When?"

Roger shifted on his feet and glanced over Red's shoulder. "Tomorrow. I've been quietly lobbying on your behalf."

Red gave him a closed-mouth smile. "I appreciate that."

Roger scoffed and shook his head. "No, you don't. You expect it."

Red stared at Roger blankly until the man looked away. "Where do things stand?"

The man sighed. "I've spoken to Mitchum. He's with us. That means Brazil and South Korea are, as well."

Red pursed his lips. "That likely positions Jasper as the deciding vote. If we can't secure his vote, the Director will have a majority to act against you."

Hobbs scoffed in disbelief.

"Jasper will have to be persuaded." Red continued, unphased.

"These are powerful men." Roger argued. "They don't respond to threats."

"No. With powerful men, one must appeal to their vanity."

"Listen to me, Red. The Fulcrum – If you have it, if you can prove you have it, do it now. Your life depends on it."

All life drained from Red's eyes as he stared at Roger Hobbs coldly. "Set the meeting." He stated darkly.

\\\

"Mrs. Salinger had a private detective follow her husband and his assorted mistresses for two months, but he found nothing on this particular woman." Samar expounded as she set an armful of files down on the desk in front of her. "Partial prints, burner phones, inconclusive selfies taken from the victim's phone."

"Conway's lawyers did three months of discovery before copping a plea, and all they got were payroll records from his ranch and a lot of fake green cards and social security numbers." Ressler continued for her.

"The lawyers interviewed as much staff they could find, but no one could or would positively I.D. the woman Conway alleges framed him." Liz took up the explanatory baton. "Two different cases, two sets of professional investigators, and this woman didn't leave a trace."

Cooper nodded and opened his mouth to speak just as Aram bounded over with his usual endless spring of enthusiasm.

"Guys, check it out. The detectives and the lawyers may not have found anything conclusive on their own, but if you put the photos they found together – Our ghost has a face." He explained as he went to his work station and shared his laptop screen with the large overhead. They all watched as the photos overlaid atop each other, the pieces of photos scrapping together to form a single image of a woman like a jigsaw puzzle.

\\\
"Okay, so, I have this friend, Osborne, in the forensics lab – Freaking Osborne." Aram shook his head, a secret smile on his face as his eyes grew distant, reminiscing about some scene like an ex-frat boy missing the glory days.

"Aram." Cooper reprimanded.

Aram cleared his throat and shook his head, his cheeks turning red as he came back to the present. "Right. So, I scanned over 40 partial prints Conway's investigators found at his ranch, another 53 partials found by Mrs. Salinger's private detective. I fired them off to Osborne. He is a wizard with whorls, loops, and arches. He managed to stitch together three partials into a gorgeous, crystal-clear left thumbprint. Ran it through AFIS, and bang. Her name is Vanessa Anne Cruz – 36 years old. Last known address – Her mother's place in Edison, New Jersey."

Cooper nodded his head definitively and looked to Ressler and Liz. "Get there. Now."

\\\\s

Ressler stopped pounding on the door at the sound of a wracking cough preceded by footsteps towards the door. As the door slowly opened to reveal a frail older woman, Ressler took a step back towards Liz.

"Aida Hernandez?" He asked, his voice softening as he gazed at the old woman. "Special Agent Donald Ressler, Special Agent Keen." As Don introduced them, both he and Liz took out their badges and flashed them in Mrs. Hernandez's direction. "We're trying to locate your daughter, Vanessa Cruz."

"My daughter?" The woman was interrupted as her shoulders heaved with more wracking coughs. "She's dead."

\\\\s

"It's my fault. Vanessa never really had a good male role model. Her father was a creep, so I wasn't surprised when she married one. Wash, rinse, repeat."

Liz shifted where she sat on the floral printed couch. "Excuse me?" She asked, watching the older woman's hands shake as she poured them tea.

"Some women make the same mistakes with men over and over again. Hernando was a young broker. Worked at a big firm. Turns out, he was a real crook. He was doing insider trading, and when they caught him, he jumped off the George Washington Bridge."

Liz and Ressler shared a wide eyed look of shock. "And what happened to Vanessa?"

"Oh, she thought they set him up. She adored him till the end. Never questioned his innocence. I tried to reason with her, but–" Mrs. Hernandez was once again overtaken with a coughing fit.

"Take your time." Ressler murmured consolingly.

"They found her folded clothing at Rockaway Beach. They never found a body, but I know she was dead. She'd never abandon me."

"She looked after you?" Lizzie questioned.

Mrs. Hernandez gave them a small, watery smile. "She was such a beautiful person. Never a thought of herself, always of others."
"And since she's been gone?" Don asked.

"Vanessa made sure I'd be well taken care of." Mrs. Hernandez stated before taking a sip of her tea.

"How did she do that?"

"She had an insurance policy." Mrs. Hernandez stated with a shrug. "I kept up with the mortgage and made ends meet."

"Do you still have the policy?" Ressler questioned.

Mrs. Hernandez seemed to take a moment to think. "I never saw the policy. But I have a letter that came with the check. I'm sure I can find that."

\\\\

"It turns out it's a fake."

Liz turned away from the table where she'd been browsing databases at the sound of Samar's voice behind her. "What is?"

Samar sighed as she tossed a folder onto the table beside Liz's hand. "The entire company. Minnetonka Bankers Health & Life was incorporated in 2006. In nine years, the only policy it issued was to Cruz's mother. It's a shelf corporation."

Liz raised a brow in confusion and glanced over at Don as he stood on the other side of the table. "You mean 'shell' corporation?"

Samar shook her head with her lips pressed tightly. "No. 'Shelf,' with an 'f.' Criminals file incorporation papers. They pay all the fees. It's totally legitimate. Then then they put them on the shelf for years, sometimes decades. They pay the minimum corporate tax, build up a credit rating, comply with filings to create an established, creditworthy business that can be used to launder all kinds of transactions."

"Including phony insurance payments." Don murmured.

"Guys?" Aram spoke up from his work station before quickly unfolding himself from his chair and making his way over to the rest of the group. "It looks like this isn't the only way Vanessa Cruz has used shelf companies. At least six other victims were all accused of funneling money through shelf corporations they say they didn't know existed."

"Samar, you said these corps are being sold to criminals. If we could find the person who sold them to Cruz --"

"Then we might find Cruz." Don finished Lizzie's thought for her.

\\\\

"Hey Dad, I need you to put me in touch with someone who brokers shelf corporations." Lizzie had begun speaking the moment she heard the distinctive click of someone picking up on the other end.

"Lizzie, Sweetheart! You called just in time, I've brought Sammy for his first fitting for his little tuxedo – Lizzie he's going to be the most adorable ring bearer! And he's handling the fitting so well!" Red said jovially, seeming to not have heard her request for information.
Lizzie laughed good naturedly, long used to her dad spouting off whatever is at the top of his head. He really only got to relax enough to do so when he was with family so she allowed him the luxury. Mostly.

"Dad, I'm sure he is being beyond cute right now and I'm also sure that you have already taken dozens of photos which you will send Dembe to have printed this evening. I'm also sure we will be discussing what made you think taking a still growing one-year old to get fitted for an outfit he won't be wearing for months was a good idea." She teased. "But right now, I need you to focus, okay?" She paused. "I need the name of someone you know who brokers shelf corporations. We're trying to track down where this Blacklister seemed to get hers."

"You're always ruining my fun, Lizzie." Red whined. He was going to continue but was interrupted by a small rustling sound on his side and a toddler's shouts of "Mama! Mama!"

Lizzie smiled wistfully at the sound of her son's voice.

"Yes, Sammy love. I'm on the phone with your mama. We've got important adult things to do though. Here, love, I think it's snack time." The distinctive zip and rustle of Red looking through Sammy's diaper bag allowed Lizzie the time to think back to all the times she'd seen her dad with a diaper bag hanging from one shoulder, ruffling his expensive suit jacket. The sight never got less amusing and endearing.

"Ah yes, there you go." Red murmured as he apparently got hold of a snack and instantly appeased Sammy. "Lizzie, his love of these little goldfish things cannot be healthy. I tried one and I highly doubt it's real cheese. I'll look for a better substitute. I can see the appeal of a little fish-shaped cracker. I'll see about something a bit more… wholesome."

Lizzie chuckled, shaking her head at her dad. "That'd be great, Dad. Now, focus old man. Shelf corporations."

Red grumbled grumpily before sighing. "What's the name of the shelf corporation?"

Lizzie fumbled for the file that Samar had obtained. "Uh… Minnetonka Bankers Health & Life."

Without missing a beat, Red responded. "Diamond Drive Properties. It's a little place in Baltimore. Lovely girl, goes by the name of 'Ziggy,' runs the place. All of the shelves and shells that she brokers have names of Minnesota lakes."

What's so urgent?" A shorter-than-average gentleman with closely cut white hair questioned as he walked up to Mr. Hobbs, whose balding head reflected the overhead lights like a halo.

"I wanted to talk to you about Raymond Reddington."

The white haired man's lips pinched together as the corners of his eyes creased in annoyance. "The vote's not until tomorrow afternoon."

"The vote's all but taken – Not officially, but I've spent the last six hours speaking with all the major players."

The white haired man reared his head back in mild surprise. "You're back-channeling?"

"You're damn right." Mr. Hobbs stated hotly. "If Reddington has the Fulcrum, his death triggers a protocol for release. We will be exposed."
"And why am I here?"

"You're the swing vote, Kenneth. You're the one that will make this decision."

"You know I lean towards the Director. Why should I change that position now?"

Red stepped out from behind the pile of crates he'd been behind, listening to the conversation. "Because, Mr. Jasper, you strike me as a man who would prefer to pitch rather than catch."

Jasper looked to Hobbs, his face a growing mask of fear. "What the hell have you done?"

Hobbs stretched his hands out in front of him placatingly. "Just hear him out. That's all I ask."

"Roger is quite right." Red stated jovially before his face quickly became stone. "The Director's latest stratagem is hubris. It has very little to do with me and everything to do with the consolidation of his power. If he succeeds, you'll become nothing more than his trusted servant. He needs to go. He will go." Red stated harshly. "Tomorrow, after the meeting, after you win this vote with everything that your head and your heart tell you are true."

"You're talking about assassination." Mr. Jasper murmured, his eyes wide.

Red nodded solemnly. "Yes, Mr. Jasper. 'Ambition's debt must be paid.'"

"Julius Caesar?" Mr. Jasper scoffed.

Red's pleasant smile had sharp corners. "One of my favorites – The play, not so much the man. The man was a bit full of himself. He did have a brilliant military mind, but he couldn't smell a plot to save his life. Intentional pun."

"And why is that?"

"Pride." Red shrugged. "The subtlest and yet most deadly of the seven sins. Like the Director, he couldn't be saved."

"And which part do you play in all this? Cassius?" Mr. Jasper questioned.

Red let out a bark of a laugh. "Oh, no. I'm the Rubicon. You simply need to determine which side of history you want to end up on. Who are you, Mr. Jasper? A subordinate who remained slavishly obedient to his master, or the presumptive leader of an organization that will be far more powerful than it has ever been?"

\[
\text{\textcopyright}
\]

Don was standing in the middle of a large loft apartment as the forensics team crawled over the place. Liz had gotten a mailing address from the shelf company broker and he had gotten a team together immediately to follow the lead.

"I've got dozens of files, photos, dossiers." Don stated, his cell phone held tightly to his ear. "I mean, she's going through their trash, hacking their networks. I mean, listen to this." Don opened up one of the many files they'd found in the woman's apartment, careful to use only his gloved hand. "Copies of Declan Salinger's bank statements, medical records. There's even surveillance photos and every book and video he's ordered for three years."

"Hang on. Did you say dozens of files?" Aram's voice came over the speaker. "This goes way beyond the names Mr. Reddington gave us."
Ressler nodded. "I'm looking at people she's framed, people she's thinking of framing. Aram, you wouldn't believe this place. Hair, threads, lint, bits of carpet, cigarette butts. All collected, categorized, and filed under each victim's name."

"Trace evidence to be planted at crime scenes."

Ressler went over to a cabinet that held hundreds of little draws filled with hair follicles, nail clippings and skin samples. Squinting at the names on each drawer, Don stopped short. "Huh. Drew Roberts. He was one of Cruz's victims. He worked at Oakside Investments."

"And?"

"That was the firm that employed Cruz's dead husband. Aram, I might have an idea what this is all about."

Lizzie was at the kitchen counter, peeling potatoes as Sammy sat in his high chair, banging his sippy cup against the tray.

"Hey little man, what's with all the racket?" Don's exuberant voice filled the kitchen and Lizzie turned away from the counter with a smile as Sammy threw up his hands, accidentally flinging his cup as he yelled "Dada! Ho!"

Don laughed as he bent forward to press a kiss to Sammy's forehead. "Yea, buddy. I'm home!" He said happily as he swiped the sippy cup off the floor.

Don turned towards the counter to set the now dirty cup down and smiled at Liz as she leaned against the counter, smiling back at him. "Hey wife." He murmured as he sidled up to her. Don rest his hands on her hips and drew closer, kissing her lips gently.

Liz returned the kiss with smiling lips as she wrapped her arms around Don's neck. "Not just yet, mister. Hold your horses." She teased.

Don smirked as he backed away, looking down at the counter. "Uh babe, you're probably going to want to peel some more potatoes."

"Why?" Lizzie looked down at what she had. It was more than enough for the two of them. "That's…" Lizzie looked up at Don's chagrinned face. "Don. What did you do?"

"It's not about money. It's about revenge." Don stated, gesticulating with his fork. "Hernando Cruz jumped off that bridge after being accused of insider trading. He purchased 10,000 shares of stock in Rudman Pharmaceuticals one day before it got approval from the FDA to market a new cancer drug." Don took a mouthful of potatoes and swallowed carefully before continuing. "That stock doubled overnight. Toshiro Osaka, our Japanese entrepreneur When Hernando Cruz made the trade, Osaka was the CFO at Rudman Pharmaceuticals. Miles Chapman – He was the regulator who approved the drug. And Drew Roberts was Cruz's co-worker who oversaw all of the trades."

"You think they were in on it with the husband?" Cooper questioned as he passed the platter of chicken over to Samar who sat to his right at the dining table.

Ressler shrugged and shifted in his seat, crossing his legs under the table. "I'm saying maybe the husband wasn't in on it at all. Maybe they set him up."
Samar nodded as she dished out another piece of chicken onto her plate. "It makes sense. Vanessa Cruz is a frame-up artist. Maybe she got the idea from seeing how easy it was for these people to frame her husband."

"Wait." Aram said before wincing as his knife made a terrible screeching noise against the ceramic plate. "The evidence you found in Cruz's loft suggests she's been targeting dozens of victims."

Ressler nodded as he took another bite. "All one-percenters – People who personify the same greed that cost her husband his life."

"Assuming that she's going after everyone who was involved in framing her husband, the question is, who's left?" Cooper questioned as he added more salad to his own bowl.

"I don't know, but I do know someone who can tell us."

"Alright guys!" Liz said in a mock stern voice, glaring jokingly over at Don as she interrupted. "No work at the dinner table, yea? And Don, stop talking with your mouthful." Everyone at the table chuckled at this as Don returned her glare.

"Yes Mom." He murmured before quickly yelping, doubling over to rub the shin that Lizzie had just kicked.

Liz and Ressler sat across from a middle aged man with salt and pepper hair wearing a telling orange jumpsuit. "Before you made your fortune in the private sector, you worked in the division of corporate finance at the S.E.C."

"Yeah, so?" Conway flicked his gaze over to the one-way mirror. "Did you look at the research I gave you?"

"Tell us about Hernando Cruz." Ressler ordered.

"Did you find anything?"

"Hernando Cruz." Ressler barked. Having to repeat himself annoyed him. "He was a trader for Oakside Investments in 2008. He killed himself after you were about to open an investigation into him for insider trading."

"So? What does that have to do with – I thought you were looking for the woman who set me up."

"It was his wife who set you up, and now we know why – Along with Toshiro Osaka, Miles Chapman, and Drew Roberts." Don said waspishly.

"Tell us about Hernando Cruz." Lizzie demanded.

Don leaned forward on his elbow. "He didn't jump off that bridge, did he, Lester?"

Conway's face soured which he attempted to hide by hanging his head. "Don't look so depressed. Today's your lucky day. We found out who framed you." Liz taunted.

"Cruz. It was his wife?" Conway questioned, his tone subdued.

Ressler shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe we can help you. Maybe you can talk to us, and maybe we can make a deal."
Conway sighed, his handcuffs jingling as he shifted in his seat. "It was 2007, before the crash – Height of subprime mortgages, bundling, things that really hurt people. But this – It was a victimless crime. We had every angle covered – The trading floor, the regulatory agencies."

"You made the S.E.C. look the other way."

Conway pressed his lips into a thin line. "I want a lawyer."

"No, no, no." Don said with a chuckle. "What you want is a deal, and the only way you're gonna get that is if you keep talking. So – Talk."

"Everyone was going to look the other way, except that kid, Cruz. He found out, went to his boss. We tried to keep him quiet, but he refused. He was too idealistic."

Liz raised an unimpressed brow. "So you were a part of a conspiracy, and when Cruz tried to go against you, he was murdered – Thrown off a bridge to keep him from blowing the whistle. That's when you framed him, which is why she framed you."

Conway shook his head in disbelief, his eyes gazing into the middle distance. "When I knew her, she was nobody, a ranch hand. How did she –"

"If Cruz went to his boss, like you said, why was it never reported?" Lizzie questioned.

"Because his boss was in on it." Conway stated as if it were obvious. And honestly, it kind of was.

"What was his name?" Don demanded.

"Mason Carlton, Thundridge Capital. Cruz has taken revenge on everyone but this guy. Find him, Aram." Don quickly hung up and put both hands back on the wheel as he drove them back to D.C. He looked over at Liz questioningly when he felt her hand on his thigh.

"Have I ever told you how fun it is to play good cop, bad cop with you?" Liz asked, a small flirtatious smile causing her cheeks to dimple.

A slow smirk traveled across Don's face.

"I called Carlton's office, and nobody's picking up. His cell is going straight to voicemail." Aram began speaking as soon as Liz and Don stepped into the war room and walked over to his desk, expecting them to follow. "But get this – I accessed his cell records, and I found a ton of inappropriate messages with his assistant. Her name is Abby Issa. Either this girl is having an affair with her boss –"

"- Or he's being catfished." Liz completed his thought. "You said she was his assistant?"

Aram nodded. "Which means she'd have the keys to the kingdom – Passwords, financials, credit cards. There's a hit on Mason Carlton's Amex. He reserved a room for tonight at the Wolverton Hotel."

Liz and Don stood at the Wolverton Hotel's security desk, both shifting impatiently as the head of security called up to the room Carlton had charged his card to.
After several rings, the man looked up at them and shook his head before leaving a message. "Hello, this is security calling. I have a gentleman and a lady from the FBI here who'd like to have a word with Mr. Carlton."

Standing up, the unusually tall man waved his hand towards them. "Follow me, please."

The security guard inserted the key card into the door and then quickly moved out of the way, allowing Don and Liz to storm their way into the hotel room.

"Hands where I can see them. Hands in the air!" Don began shouting even before they left the confines of the small hallway. As they entered the bedroom, they found a pretty dark haired woman, crying as she gazed down at the body of Mason Carlton.

"She said she made a mistake." Abby Issa sobbed. "She said she made a horrible mistake."

"Radio security! Have them lock down the hotel!" Lizzie yelled towards the Head of Security who had followed them in as she dove towards the body, and immediately began searching for a pulse. "And call an ambulance!"

Liz knocked on the door frame of Cooper's office, hanging her head in. "You wanted to see me?"

Cooper smiled as he got out of his seat and moved behind her. "I thought you should know," Cooper closed the door behind her before making his way back around the desk to sit at his desk as she took a seat as well. "Mason Carlton's gonna be charged in the murder of Hernando Cruz."

Liz sighed and slouched in her chair. "We lost her." She murmured, frustration saturating her voice.

Cooper pinched his lips together and nodded gravely. "Yes. And we will find her. What matters now is that the innocent people she framed are gonna be set free."

Liz nodded, her eyes wandering as she lost herself in thought…until something caught her eye. "Why do you still have that thing?" She asked, pointing to the cane that sat in the corner of his office.

Cooper chuckled and gave a small shrug. "To remember. Every time I begin to doubt what we're doing here, I look over there and think back to what Tom did – what the Cabal did. Making me think I had cancer. Meticulously weaving their way into our lives." Cooper shook his head and trailed off. "I wonder what his angle is."

"Sir?" Liz asked, unsure of what his angle was.

"Reddington. Why give us this case? What's his interest in this Cruz woman?"

Lizzie thought about it for a moment before she scoffed, leaning her head against the back of the chair as she gave a small helpless giggle. "You're gonna need to look at that cane a lot in the coming months, Sir." She joked darkly.

Cooper's brow creased in confusion. "Why is that?"

"Because she's got a rather particular set of skills." Lizzie stated, as she lifted her head up and sat
up in her chair to look at her boss directly. "She's going to be useful to him. To us."

\///\///

Red looked at the caller ID before hitting the green button. He put the phone to his ear but said nothing, letting the person on the other end start the conversation.

"It's me. It's done." A hoarse whisper came through the speaker of his phone.

"I'm listening." Red said gruffly, recognizing the sound of Jasper's voice.

"The vote went your way. The Director wasn't very happy, but a vote's a vote."

"And Hobbs?"

A slight pause. "He wants to meet."

Red smiled grimly. "Yes, I'm quite sure he would have. But he can't, can he?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Hobbs was to contact me after the vote was cast." Red stated darkly. "He didn't, which means he's dead, which means you betrayed him. Betrayed me."

"That's not true. He specifically asked that the three of us should meet so that we can discuss the future."

Red chuckled humorlessly. "You need to run, Jasper. Run like the prairie wind, because I'm coming for you. And when I find you, I'm going to cut out that forked tongue of yours and deliver it to the Director myself."

Red hung up the phone and tossed it away from him as he laid his head back against the head rest and closed his eyes.

"It's time to go away, Dembe." Red said with a great sigh.

Dembe looked at Red through the rear view mirror. "Lizzie wants to meet with you. Said she'd meet us on the corner of 25th and Broad."

Red smiled softly. "That little Italian place she loves?" At Dembe's nod, Red's smile widened. "That sounds lovely." It was truly a marvelous idea. He wanted to see his little girl one more time before he left. He hoped she brought Sammy.

\///\///

Lizzie was waiting for them in the parking lot of the abandoned warehouse on the corner of 25th and Broad, leaning against the hood of her car when they pulled up. It was a little tradition of theirs. They'd always take a lovely stroll through the length of the park from here as it took them almost directly to the restaurant.

The fact that the tradition was started when the trail of one of the blacklisters led Liz and the team straight to this warehouse where Red was torturing said blacklister for information was irrelevant.

"Hello Sweetheart!" Red greeted her happily as he climbed out of the back seat. He walked towards her, his arms open and they embraced as if they hadn't just seen each other that morning when Red came by the house to pick up Sammy to have breakfast with him before dropping him
off at the daycare.

"Hey Dad." Liz murmured. As they pulled back from their hug, Liz's eyes slid over to Dembe and she smiled, opening her arms once more in invitation.

"Come on, big brother. I don't care if you're on duty right now." She teased and laughed at the sound of Dembe's breathy laugh as he walked over, hugging her tightly as well.

"Hello Elizabeth." Dembe said softly and kissed her on the cheek before taking a step back.

"Where are Donald and Sammy, Lizzie?" Red questioned, craning his neck slightly to try and get a look inside her car.

Liz rolled her eyes. "Don wanted to have a guy's night. I think he's going to teach Sammy the art of watching football."

Red laughed heartily, shaking his head. "Well isn't that quant. I suppose I can live through watching our little Sammy playing sports as long as I get to have all the adorable little team pictures they take."

Liz and Dembe shared a bemused look.

"Shall we go eat? I am absolutely famished and I have been salivating for some of Lucia's lasagna ever since Dembe mentioned you wanted to meet." Red said, heading off in the direction of the park.

Dembe and Liz shared another glance, this time amused as they watched Red swagger off. "I only just told him 20 minutes ago."

Liz let out a bark of a laugh and they began to walk, a few steps behind Red. "Yes well, he's rather –"

The sound was deafening. It had a visceral effect on everything. Like a sonic boom, destroying everything in its path including time. Everything slowed to a horrifying crawl.

Lizzie watched as her dad crumpled. He didn't move.

"No!" Lizzie sobbed. She couldn't tell if she was running. She wanted to reach her dad but everything was sand.

There was the sound of more bullets. Though it sounded distant, as if through water.

"Raymond! Elizabeth!" Dembe's panicked cries woke her as they reached her ears.

Lizzie dropped to the ground next to her dad, and stared with horror.

"Elizabeth! Move!" Lizzie whimpered as Dembe put his arms under her father's armpits and bodily pulled him behind a dumpster. Lizzie followed like a puppet on a string.

Lizzie fell to her knees beside them, the world gone quiet again as the shooter obviously had no line of sight anymore.

"Daddy…" She murmured brokenly.

Dembe grabbed her hands and placed them above Red's bloody shirt. "Keep pressure, Elizabeth." She choked back a sob as the warmth of her dad's blood seeped through her fingers, bringing
everything back into focus and forcing her to do as Dembe asked. With a quick glance, Lizzie ascertained that Dembe was removing his shirt. He quickly tossed it to her and she replaced it quickly on her dad's chest.

Lizzie ignored it as Dembe spoke in rushed murmurs on the phone. She looked down at her dad and tried to give him a weak smile as he gazed at her. His eyes telling stories of incredible pain as blood dripped from the side of his mouth.

"Hey Daddy." She attempted to be soothing. Really she did. But how do you make your world feel better when it's breaking apart beneath you? "You're gonna be alright. Dembe's calling Mr. Kaplan." Lizzie choked on another sob as she watched her dad's eyes grow heavy. "No Dad, you've got to stay awake okay?" She wanted nothing more than to caress his cheek but she was currently trying to hold his life inside his body. "Mr. Kaplan's gonna be really pissed if she finds you sleeping on the job."

Red's eyes closed.

End Notes

I don't own these people. Owning people is bad.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!